

## Chapter 5

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# Staff–prisoner relationships: the heart of prison work

It is difficult to define what corrections officers do, let alone assess how well they have done it. Nevertheless, it is clear that the direct work product that these officers produce is not security, control or safety but personal interactions between themselves and prisoners. The affective nature of these interactions directly influences the level of tension between officers and prisoners and indirectly influences the safety, security and control within the prison. (Gilbert 1997: 53)

In the control of prisoners, officers shall seek to influence them through their own example and leadership, and to enlist their willing co-operation. (Prison Rule 6(2))

At the end of the day, nothing else that we can say will be as important as the general proposition that relations between staff and prisoners are at the heart of the whole prison system and that control and security flow from getting that relationship right. Prisons cannot be run by coercion: they depend on staff having a firm, confident and humane approach that enables them to maintain close contact with prisoners without abrasive confrontation. (Home Office 1984: para. 16)

It is a well-established maxim that staff–prisoner relationships matter. The impact of staff–prisoner relationships and of staff behaviour more generally on the quality of a regime is crucial:

Whatever statements of the policy may promise, it is the local staff who are ultimately responsible for putting policy into effect. Introducing changes in programme activity may be an essential first step in changing the nature of a regime but the way in which staff supervise new activities will be a major determinant of the trainee's [sic] experience. (Thornton *et al.* 1984: para. 3.3)

In his review of prison regimes, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Judge Tumim found that:

the prison officer needs to be skilled in specific areas of prison work, and there is considerable job satisfaction to be gained from this. One of the problems facing prison staff over the years has been a lack of clear job specifications or an appreciation of the skills needed for prison work ... Despite the development of management techniques which emphasise the diversity of prison work, we found few examples of prison staff working flexibly or with a high expectation of the job. (HMCIP 1993a: paras 8.2(1) and 8.7)

Despite the centrality of staff-prisoner relationships to the running of prisons (Home Office 1984; Sparks *et al.* 1996), few satisfactory analyses of the nature of the staff-prisoner relationship have been conducted.<sup>1</sup> There has been wide recognition of the significance of staff-prisoner relationships to order (see, for example, Home Office 1984; Ditchfield 1990; Sparks *et al.* 1996), to justice (Home Office 1991), to security (Home Office 1995) and to constructive regimes (Dunbar 1985). However, it is likely that different models of the staff-prisoner relationship are implicit in these different visions. A lack of clarity about what the 'right' relationship might be and how this might be achieved has become particularly evident in the light of recent reports exposing the dangers of conditioning, the under-enforcement of rules relating to security and the effects of under-management on staff behaviour (see, for example, Home Office 1994, 1995). Staff-prisoner relationships can go wrong in several different ways – they can be too close, too flexible, too distant and too rigid (see Sparks *et al.* 1996). As Lucas demonstrates in relation to justice (Lucas 1980), it is easier to identify wrong relationships (injustice) than to specify right relationships (justice). There is a need for clearer thinking about what 'a right relationship' is.

The term relationship can mean 'alliance', 'association', 'connection' or 'dependence'. There is a flow of interaction and dependence in two

directions (e.g. see Shapira and Navon 1985), although, in the coercive environment of a prison, relationships are invested with an unusual amount of power (the ability of one party to influence or determine the behaviour of another party). This power is ‘held in reserve’ most of the time, so that day-to-day interactions take place without explicit reference to it, but both staff and prisoners are aware of who has how much power and prisoners may try to challenge it, overturn it or keep it to a minimum. Because of the power-laden nature of interactions in a prison, both staff and prisoners are sometimes uncomfortable with the word ‘relationship’. When we use the word ‘relationships’ in the prison context, we mean how staff relate during sustained periods of interaction, including interaction of a non-rule-enforcing – or rule-resisting – nature. Relationships are made up of social practices, of some rule-enforcing and many non-rule-enforcing encounters. In a prison, these social practices exist around the ‘tasks’ of the prison day – and ‘relationships’ can develop as a result. This distinguishes them from family relationships where power flows between members but within a much more affectual context and the relationship has an independent value, or from social relationships, where interaction is more voluntary, or from work where power also flows but less overtly and relationships evolve and may merge into friendship. We considered using the term ‘relations’ (which has a slightly more restricted meaning – interaction around a task). In general, however, we concluded that only the word ‘relationship’ could adequately describe what we have observed. The dimensions of the term staff and prisoners are sensitive to are its associations with voluntariness and with families. We agree that there are important limits to ‘relationships’ in prison and we shall discuss them later in this chapter. But in the end, we have found no satisfactory alternative to the word.

In general, perceptions of staff–prisoner relationships are often quite favourable in prisons in England and Wales (see White *et al.* 1991; Relationships Foundation 1995; Liebling *et al.* 1997). They are generally characterised – and contrasted with relationships between staff and prisoners in some other jurisdictions – by relatively high levels of respect, relaxation and good humour. It is part of the ‘British tradition’ that relationships between staff and prisoners provide the glue which hold prisons together. These are commonly held perceptions, with the proviso that serious complaints are sometimes voiced by individual prisoners relating to staff attitudes or behaviour in particular establishments. So within this overall picture, there may be significant variations between types of establishment and between

individual establishments in relation to the kind of relationships which exist. Flexibility on rule enforcement is one important dimension on which relationships can differ (as argued in Chapter 6) but other variations are closeness and distance, staff confidence and mutual trust, which may be related to rule enforcement.

Goffman describes an 'involvement cycle' whereby staff move from distance to 'warm interest' to being 'burnt' and to 'retreat'. Once removed from the dangers of contact, the cycle begins again. There are special difficulties in handling this cycle when the population concerned is capable of behaving destructively towards themselves as well as towards staff. There are awkward reverberations if involvement transgresses certain boundaries – reverberations almost as powerful as 'the incest taboo' (Goffman 1961: 75).

The job of being a prison officer is carried out in 'a special moral climate', in which staff are faced with 'hostility and demands', and yet are expected to meet the prisoner 'from a rational perspective'. How is this achieved? Clarification of this complex feature of prison work can only be achieved through detailed and long-term studies of the nature of staff-prisoner relationships in a number of establishments. We have carried out one such study (Liebling and Price 1999) and a detailed review of the literature (Price and Liebling 1998), and will draw on these and other sources here.

Key questions, which we address as far as we can in this chapter, are:

- 1 What is the nature of staff-prisoner relationships? Is it possible to describe them accurately and to explain the various models of staff-prisoner relationships identified in different establishments? What accounts for the existence of these differences? Are there models of good practice? What fosters and what undermines 'right' relationships? How, and to what extent, do relationships hold prisons together? How and why do staff-prisoner relationships (relationships involving considerable dynamics of power) become dysfunctional?
- 2 What are the roles of 'trust', 'respect' and 'fairness' between staff and prisoners, and between staff and management, in the special environment of a prison?<sup>2</sup>

We have not answered all of these questions fully, but we consider them an important framework through which to think about available, ongoing and future research.

## Striving for ‘right relationships’

To answer questions about what ‘right relationships’ are and what drives them, we need to be able to describe their nature. What is required and what is possible may differ substantially between different types of establishments and over time. Certain common themes emerge, however. Among the ‘ingredients’ necessary to positive regimes and relationships are: staff empowerment, high morale, the existence of clear aims, ‘a proper induction for staff in order to inculcate them in the values of the establishment’, high expectations and the presumption of an ‘active role’ to be played by staff in the life of the prison (e.g. Deighton and Launay 1993). At one establishment, praised for its outstanding staff–prisoner relationships, ‘staff were encouraged to use as much discretion as possible in the way they worked. Thus many chose not to wear uniform and rarely resorted to formal disciplinary procedures’ (Deighton and Launay 1993). The Inspectorate found high morale, good teamwork, positive staff attitudes towards prisoners (and vice versa) and an unusually high level of discretion used by staff, with very few complaints. They found that ‘prisoners dropped their defensive barriers’ and that ‘this presented opportunities for positive work’ (HMCIP, 1993b: 49; see also Cooke 1989 and 1991).

The question of how far ‘liberal’ staff–prisoner relationships are acceptable or advisable in the special environment of any prison – particularly since the security lapses of the mid-1990s – needs careful consideration. Are good staff–prisoner relationships intended to secure order, control and compliance, or are they linked to other aims such as tackling offending behaviour? How real are the conflicts between officers’ ‘welfare’ and security tasks? As we saw in Chapters 3 and 4, officers have three essential tasks: security, rehabilitation (or tackling offending behaviour) and care, and ‘getting through the daily routine’. All three overlap and support each other.

In 1970, Emery published a review of the impact of the so-called ‘Norwich Experiment’ on the local prison at Bristol (Emery 1970). Before the introduction of the altered regime, Bristol prison had the highest rate of reported prisoner offences of all local prisons (Emery 1970: 22). Not only did the prison suffer greatly from overcrowding, but its staff were divided (Emery 1970: 33–4). The Norwich Experiment, developed in the 1950s, relied heavily on building a closer relationship between staff and prisoners. More association, improved prisoner–staff relationships and more work were all central to the scheme (Emery 1970: ix). By keeping the boundary between prisoners

and staff clear, through a clearly articulated system of punishments and rewards, the experiment aimed to reduce the divisive sense of unfairness that arose from the use of staff discretion (Emery 1970: 12).

Despite initial staff resistance to an increase in their hours due to the growth of time that prisoners were allowed to spend out of their cells, and despite some resistance from a minority of prisoners to greater amounts of association, both sides ultimately came to value the changes in the previously restrictive regime. Increased association reduced tension, and reduced the symbolic and actual centrality of staff to prisoners:

With this went a significant decline in prisoner hostility to officers, a lessening of mutual distrust, and the virtual disappearance of the schism in the officer ranks between 'activists' and 'passengers'. (Emery 1970: 91)

As Emery shows, however, the question of how involved it is advisable to ask staff to become is complex. Genders and Player's review of the therapeutic regime in operation at Grendon illustrates the significance of 'close' and 'treatment-oriented' staff-prisoner interactions (Genders and Player 1995). The staff play a significant role in Grendon's aim to have 'no more victims'. On an unannounced short visit to the prison Judge Tumim was particularly impressed by the variety and scope of problem-solving and conflict resolution (HMCIP 1993c). Despite all the positive findings of Inspectorate Reports, there is a tension between Grendon's dual role as a therapeutic community and a prison (Genders and Player 1995: 96-8). As Genders and Player explain:

Grendon's primary identity is that of a prison and, as such, it is subject to the same formal rules as the rest of the system. In consequence, whatever level of co-operation the prison extends to the therapeutic community, it must reserve the right to step in and seize control whenever the security and discipline of the establishment is perceived to be under threat. Thus, within the communities, the staff team, amongst whom the uniformed officers form the majority, retain the ultimate authority to make or revoke decisions in the name of the prison. (Genders and Player 1995: 97)

In order for the balance between prison and therapeutic community to be maintained along with order and control, Grendon

is almost entirely dependent upon the degree to which the officers and prisoners are able to modify their traditional prison roles, in order to break-down the social divide between the 'keepers' and the 'kept' and to facilitate co-operative relationships and alternative working practices. (Genders and Player 1995: 98)

According to Genders and Player, the staff–prisoner relationships in Grendon 'tended to be characterised by three specific qualities: individualism, permissiveness and trust' (Genders and Player 1995: 98). Furthermore, relations within the staff community were different from other prisons as

there was a flattening of the formal staff hierarchy, a bridging of the usual divide between the civilian and uniformed groups, and an emphasis upon democratic teamwork. (Genders and Player 1995: 99)

The ideology of treatment within Grendon has a significant impact on the mode of maintaining discipline and control. Despite the underlying fact that persistent non-cooperation is not tolerated, Genders and Player reported a different approach to many forms of prisoner behaviour which in other prisons would normally result in adjudications. That is

[a] key feature of staff working practices at Grendon is the high level of tolerance which officers extend toward behaviour which their formal training in prison discipline requires them to define as insubordination. The use of abusive language to an officer and the refusal to obey an order are amongst the most common disciplinary charges recorded against prisoners in other prisons. Yet at Grendon such behaviour rarely results in formal proceedings ... alternative means of controlling it are used. In essence, officers are expected to exercise control through therapeutic means and to interpret such behaviour as the manifestation of a man's problems and thus, as material for discussion rather than as an offence requiring a formal hearing. (Genders and Player 1995: 101)

Although Genders and Player reported that almost all of the staff they interviewed (94 per cent) thought that, in some respects, working at Grendon was more difficult than working elsewhere, 'more than three-quarters of the officers stated that they found their work at

Grendon to be rewarding and fulfilling' (Genders and Player 1995: 102).

Hay and Sparks comment at some length on the nature of staff-prisoner relationships in their study of control problems in dispersal prisons. They note that:

Much of prison officers' activity is taken up in talking to prisoners and coping with the contingencies of daily events ... the question of approach to prisoners is open to particular disagreements about the appropriateness of different kinds of relationship and practice. Views on this issue vary in respect of the degree of closeness or distance which is right for staff to adopt vis à vis prisoners and on problems of flexibility vs. consistency. This, in turn, varies in relation to the kind of regime which they are expected to run, and hence the particular demands which the managerial philosophy of the prison makes upon them. (Hay and Sparks 1991: 83-4)

Hay and Sparks argue that these issues are 'very much a matter of concern and debate among staff'. Prisoners also express concern about 'boundaries' and knowing where they are. The 'key issue' of staff-prisoner relationships is highly significant and complex.

In studies of small units, it is noted that staff continuity (including continuity of governor grades and an effective and integrated management team) and personal officer schemes are identified as two of the key components in securing 'right relationships' (Home Office 1987: para. 52; see also Bottomley 1994: 35). Lack of continuity leads to 'low morale', a poor 'sense of cohesion and purpose' and 'poor communication' (Bottomley 1994: 34). It makes personal officer schemes unworkable (McAllister *et al.* 1992; Bottomley 1994) and creates undue pressures for staff.

A good personal officer scheme can be 'one of the best means to achieve close staff involvement with prisoners' (Home Office 1987: para. 52) and could potentially be 'the lynch pin of a successful policy of control and containment' and also 'facilitate behavioural change in prisoners' (Bottomley 1994: 35). Evershed and Fry concluded that the personal officer scheme was 'possibly the most important aspect of the (Parkhurst) unit's regime' (Evershed and Fry 1991: 31). Martin argued, in his evaluation of Parkhurst Special Unit, that the personal officer scheme 'undoubtedly enhanced the role of the officers' but that it was at the time of his research being 'jeopardised by too rapid moves of staff' (Martin 1991: 130; see also Needs 1993: 11).

One of the main aims of the (now defunct) Control Review Committee (CRC) special units was ‘for staff to attempt to reduce the level of unacceptable behaviour in prisoners by employing their skills as prison officers’ (Bottomley 1994: 22 describing Parkhurst). A ‘high degree of staff involvement’ was seen as one of the key ways in which prisoners’ behaviour could be managed and where necessary, challenged. High staff morale and commitment facilitated by continuity and training was seen as vital (Bottomley 1994: 26). An important principle was allowing staff to ‘volunteer’ for specialist posts. It may also be important to offer incentives for staff to get to know (particular groups of) prisoners well and to feed into any review system (Bottomley 1994: 37). Needs commented in his review of the operation of the Hull Special Unit that:

There has been much constructive, and some outstanding, work by involved individuals who bring to bear a down-to-earth good sense combined with skill at communicating. There are others who are less involved, to the frustration of their colleagues who must shoulder more than their fair share of the burden of demands. (Needs 1993: 11, cited in Bottomley 1994: 38)

Similar conclusions were drawn from evaluations of the Close Supervision Centres which replaced the CRC small units (see, for example, Clare and Bottomley 2001).

Staff–prisoner relationships in general are likely to be the key determinant of the success or failure of any policy. In an evaluation of the Hollesley Bay structured incentives regime carried out in 1967, it was found that the experiment was partially sabotaged by staff on one of the ‘control’ houses surreptitiously introducing an incentives system with review boards and enhanced facilities in order to compete with the ‘experimental’ houses. Staff eagerness to be ‘the best’ made it impossible for them to ‘hold back’ on schemes which appeared to have a positive impact on prisoner behaviour (Williams, 1999, personal communication). This shows a commitment to ‘achieving results’ which is one of the Service’s greatest strengths. Staff are the vital medium through which such a scheme can operate. Staff frequently become committed to ‘their’ wing or unit, wanting their area of the prison to function smoothly and without confrontation.

In Joe Pilling’s influential lecture, *Back to Basics: Relationships in the Prison Service*, Pilling, a former Director General of the Prison Service, identified the high standards and expectations characteristic of ‘the finest Borstal tradition of care for and belief in the individual and

his potential' (Pilling 1992: 2). He reminded the Service that the basic tenets of good relationships between prisoners and staff are about 'knowing, respecting and caring for prisoners as individuals' (Pilling 1992; see also Dunbar 1985). He argues

a well ordered and safe environment is still characterised by open, relaxed relationships of mutual respect between staff and prisoners. (Pilling 1992: 3)

This 'tradition' faced a loss of confidence at the time of the escapes from Whitemoor and Parkhurst in 1994 and 1995 (although arguably one of the reasons the escapes occurred was precisely the absence of such relationships). One learning point for the Service has been that the (vague) term 'good' may be better replaced by the term 'right' relationships. Pilling's five key concepts of respect, fairness, individuality, care and openness should still underlie all that the Service aims to achieve. This, Pilling goes on to show, depends upon the ability of staff of all grades to 'work with' prisoners, allowing them to participate in decisions about their personal development while in custody. Staff should be empowered, valued, trained, supported and encouraged – and the Service should 'recognise and reward those values' in its promotion procedures and in other ways. 'Good relationships can be preserved in spite of the inevitable frictions of prison life' (Pilling 1992: 10) and this is as relevant to staff–staff and staff–management relationships as it is to staff–prisoner relationships.

Our own study at Whitemoor was intended to 'fill the conceptual gap' left by previous research on staff–prisoner relationships and to provide clearer thinking about what 'right relationships' might be. In the remainder of this chapter, we try to explore why staff–prisoner relationships are so important to prison life and what this tells us about the nature of prison work.

There were certain key questions that we wanted to answer, such as what was the quality of staff–prisoner relationships? What did officers and prisoners want from these relationships? Could the quality of staff–prisoner relationships be measured and improved? Key performance indicators (KPIs) do not measure 'intangibles' such as the quality of staff–prisoner relationships, the usefulness of activities provided or the social climate of an establishment, which are much harder to translate into service delivery objectives for staff to follow.<sup>3</sup> Are there ways in which staff can be motivated and encouraged to work constructively with prisoners and with management to secure

the delivery of ‘positive and just regimes’?<sup>4</sup> Are there different kinds of officers, and are variables such as length of service, age, experience, etc. of major significance (as indicated by research on assaults on staff: see, for example, Sparks *et al.* 1996: 234; Ditchfield 1997)?

In general, we found that staff–prisoner relationships at Whitemoor at the time of our study were good and, considering the frictions of prison life, they were quite close. Most prisoners felt that 90–95 per cent of their interactions with officers were civil and polite, although it was notable that officers generally had a more positive view of relationships on their wing than prisoners did. Relationships operated within fairly clear frameworks of expectation. Staff wanted compliance and acceptance of their authority. Prisoners wanted to experience themselves as agents, as individuals, and to resist ‘indifferent’ or overbearing forms of coercion. The flow of power was negotiated in this space: only legitimate power generated the sort of consent prison officers required.<sup>5</sup> There were ‘mind games’: staff described sometimes feeding misinformation or trying to manipulate desired outcomes:

It’s a game of cat and mouse. We’re trying to catch them out, they’re trying to get one over on us. (Officer)

Prisoners preferred officers to be ‘straight’, even if they were giving unwelcome news or instructions. Officers who ‘gave it the verbal’, ‘wound prisoners up’ or overreacted to provocation lost their authority and encountered disrespect. Prisoners felt entitled, by the fact of their imprisonment, to feel frustrated, disgruntled and aggressive. Prisoners assumed that staff should avoid becoming caught up in this transference, and should be capable of maintaining a professional ‘distance’ in the face of their frustration.

The boundaries of staff power were constantly under pressure from prisoners:

I just will not do what I’m told. I’ll be: ‘but why? if you do it like this it’ll be much better.’ I put it right to a screw the other day – he’s not so much offensive as sneaky on how he’s been using it, he’s been over the top with all the petty rules. He wants promotion and so on. And so I said, ‘look, I’m unemployed, I’ve been banged up for six months with no job and the reason I lost my job was because of a bad back.’ I said ‘You don’t have to lock that door. I’ll go out for a bit of a walk, I’ll come back. There’s only an hour left until unlock. You don’t have to lock

that door, it's down to landing discretion. You personally don't have to do it but you do. What is it about you that makes you want to go around locking people up?' He said, 'They're the rules.' I said, 'no, it's down to landing discretion.' 'Well, I can't let one out without letting others out.' 'No, that's not right, you can let the people out that cause no problems. I won't run around the landing. Fine. I'm not a nuisance. You don't have to lock me up. I'm not refusing to work. There must be something psychologically wrong with you if you're insisting on banging me up.' And he just slammed the door and left me locked up. But I've had my little pop at him. That's how he is, he's one of those nasty little fuckers that won't. This morning I've been left open all morning, because the screw on the landing was very relaxed, he knows I won't cause him any grief. I'm in my cell, lying on my bed reading my book. What's the difference between the door being shut and the door being open? It used to be that you got left open. Now it's 'bang 'em up, bang 'em up.' Why? There's no real trouble. (Prisoner)

Prisoners expressed ambivalence about staff being in control. On the one hand, many prisoners tested every space to see where there was room to push officers back. On the other hand, the majority were uncomfortable if staff did back off:

One time, I brewed up thirteen weeks solid on the trot, two litres every week. They missed it every single time. I was a very nervous prisoner with it sitting around ... ! If someone shouted 'DST on the wing!'<sup>6</sup> – I'd stick it on the window sill; stand there ready to knock it out. It does make you nervous because you know that the DST will cause you grief. As long as you're not doing anything major, I think they should leave you alone. Some of them do, some are really good. I mean, I used to smoke dope on the landing. A couple of new staff come in, I sat at the 1's playing pool, rolling a joint sat at the table. I lived here, as far as I was concerned, and this is what it used to be like. New officer saw me skinning up, ran to the centre – 'he's taking drugs down there!' The SO came down, so I put the matchbox over the joint and he says 'you're rolling a joint? Don't do it on the landing.' I said, 'hang on, I live here, get back in the office.' This is my way of conditioning them. If they see it done openly, it forces them back to leave you alone more. He said, 'off the landing with it, in your own cell.' He threatened

me basically, said that if you don't go to your cell to smoke it, he'd lock down the landing and spin everyone. So he put it right on me then. So I said, alright, I'll do it in my cell. So it stopped me walking round with a joint. Which is fair enough, because I was taking the piss. (Prisoner)

One of the curiously under-discussed features of staff–prisoner relations was the impact of major incidents: hostage-taking, fires, disturbances, serious assaults, witnessing violence – the risks of these, officers' worst experiences of them – and the capacity individual staff members and prisoners had to absorb these experiences and to 'go on'. The evidence suggests that overexposure to these kinds of incidents, without support, can damage and dehumanise staff, with dangerous consequences (Tait 2008c). There was an acute awareness of the potential for danger among staff (and many prisoners). There was also an honest acceptance that in some situations, individual prisoners 'lost control' and could not be relied upon to remember 'credits' in any relationship built up over time:

*Do you think prisoners make distinctions between officers when there is violence? Do you think they avoid officers they have got relationships with?* (Interviewer)

I don't know really, to be honest, because when it reaches a situation where they think the only option they have is violence, I don't know whether they have got the control or the awareness to differentiate, really. Because I have seen situations where somebody that I have known quite well has turned round and smacked me, then smacked the PO, and I've restrained him and it's somebody who I knew quite well, who I have known previously ... I knew he was violent but I didn't think he would do that really. There's ... it might be a chemical thing, but there's a stage where a certain part of the brain shuts off and, you know, it's a panic reaction. (Officer)

## Officer and prisoner views of each other

Officers and prisoners worked with different visions of each other, and these visions informed the type of relationships that developed. For prisoners, the 'role' that officers played in their lives was illustrated by their characterisations of officers: broadly, prisoners saw:

- a small but significant number of 'good' officers who would do things for you and go out of their way to help you;
- a larger number of 'neutral' officers who were in the job for the money but would usually treat prisoners like human beings; and
- a small number of 'bad' officers who would not try to help prisoners and who could be vindictive or pick on prisoners they didn't like, enforcing 'petty' and 'sneaky' rules.

Often, the prisoner's view was reduced to a simple dimension: 'good' or 'bad'. However, some prisoners could produce a much more detailed characterisation of officer 'types':

You've got the ones who really aren't interested, are purely in the job for the money and will tell you that ... I'm certain there are some in the Service that are here for the power, and would probably do the job if they were only on six thousand a year. There are others who have some weird interest in being around criminals and notorious people. You have others who genuinely want to try and do something, and I have met them and spoke to them about it; there are officers who feel that they have something to offer. You have career people who are doing it for their career; if they weren't prison officers they could be working in companies. (Prisoner)

Sarah Tait proposed on the basis of her recent empirical study at two prisons that officers can be divided into five types, based on their orientation towards prisoners. Her typology of officer approaches to care was developed by comparing officer views and practices with the desired type of care described by prisoners. Approach to care was related to officers' views about prisoners as a group, their preferred basis of power, and their emotion management style. Officers' sense of personal security shaped their interaction with their environment and their ability to empathise with prisoners. *True carers* held a prisoner-led philosophy and practice of care and experienced the highest level of reward in their work. *Limited carers* and *old school* officers drew on similar professional identities but from different eras; they offered a pragmatic form of care and limited their use of authority and affective involvement. *Conflicted* officers expended considerable energy on a 'deserving few', but their caring was conditional and was often conflated with control. A further group of officers were identified as *Damaged*. These officers had minimal involvement in caring largely

due to sustained trauma in their work. Some avoided work, while others were aggressive towards prisoners. Conflicted and ‘damaged’ officers were the most alienated, and struggled to make sense of their experiences and emotions. The gender and proportions of officers of each type constituted wing and prison cultures, which were related to institutional levels of care. Tait argues that care is a meaningful construct with which to conceptualise prison officer work, and is of vital importance to alleviating the pains of imprisonment and offering prisoners hope for the future (see for example, Tait 2008b).

At Whitemoor, views of prisoners were far more differentiated (by both prisoners and officers) than those of officers:

There are those who get on with it, who’ll just do it, and basically put up with whatever the system is. At times they might have a little outburst because we all do. You’ll blow off steam and then a couple of hours later you’ll be better. There’s prisoners who sometimes because of their connections you feel work it different. Let’s play the game a little bit. Because there is the thought in the back of your mind that someone could be at your house, somebody could follow you. It’s not the best thing to be worrying about ... But most of these aren’t that influential. And then you’ve got your gobshites and your arseholes who are just swine. Buck the system, buck any form of authority because it’s authority. Doesn’t matter who it is. Totally anti-authoritarian and will be so for a long time. And you’ve got to work them different. You’ve got to side with them, but make it clear to them that what you say goes. (Officer)

Some resisted ‘typifications’:

I know it’s a real cliché, but they’re just human beings. Take them as you find them ... You can’t be judgmental. They’re just human beings, and the majority are absolutely fine. (Officer)

I don’t think you can see them in general. You tend to react and treat people in the way that they’re reacting and treating you. I tend to give most prisoners a fair chance. Quite a few times you see prisoners who start off with an aggressive attitude, but once they get used to you they calm all that down – and some of the ‘worst’ prisoners on here, if you take time to speak to them, then most of the time they’re not that bad. They may be

feeling frustrated, but if you talk to them and listen to them you can break down a lot of the barriers. (Officer)

Both officers and prisoners were aware of the difficulty of placing trust in any individual officer or prisoner. Officers acknowledged that their basic security and control role and the need for safety meant that some wariness (or even mistrust) of prisoners was necessary. Often, the lesson of replacing trust with caution had been learned the hard way:

I've had one threaten to rape me. He got moved. Also there was one female someone attempted to take hostage and I was actually on leave that day – it was my landing, and another prisoner said that he was actually going for me. How true that was I don't know.

*How does that sort of experience affect you?* (Interviewer)

Umm – that one at first, the thought that it possibly could be true was a bit of a shock because of the prisoner – it shocked everybody. He'd have been the last person, if you had to put in order all the prisoners on the wing as to who'd be the first to last to take a hostage, he'd have been very near the bottom. But really, you can't dwell on it. ... (Officer)

It's constant learning, because they will try anything and everything to get their own way. It's hard to trust somebody and not trust somebody at the same time. You've got to look into their eyes and wonder if they're telling the truth or not, which winds a lot of prisoners, who are telling the truth, up. And you can't get across to them that it's because you've been had over in the past so many times by so many other prisoners – 'but that's not me!' – 'But that's what they said to me last time!' (Senior officer)

Prison officers and prisoners traded in *gradations* of trust. Again, this was a finely balanced exercise, where experience, without grudges, was necessary. In their interactions, prisoners were constantly aware of the many different roles officers played – particularly in relation to any reports that might be written about them. Prisoners played a role too:

You can't be yourself with officers. There are times when I have said something and then it's been thrown back in my face four years later ... in a report. (Prisoner)

Yet, despite this wariness, and despite all the inevitable problems of life in a prison, almost every prisoner and every officer had at least one or two good relationships with members of the other group:

Some you can get on with better than others – my personal officer is as good as gold. I can't spell too well, and if ever I wanted anything like that done, and I've only got to go to him, and he don't say, 'oh, later' – what he usually says is, tell me what you want, and he'd go away and the next time I'd see him he'd have written it all out for me ... If I wanted something properly, good as gold he was. (Prisoner)

I suppose there's one, [X], I'm always pulling his leg – he's on a constant diet and yet he's always got a Snickers or a Mars Bar in his hand, so I'm always pulling his leg. He was sitting there yesterday looking at his toenails and I said 'I bet you haven't seen them for a long while, have you?' Just banter like that. And he calls me his favourite officer. I think it's the jokey rapport I have with him. At the end of the day, he respects me as an officer. If I ask him or tell him to do anything, he'll do it. I never get any problems with him. (Officer)

Why were relationships established in the first place, when officers were in a position of authority over prisoners and were responsible for the enforcement of rules, and prisoners were often trying to avoid those rules and were in a place they would rather not be? What was important and significant about them?

### **The significance of staff–prisoner relationships**

Officers and prisoners at Whitemoor both agreed that relationships were important on many levels. They were significant for:

- instrumental reasons (as officers, 'we need them to make the prison run smoothly, and to gain intelligence'; as prisoners, 'we need them because officers write our reports and are gatekeepers to a lot of things we want'); and

- normative reasons (good relationships are a humane and pleasant thing; they make prison work/life in prison easier; good relationships are an end in themselves).

Prisoners were more likely to concentrate on the first of these aspects – the strategic and material reasons for establishing relationships, although many did note that reasonable relationships made prison more bearable:

It's important in a lot of ways – if you want something done, or if you're having a bad day over something, you could go to an officer and say, look, this is what's happening and, you know, that officer would go all out to solve it. That's what I like with the officers in here, because whenever I have any problems I can say to them that something isn't right, and I have to say that ten out of ten, they've solved it. I'm glad to say that I can say that. It's true that they do sort my problems out. (Prisoner)

Officers relied on their relationships with prisoners to achieve order and safety (one senior officer astutely described the value of relationships as 'quiet power'). Prisoners wanted relationships that would achieve justice (and this notion of justice included some reference to 'care').

Relationships were the 'oil' which smoothed the flow of a prison day, but in a way that implicitly meant more power (or a more effective utilisation of power) for officers. Officers were aware, as were many prisoners, that a good knowledge of prisoners led to increased power:

You can tell if they're up to something because some of their attitudes change, they try and distance themselves from you. It's one of the things that helps us monitor them – their reaction to us. (Officer)

When you're on your own wing, you know the prisoners ... and when a prisoner passes a comment, you know whether that is normal for that prisoner or might be causing trouble. You ... pick up the vibes ... you can weigh things up. (Officer)

As we noted in the previous chapter, one of the most significant aspects of staff-prisoner relationships was that they constituted the framework within which decisions were made (and discretion

exercised) by prison officers, and the context in which those decisions were assessed and evaluated by prisoners. Relationships were the route through which everything else was achieved, and through which prisoners perceived the delivery of fairness, respect (see later in this chapter) and justice – see Figure 5.1.

There was an important link between the relationships officers developed with prisoners (and the relationships they wanted) and rule enforcement:

*Has there been an occasion where you might have placed a prisoner on report and you chose not to? (Interviewer)*

Yes. Instead, I put an SIR<sup>7</sup> in and the security department said I should have put him on report, but in my opinion, I didn't think he warranted it. It was one of the orderlies ... There are two of them, and one had just quit. The other asked who had applied for the job, and I said, no one as yet. The prisoner said that was good because he wanted to choose who worked down here, and that he wanted one of his mates. I said that wasn't appropriate, and he said that he didn't want no black people down there. He became – not aggressive – but intimidating. I

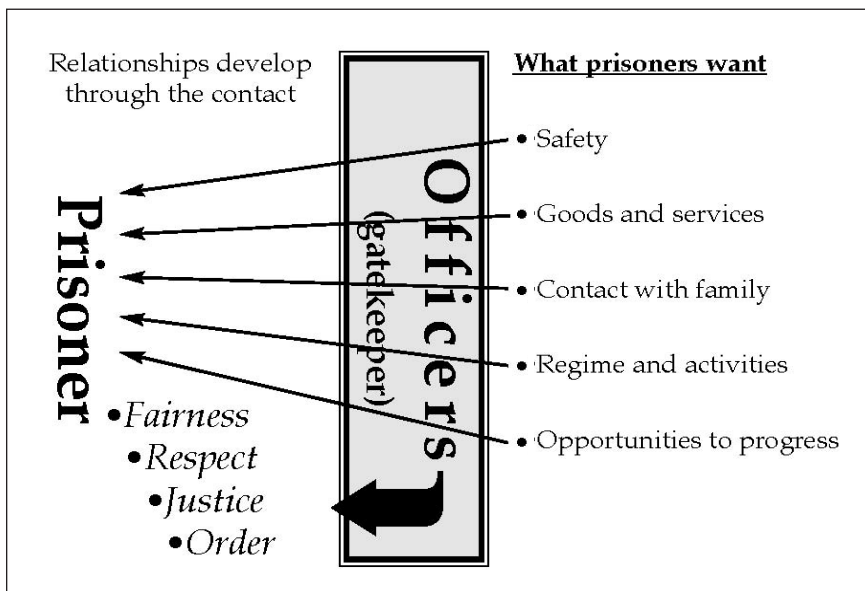


**Figure 5.1** The significant role of prison officers

put it on an SIR and they said I should have put him on report for racism, or for intimidating me. *But because I work as a cleaning officer, I wanted to keep some kind of relationship.* I'd already had a word with him, told him I wasn't happy with what he'd said, but I thought that if I'd put him on report for it, it would have broken the relationship, and it didn't warrant that. I'd spoken to him and told him that I didn't agree with racism and with what he's said, and in the end he apologised and shook my hand, which I thought was a result really. (Officer – emphasis added)

This is a modern illustration of the argument made by Sykes (1958) that we will encounter in the next chapter. Here, we can examine how these accommodations are made. There is a continual tension between the intrinsic, caste-like gap separating staff and prisoners, and the bridging of that gap that is necessary if the task of 'getting through the prison day' is to be accomplished smoothly (Ben-David and Silfen 1994). This tension is not – and cannot be – controlled by formal rules and structures but by informal structures that lead to the development of mutual understandings between officers and prisoners.

The decisions made by officers were commonly embedded in knowledge gained through relationships – not just about what was happening on the wing but, most importantly, about the personalities of individuals. Officers constantly framed their decision-making with regard to the individual prisoner in front of them, seeking the best way to calm the situation and achieve their goals. With the knowledge gained through relationships, officers' observations became meaningful, their judgement could be informed and they knew how to handle potentially dangerous situations. As one officer put it, 'part of a prison officer's job is to get people to cooperate with them, and relationships are crucial in that'. The most refined skills possessed by prison officers were in managing complex human behaviour:

If you know who's who, who's jostling for what position, who has what kind of hold on which prisoners, who's beginning to lose his cool ... then, you know what you are doing when you take one out. You can front it, intervene, nip it in the bud. You can pull one of them aside and say, 'look, let's get this sorted out; we're both adults, let's find a route which saves face'. Otherwise you risk playing into a potentially explosive situation. (Officer)

Through relationships, prisoners (and officers) became individuals. Officers and prisoners sometimes knew truths about each other which others did not know (the bad mornings, the fiery tempers, the second girlfriend, the impending divorce, the parole rejection, and so on). Staff could use this information to deploy their authority more wisely and carefully with the complexities of their population in mind. Officers did not often (according to the accounts we heard from prisoners) use their power in coercive ways. The relationships officers had with prisoners could help them effect positive change in the prisoner, or aid them in dealing with difficult personal problems. In this aspect of their work, prison staff often won our admiration. Indeed, officers were at times working not with the idealised abstractions of specialists, visitors or researchers, but with the worst and most difficult aspects of the human spirit, head on. In this sense, they could be more liberal, accepting and honest in their practical and daily encounters with prisoners than any of their critics.

Prison officers develop in their work what Giddens (1984, 1990) has termed ‘practical consciousness’. By this, Giddens means all the things that we know about our work or what we do in our lives, but which we cannot easily explain in words. This aspect of knowledge enables us to make decisions without necessarily being able to verbalise how and why each decision was made. Prison officers can thus often achieve what might seem the impossible without being able – or required – to explain how it was actually accomplished, from the maintenance of the day’s routine to the ending of a tense encounter. This is what experienced officers mean when they refer to the sorts of knowledge experience brings. They often regard this working knowledge or practical consciousness as ‘common sense’:

We were doing MDT.<sup>8</sup> He was in the seg. on seven days loss of tobacco and I knew that and he wouldn’t pee for me, so I said, hurry up I’m dying for a fag. He said, ‘Do you smoke, Gov? I haven’t had a fag for days’. I said, would you like one? ‘Oh, I’d love one’. Then pee in that bottle and I’ll give you a fag. ‘You’d better’. If I say you’ll get one, you’ll get one. He peed. I gave him a fag. That started that relationship off. But he’s come to the wing and he’s really trying to get on with it. We have a laugh. (Officer)

## **What did prisoners consider important in relationships with officers?**

It was important to prisoners that they remained moral agents in their dealings with prison officers: that is, persons with some uniqueness. They wanted to be treated as individuals, despite their imprisonment, and despite being subject to a tightly run regime. Prisoners also wanted officers to recognise when petty injustices and frustrations occurred, to understand how important these might be to prisoners and to agree that they were unfair – and to allow some space in which these frustrations could be expressed. Prisoners needed officers to be predictable (not necessarily as a group but certainly as individuals) so that they did not feel subject to whim, and so that they could build up trust in particular officers. Most officers were aware of these ideas (if only on the level of ‘practical consciousness’) and would treat prisoners as rational beings:

If you’re not sure, tell them you’re not sure, but be straight with them. It’s important because they will come to rely on what you say then. X asked me to sort something out about his diet. I checked it out, he was right, he wasn’t getting something he should. I made sure he got it, and I’d said, if you’re right I’ll get it for you ... He was right and he got it; he said thanks very much. Because I get on well with him now, because I’ve demonstrated to him that I’m straight with him, and on a couple of occasions I’ve told him (no), and then I’ve gone the other way and done something for him (as well) – now, if there was a problem, and I was to say to him ‘just be quiet and listen to what I’m going to say,’ he’s going to listen to me, and trust me when I say, ‘if you go behind your door now, I’ll get you out as soon as I can.’ [...] I sorted out his visit for him – we as a Service had messed up his visit. It wasn’t his fault. The attitude of the visits staff was, stuff him, he’s only a prisoner – but that’s not right. He’d followed the rules; he’d done everything correctly, and we’d screwed it up. I made sure he got a visit. That’s not doing him a favour, it’s doing what I feel is right. [...] We have a duty, if they’ve obeyed the rules and regulations themselves, to do right by them. (Senior officer)

‘Doing right by them’ was precisely what prisoners wanted staff to care about.

Table 5.1 shows the terms prisoners used when they were describing the best officers on their wing. Perhaps most important, prisoners wanted the prison officer to be a human being – regardless of the authority they held, the orders they were giving out, the bad news they might hold, prisoners wanted officers who could be themselves and be human:

They should be good judges of when to use other parts of their personality ... [But] this is a serious place we're in; it's a warehouse of suffering; the home to a lot of people, and they should treat that with a little respect. But that doesn't mean that there has to be no sense of humour ... I think if they could get a prison officer with all those qualities ... Someone that is aware of other people's needs. It's happened before when a prison officer who's had a go at me has come back and said he was sorry about it. I wouldn't just respect that, but I'd get a lot out of that – human communication. Someone who isn't perfect, but tried to be as good as he can be, and isn't afraid to apologise if he makes a mistake. (Prisoner)

**Table 5.1** The best officers

|                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• a listener</li><li>• a controlled sense of humour</li><li>• mature</li><li>• someone who'll keep an eye on you</li><li>• someone you can talk to</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• motivated</li><li>• intelligent</li><li>• capable of using authority</li><li>• careful</li><li>• compassionate</li></ul> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**The importance of fairness**

The word ‘fairness’ is heard frequently in prison. Research has shown how important fairness is to prisoners, and how prisoners closely relate perceptions of fair treatment by officers to perceptions of the fairness of the regime as a whole (Ahmad 1996; Liebling, assisted by Arnold 2004) – that is to say, if officers treat prisoners fairly, prisoners will generally consider the prison regime to be fair as a whole (see also Sparks *et al* 1996).

Fairness was generally a one-way process<sup>9</sup> – officers were judged by prisoners on whether they were fair or not. Fairness was strongly related to distribution, and it was officers who held the distributive power. Officers did not expect to be treated fairly by prisoners (indeed, officers would expect the typical prisoner to act self-interestedly).<sup>10</sup>

Officers were aware that their relationships with prisoners were often grounded in their position as 'gatekeepers' and distributors:

I think most relationships start off being bad anyway, because you've got a white shirt on. So initially, with the reputation that Whitemoor has, you are the enemy. And then it's a case of breaking down those barriers, making yourself known to that prisoner on that spur, letting him know that you are an individual, and that you may be an officer and hopefully a well-respected officer.

*How do you do that? Break down the barriers? (Interviewer)*

It's a case of being fair, I suppose. Giving him information that you know he's going to need, rather than just ignoring him. (Officer)

Officers and prisoners gave different reasons as to why prisoners should be treated fairly. Officers usually saw fairness as important for instrumental reasons, for making the job easier, with fairness defined as equality of treatment – if one prisoner gets something, then all prisoners should. The significance and the meaning of fairness were usually tied together in an officer's thinking:

*What do you mean by fairness? (Interviewer)*

That nobody gets anything that they shouldn't really have. And if one person gets it, and another person says 'he's got it, why can't I have it?', there's got to be a bloody good reason, whether it's a mistake or he's entitled to it and you're not. Because once you start doing one thing, that favour or little perk ... that becomes the thin end of the wedge. And what was a small perk is the norm, and then it's the accepted norm, and then it's automatic right. And a lot of prisoners don't realise that a lot of things that are allowed in prison are actually privileges, and they can be taken away. But because they've had them so long, they're apparently entitled to them by law. (Senior officer)

Fairness for officers was consistency in distribution and in rule enforcement. Fairness was tied up with the formal and material aspects of prison life. The concerns of prisoners for fairness were twofold: first, a feeling that fairness was right *per se*; and second it had an important

symbolic role: if prison officers were not fair, then the criminal justice system (and the law) could not possibly be fair:

*Can you describe what fairness is?* (Interviewer)

What you have to remember is that people come from outside to prison. They're in prison because they broke the law, and being here is their punishment, being taken away from society. In prison there are certain rules and regulations, you're told what you're allowed and what you can do. Whilst you're in prison, if the prison officers break the law themselves, don't give you what you're entitled to, and be very aggressive to you – it just teaches people that all this obeying the law, going by the book, staying out of trouble is just pure bollocks. So that when they get out, they're even more ... rules and regulations aren't going to mean anything to them. (Prisoner)

Prisoners often described a sort of fairness that could be regarded as *consistency in process*. Such consistency was often valued for the security it brought – even when the outcomes of such consistency could be unfavourable (see Tyler 1990):

Well a friend of mine tried to take [governor X's] eye out ... he didn't like the answer he was given – but at least he would give you an answer. Any other governor would lie to you, fuck you about, lush you, anything at all. But [the governor] (a) he was fair, (b) he was honest. So if you went with something and you weren't getting it, he would tell you 'no you're not getting it and you're not getting it because ...' He'd tell you fair, where others would say 'oh I don't know, I'll have to ...' and fuck you about ... He was straight, I thought he was okay. He was blunt, but personally I prefer that to someone saying 'I'll have to see him, and I'll have to see him and ...' (Prisoner)

Many prisoners, however, realised that equality of treatment could result in unfairness of *outcome* and perceived injustice. To reach the goal of equality of treatment, individual needs were sometimes sacrificed. This was a difficult area, and some prisoners verbalised the complex moral position of the officer very clearly:

Fairness is paramount. Sometimes they just can't be – their hands are tied and they can't make a decision. Prisoners think the one

who opens his door is the one who can solve his problems. But it doesn't work like that. What is fairness? It is ... to have compassion. I think that is what it is. If you have compassion for people, then everything else will follow. You are not closed-minded; if someone is distressed, you ask questions, get the guy out of his cell. Make a phone call to the hospital. (Prisoner)

A prisoner who had recently lost his job after an adjudication put it this way:

You come to terms with the fact that it's happened, but at the same time you're looking for some sort of fairness at the end of the day, and when you find that you don't get any, you sit down and you think 'boy, it's not just that prison's a rough ride, but they try and make it rough everywhere in the system for you.' Especially when you're getting out of jail soon. There's no compromising. If there's compromising in fairness, then I think people would get on better. By not having any *compromise in fairness*, people don't get on and it makes a bad situation even worse. (Prisoner – emphasis added)

Prisoners were asking for flexibility within a framework of consistency. They were asking that their individuality, their own needs, be attended to when rules were enforced or decisions taken. There was thus an understanding that straight consistency in rule enforcement could lead to unfair treatment. The prisoners were asking for discretion to be exercised in their cases. This was the apparent paradox that led us to the moral philosopher Harrison (1992). The prisoners were asking for 'mercy' (a decision not to enforce a rule) to be granted. As we argue in this chapter and elsewhere, officers did exercise 'mercy' in many cases.

### The granting and receiving of respect

Like the concept of 'fairness', the word 'respect' is heard frequently in prison. It is clearly an important feature of relationships between officers and prisoners, but the word is used with different meanings. What does 'being treated with respect' mean?

We identified at least three different examples of the term 'respect':

- 1 respect as fear/power;
- 2 respect as individuality;
- 3 respect as moral strength (or legitimacy).<sup>11</sup>

The first kind of respect relates to power or status. In this case, if I say that I respect a person, I acknowledge the power held by this individual and their capacity to wield that power to do damage to me (or indeed to help me). This is the typical ‘gangster’ or ‘Mafia’ notion of respect. It does not necessarily denote admiration or liking of the individual concerned but these ideas can be included. Some prisoners at Whitemoor talked about their time in the military producing respect from ex-military officers. Officers frequently mentioned the need to be respectful (wary) of the potential for danger in certain situations with individual prisoners. This was not the most common notion of respect but it seemed significant.

The second and more common use of the term respect was earned by stepping out of role – that is, by an individual stepping out of the stereotypical role adopted by virtue of being ‘a prison officer’ or ‘a prisoner’. This notion of respect is linked to negative expectations – as a stereotypical prisoner, I expect the stereotypical officer to be untrustworthy, deceitful, power-hungry, abusive and lazy, and to nick me for any minor thing I do wrong. As a stereotypical officer, I expect the stereotypical prisoner to lie, cheat, intimidate, shout and act selfishly at all times. When an individual steps out of that stereotypical role and, for example, promises a prisoner something and comes through with it promptly, or treats me politely and asks me to do something rather than delivering an impersonal order, or a prisoner obeys my request quietly and without dispute, or debated a point with me without threatening violence – then I respect that person and see them as an individual. This idea of respect has as a main tenet the notion of *individuality*:<sup>12</sup> the knowledge that *I am not a stereotypical prisoner or prison officer*. By responding to me as an individual – by doing what I asked without complaint, by demonstrating a little care and humanity – you have recognised this fact. One prisoner gave an example:

I give them their dues, because I’ve been acquitted of hostage taking and that ... and I’ve been acquitted of stabbing their colleagues before, assaulting them and ... they haven’t been malicious towards me ... The SO said to me that he’d like to think of me as one of his successes, because I’ve changed in the way I go about things. He’s seen me in situations, and tried

to make sure there are no obstacles in my way, and I can only respect someone like that. He saw I was going through mental pressures, and he didn't bring any physical harm towards me, he tried to help me out so I could go through even further. And this lady [officer] as well, she saw what I was going through and she came through and 'you alright?' People like that, I can't help but respect. They haven't brutalised me, they've only tried to help me. (Prisoner)

Officers who went out of their way to help prisoners, who wrote letters for prisoners who were illiterate or who came in during their spare time to help out the prison bands, were recipients of this second kind of respect. They stepped out of the 'them and us' characterisation.

The third notion of 'respect' may be specific to those who hold power or authority. This notion is something of a combination of the first and second and applies in prison exclusively to prison officers (and occasionally to some governors). This is respect for the officer who has what one prisoner described as 'moral fibre'. In our research, it was respect for the officer who had a firm but consistent line but enforced that consistency in a flexible manner. One prisoner described one such officer:

He was very by the book – he'd do things like come along and tell you, '*If I catch you again, you're nicked.*' He'd tell you straight. Anything to do with security he'd nick you for immediately. He's not a man I would have smoked a spliff in front of, you know? Not that he would have objected in his own personal view of things, but it would be like you were taking the piss. Some officers just don't give a fuck. That's different of officers you respect ... You've got a prisoner who's right stropky, they're not going to get intimidated, they're going to stand there and go, 'uh-huh, uh-huh, okay, I hear what you're saying. I accept that ... but this is how the prison runs, and that's how it has to be.' They'd tell you straight. I like that. (Prisoner)

This respect applied to officers who did their job 'properly', officers who were not afraid of the rules they had to enforce, but who were willing to debate and engage in dialogue with prisoners over those rules. These officers would listen to a prisoner's argument but not be swayed from their position. Further (and this was very important) such officers were prepared to explain why they could not be swayed, and why they held the position that they did. These were officers

who knew the rules, but who saw a consistent ‘bigger picture’ to their work and were prepared to bend rules when they did not match that bigger picture (and be able to explain to prisoners and to managers why those rules were bent). The respect held for these officers lay in an acknowledgement of the power held by them and the careful manner in which it was used.

Respect could be earned or lost. Prisoners generally talked of officers ‘earning’ respect through their actions; officers more frequently spoke of prisoners ‘losing’ respect through their actions. This meant that more work at relationships was required by officers to enjoy respect than by prisoners. Without contact with prisoners, respect could not be earned by officers; however, if this contact was handled in the wrong way, respect was in jeopardy.

Respect was a key concept that arose out of and affected relationships. While staff and prisoners often began with a mistrust of the other deeply embedded in cultures, memories and structures, it was possible to break through those barriers and to build trust and respect for the quality of the human individual on the other side. Cultures, memories and structures are not binding. Individual agency shaped the prison world. Examples of humanity and individual feeling were possible – and important – in this coercive environment.

These differences in the meaning of the term respect are important. Officers should respect the prisoner as an individual, but should not ‘respect’ the power of prisoners to the extent that they underenforce or avoid the rules glibly. Which differences are legitimate and can be ‘allowed’. Is underenforcement ever ‘just’? (see further Liebling: assisted by Arnold 2004).

The bigger picture is saying, this jail is a complex place, there are always exceptions to things, and people should be treated as individuals. And these people who struggle and say, ‘no, they’re not, they’re all prisoners and we treat them all the same,’ isn’t the case. Ninety per cent of what we do, we have to treat prisoners the same. We can’t give them all individual meals, we can’t give them individual visiting times, but in reality people are individuals and act in different ways. (Officer)

## **Boundaries, relationships and corruption**

The discussion of ‘boundaries’ and possible corruption inevitably arose in this piece of research. In some respects, this is precisely the difference between ‘good’ relationships and ‘right’ relationships. This

was a particularly pertinent issue at Whitemoor, where relationships had been (arguably at one point) too lax or too blurred and had been partly responsible for the escapes from the SSU in 1994 (Home Office 1995).<sup>13</sup>

The vulnerability of officers at Whitemoor to corruption was felt to be low, principally because of the traumatic history of the prison and the resulting boundary-conscious prison climate. However, both officers and prisoners felt that if the wrong officer was caught at the wrong time by the wrong prisoner, then something might develop:<sup>14</sup>

*How vulnerable are prison officers to corruption? (Interviewer)*

Depends on the personal make-up and personal life at the particular time. It could be a mixture of the two – a rough personal time with debts or something. Officers seem prone to it [debts] – maybe it's the stress that means that they need lots of holidays or something, go therapy shopping to make them feel good. But you've got a lot of powerful men in here with a lot of money who are very persuasive. And if someone's vulnerable, then yeah ... (Senior officer)

There was an assumption among officers that when we mentioned 'corruption', we were talking about the hard end of the scale – trafficking (particularly drugs and mobile phones) or aiding an escape. Both of these things were unanimously deemed 'corrupt'. However, at the lower end of the scale, things were much more opaque. Was swapping cigarettes corrupt? Was betting on the football for chocolate bars? There were significant differences between officers on these issues, and doubts about the ability of managers or others to draw a clear and satisfactory line:

It's very difficult to see when someone's being over-friendly to you. Because it happens over a period of time – prisoner Bloggs gives you a cup of coffee one day and the next day he's got a biscuit – it's difficult to see it happening until the point at which it's 'I gave you a cup of coffee, could you perhaps bring us in X and Y?'

*Where is the line? A cup of coffee? (Interviewer)*

Yeah – it's difficult, isn't it? Not until you were doing something against the prison rules, I think. Which is pretty obvious – it's

written down what you don't and you can't do. It's difficult that, definitely. But I wouldn't say I was being corrupted until I was doing something against the prison rules – but you're being corrupted before then, aren't you? (Officer)

The dangers of corruption sprang from the need to maintain relationships with prisoners and from the difficulty of saying 'no' if it might cause harm to that relationship. As one prisoner put it, 'Everybody likes to be liked, don't they?' Each officer's personal boundary came from their own personal view of what was and what was not corrupt, which was mainly related to where they as individuals felt comfortable 'drawing the line'. For some officers, betting small amounts on football matches was fine; for others, it was not. A few officers, particularly some of those who had worked in the SSU, were unwilling even to use first names with prisoners.

The issue of boundaries between officers and prisoners was clearly a vexing one. Figure 5.2 illustrates some of the dynamics of staff–prisoner relationships. Generally, relationships and life in

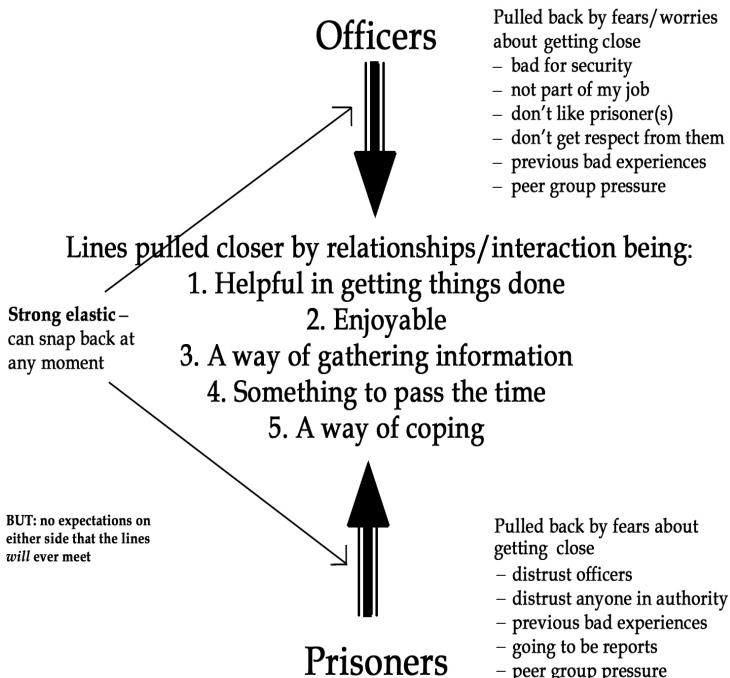


**Figure 5.2** The dynamics of the officer–prisoner relationship

prison carried on without explicit reference to them. However, when a boundary was suddenly called into question, or when an event occurred that affected boundaries, difficulties could arise. It was at these points – a lockdown search, for example, or an assault – that officers stepped firmly back into their roles as *officers*. It was a sudden reminder that this was prison, and that these relationships were artificial and had limits. These situations were like the cinema projector breaking down in the middle of a film: for a while, you can be immersed in the story on the screen, but when the picture breaks and the lights come on, you remember that the screen was showing only a superficial fiction, and you are brought back to reality. In the same way, relationships between officers and prisoners could often carry on until a boundary was crossed. It was at this point that the ‘lights came on’ and the reality of the situation (of the ‘keepers’ and the ‘kept’, of officer and prisoner) rudely interrupted the (temporarily forgotten) artificiality of the interaction. Such a moment placed the limitations of the relationships between officers and prisoners in sharp focus.

### Limits to relationships

There are 512 prisoners here; there are 700 staff on the books. That’s an enormous amount of relationships, and not all of them can be good or will be good. A good prison officer will understand the limits of his relationships with prisoners, will accept that with some prisoners, they will not have a good relationship, but can still manage that relationship in a very professional sense. Bad prison officers (a) try to treat all prisoners the same, and that doesn’t work; or (b) simply hide behind, ‘it ain’t my job, it’s far too difficult, I’m not prepared to think for myself’. You just have to be able to talk to people. (Senior manager)

Relationships between staff and prisoners were constrained by the realities of human coexistence, and by their context. The prisoner culture (values and beliefs, shared unevenly among them but present nevertheless) placed limits on the extent to which prisoners could ‘be seen’ to have close relationships with staff. Prisoners who were perceived as too friendly with staff were labelled ‘grasses’, disloyal to the distance required for dignity among fellow prisoners. Some resistance by prisoners was probably natural – people rarely accept

authority unquestioningly. Relationships were also limited by the vision staff and prisoners had of each other (see above). Sometimes officers and prisoners disliked each other – or in some cases, simply disliked what the other represented. For some officers, prisoners represented a lack of self-control, greed or amoral activity; for prisoners, staff could represent the injustices of experienced authority. There were limits to what ‘relationships’ could achieve in a prison. They could not replace decent regimes and the possibility of hope for the future, but they could support such things, soften the impact of losses of privileges and bring a more human touch to the realities of prison.

Relationships were also important in the delivery of justice at a micro level. Prison officers could embody their prison (or at a wider level, the criminal justice system) every time they spoke to or approached a prisoner (see Tyler 1990). The best examples of relationships we observed – relationships that included fairness, respect and dialogue between officers and prisoners – could be seen as instruments of legitimacy. Actions of prison officers matter – they can generate trust in the prisoner, the establishment, the criminal justice system and authority in general. In this sense, prison officers ‘embody’ a prison’s regime. More is said about this important aspect of prison life and work in *Prisons and Their Moral Performance* (Liebling, assisted by Arnold 2004).

### The overuse of power

We have concentrated in this chapter on the use of discretion for legitimacy.<sup>15</sup> Clearly there are overuses of power and uses of discretion (including discrimination) which are *against* legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> The questions of how staff resist the overuse of power, avoid holding grudges and retain relationships in the face of constant challenge have been inadequately considered in research and in training. Cultures can develop in whole establishments or (more often) in parts of establishments where staff are careless and occasionally brutal with the power they hold. Or staff may have all their pride invested in very high levels of security and discipline, and almost none invested in activities or relationships (Liebling *et al.* 1999).

The (controversial) Milgram and Zimbardo experiments demonstrated some of the dangers of power, and there are enough examples of staff violence against prisoners, or uses of intimidation to illustrate the real possibilities of staff having or using too much power of the wrong sort.

Motivated by curiosity about the cooperation of thousands of Germans with the systematic destruction of the Jews and others during the 1930s and 1940s, Milgram conducted a series of experiments intended to investigate readiness to obey morally wrong or physically dangerous acts. He called his experiments 'the effects of punishment on learning', and persuaded duped volunteers to administer shocks of increasing severity to a 'student' who gave wrong answers to a series of tests. The experiment was conducted under the strict guidance of the experimenter, who encouraged the subjects to continue. Many showed signs of severe distress and some eventually refused to go on. Sixty-five per cent of the subjects gave shocks up to and including 450 volts, apparently endangering the life of the actor who masqueraded as the student. When the experiments were repeated at a less prestigious university, the number of subjects willing to reach these levels in the experiment fell to 50 per cent. When the subject was in the same room as the 'student' instead of being the other side of a glass partition, obedience levels dropped to 40 per cent; when subjects had to force the hand of the learner back onto the shock plate, obedience levels dropped to 30 per cent. When other 'teachers' left the room during the experiment in protest (providing social support for refusing to obey), obedience levels dropped to 10 per cent. When another person delivered the shock, obedience levels rose to 95 per cent. When the experimenter left the room, obedience dropped to almost zero. Other related obedience studies show that ordinary citizens are more likely to obey an instruction if it is given by someone in uniform, even if they subsequently leave the scene, and that nurses will deliver dangerous levels of drugs to patients if instructed to do so by an unknown doctor over the telephone (Hofling *et al.* 1966).

These studies argued that abusive behaviour is best viewed as a product of transactions with an environment that supports such behaviour, and that social institutions contain powerful forces which can make good men engage in evil deeds (Haney *et al.* 1973).

Haney *et al.* (1973) conducted an experiment in which subjects role-played prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. The aim of the experiment was to 'assess the power of ... social forces ... in this situation'. Subjects were carefully selected after careful diagnostic testing of a large group of volunteer male college students. The sample were randomly assigned to play either prisoners or guards. The experiment was intended to last two weeks. Behavioural interactions were observed and video-taped, and the participants were asked to complete questionnaires, self-report scales and interviews.

The authors concluded that the simulated prison became a 'psychologically compelling environment', eliciting unexpectedly intense, realistic and often pathological reactions from the participants. The prisoners experienced a loss of personal identity and reacted to the arbitrary control of their behaviour. This resulted in a syndrome of passivity, dependency, depression and helplessness. Most of the guards experienced a gain in social power, status and group identification, which made their role-playing rewarding. The coping behaviour resorted to by half the prisoners was the development of acute emotional disturbance. A third of the guards were judged to have become more aggressive and dehumanising than predicted. Few of the reactions could be attributed to pre-existing personality traits. The authors concluded that imprisonment destroys the human spirit of both the imprisoned and the imprisoning. They argue that the brutality of prison stems not from the characteristics of individual guards and prisoners (the 'dispositional hypothesis'), but from the 'deep structure' of the prison as an institution.

To test this hypothesis, they controlled for the characteristics of guards and prisoners by elaborately creating a simulated prison setting which aimed to reflect the social-psychological milieu of existing prisons. They aimed to create the functional equivalent of activities and experiences characteristic of the prison: feelings of power and powerlessness, of control and oppression, of satisfaction and frustration, of arbitrary rule and resistance to authority (Haney *et al.* 1973: 72). Twenty-one subjects were selected from 75 respondents after screening for emotional stability and maturity. There were 10 prisoners and 11 guards. A cell block was designed in the basement of Stanford University psychology department. The guards believed the experiment was intended to study the behaviour of prisoners only. Uniforms were given (to an extreme specification) and the guards were given police night sticks to carry. Once participants had signed up to the experiment and its terms and conditions, they were 'unexpectedly' arrested at their places of residence. Their exposure to the simulated prison was extreme, with the guards quickly abandoning the prescribed rules and routines.

The authors claimed to have acquired clear, consistent and reliable results: a huge and largely negative impact on the affective states of guards and prisoners. The characteristic nature of interactions was negative, hostile, affronting and dehumanising; prisoners quickly developed passive modes of response. Five prisoners had to be released early due to extreme depression, crying, rage and anxiety (Haney *et al.* 1973: 81). One developed a psychosomatic rash. The

experiment was terminated early, after six days. In contrast, most of the guards were upset by the decision to stop the experiment and were enjoying their roles. One guard reported being distressed by the suffering of the prisoners and considered requesting a transfer from the role of guard to that of prisoner. They all arrived on time for work and some remained on duty over time. The reactions of the prisoner group and the staff group are described by the authors of the study as 'pathological'. Some prisoners coped better than others and not all the guards became hostile. Personality and attitude dispositions accounted for some of the variation in reactions and adjustments to imprisonment. There were slight differences between prisoners who demanded early release and those who stayed until the end of the experiment. Prisoners who remained scored higher on conformity, conventionality, extroversion, authoritarianism and empathy. Prisoners were rarely addressed individually, whereas guards did refer to prisoners individually. Over time, guard behaviour became more insulting, with some variation between three shifts, the evening shift being the most harassing. In interviews, prisoners expressed negative feeling, outlook and negative self-regard. Ninety per cent of the conversation between prisoners was about prison matters and their regard for each other deteriorated over time. Both guards and prisoners reported negative affect, but prisoners reported twice as much. The guards observed, after the experiment, that they were surprised by how much fun being authoritarian could be and the prisoners expressed surprise that they had felt so out of control of their emotions. They had begun to act in ways which helped to sanction their victimisation by the guards. Follow-up suggested that all the negative effects (passivity, dependency, depression, helplessness and self-deprecation) were temporary. The authors were surprised by how easily sadistic behaviour could be elicited in 'non-sadistic types' and how easily emotional breakdown could occur in stable types:

In less than one week their behaviour in this simulated prison could be characterised as pathological and anti-social. The negative, anti-social reactions observed were not the product of an environment created by combining a collection of deviant personalities, but rather the result of an intrinsically pathological situation. (Haney *et al.* 1973: 90)

The study has been severely criticised on methodological grounds (the experiment was too extreme and the results were actively sought: see Jones and Fowles 1984). But there are important warnings here, and

some resonances with some real situations observed in contemporary prisons (see, for example, Sparks *et al.* 1996; Liebling *et al.* 1999; the accounts of unhealthy cultures described in some Inspectorate reports and reports of US military prisons at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay). Zimbardo revisited these themes in his recent book *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil* (2007), arguing that we should always be on the alert for the darker side of institutional life.

## Conclusion

The role of staff–prisoner relationships is crucial to prison life. Relationships can ‘go wrong’ in many different ways. Right relationships can provide security, order, legitimacy and social support. According to Biggam and Power (1997), ‘social support could be considered as an important psychological and social variable that contributes to adjustment in prisons and the amelioration of stress’ (214). In their study of 125 young offenders in Scotland they administered the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale, the Beck’s Hopelessness Scale and the Significant Others Scale (SOS). The young offenders, having identified important relationships under the SOS, then rated each of these relationships in terms of ‘actual’ versus ‘ideal’ support. They found that ‘prisoners displaying psychological distress expressed a desire for more support from their fellow prisoners’ and more emotional and practical support from officers. Indeed, ‘vulnerable prisoners show a desire for a more “therapeutic” relationship with staff’. Perceived deficits in support from officers ‘were the major predictors of anxiety, depression and hopelessness’ (Biggam and Power 1997: 225–6; see also Liebling and Price 1999). Staff–prisoner relationships mediate levels and types of order, and they may mediate levels and types of prisoner distress (see further, Liebling and Tait 2006). At their best, relationships between staff and prisoners both constitute and help to support the finest work accomplished by prison staff.

## Notes

- 1 There has been some pioneering ‘audit’ work on relationships between staff and prisoners carried out by the Relationships Foundation, which has some interesting points to make about the state of staff–prisoner relationships. This work, although of interest, is not sociological in

- its analysis. For a more sociological and staff/prisoner-led analysis of relationships, see Liebling, assisted by Arnold (2004).
- 2 For example, routinely, what space is shared and what is not shared? What effect does prolonged contact over time have on staff-prisoner views of and interactions with each other?
  - 3 The MQPL survey, operational since 2002, is based on research intended to achieve this; see Liebling, assisted by Arnold (2004).
  - 4 During our many conversations with staff throughout previous projects we were informally told of a research project carried out at Onley, which found that prisoners were more likely to be actively engaged in activities when one shift was on than when the other shift was working.
  - 5 In practice, prison officers were not too concerned about the type of consent they achieved as long as they achieved behavioural (as opposed to attitudinal) consent. On the importance of this point, see Sparks *et al.* (1996) and Liebling (2008b).
  - 6 Dedicated Search Team.
  - 7 Security Information Report.
  - 8 Mandatory Drug Testing.
  - 9 In this, it differs from the notion of respect, which we discuss below.
  - 10 Officers, in their turn, expected to be treated fairly by management.
  - 11 There were other ideas of respect (like respect as liking or as friendship), but we have tried to restrict this discussion to the three most frequent and relevant ways in which they were used.
  - 12 A Kantian notion: 'respect for persons'.
  - 13 We do not deal here with abusive treatment of prisoners by staff – a different form of 'corruption' that can have institutional as well as individual causes.
  - 14 It is significant that only one respondent (a prisoner) mentioned that any wrongdoing would have to be on the initiative of the officer rather than the prisoner – the assumption was that officers were actively coerced or attracted into corruption by prisoners.
  - 15 Arguably we have concentrated in this book on the best aspects of prison officer work and very little on the 'dark side'. This is consistent with our aims. There is a case for more contemporary empirical work on poor performance, abuses of power, and 'when things go wrong', but this is not our present task.
  - 16 Public and media interest has tended to focus on 'the dark side' and some aspects of centralised management aim to control this facet of the prison officer's world.