

## Chapter 3

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# Understanding prison officers and their role

Staff were gatekeepers, agents of criminal justice, peacemakers, instruments of change and deliverers and interpreters of policy. (Liebling and Price 1999: 86)

I think the straightforward answer to what the prison officer does on the wing ... is that he operates the routine and the regime as decided by the governor ... So you get the core prison officers who are the ones who can do the routine. They unlock, they lock-up, they can do the routines. That's the absolute base level that prison officers can do to get the money. But that's not sufficient. It's about the other bits – it's about interacting with prisoners, having the proper relationship with them, it's helping them with their problems, dealing with their short-term needs and wants and their long-term needs and wants. (Senior manager)

What is the role of the modern prison officer? Arguably the primary role of a prison officer is the maintenance of safe custody (Thomas 1972). But there is clearly more to the officer's role than this. A good place to start is with the official definition of the prison officer's job – Figure 3.1 shows the information available on the Prison Service website for applicants interested in joining the Prison Service. This is a concise summary of the tasks facing a prison officer.

It is clear from the job description that prison work can be complex and challenging. Some of the broad objectives are apparently contradictory, prisoners are often found in highly charged emotional

Prison officers work in different types of prisons – open (low security), female, high security, juveniles, young offenders and remand centres. They help ensure the security and safety of prisoners.

### **What prison officers do**

- help offenders deal with being in prison and help them to address their offending behaviour
- supervise prisoners' activities
- aid in rehabilitating and training offenders, giving prisoners advice, support and counselling via a Personal Officer scheme
- deal with any disruptions to the regime, maintaining control and order and helping to create a safe and secure environment
- receive and process new prisoners into prisons, assessing their needs and identifying possible self-harm issues
- search prisoners, accommodation blocks, vehicles, grounds and visitors into prisons.

### **Key skills for prison officers**

- interest in dealing with social problems
- ability to react quickly and effectively under pressure, i.e. in incidents, acts of disorder
- sensitivity to others' problems and issues
- good communication skills
- an ability to get on with people from different social backgrounds
- initiative, good leadership and people management skills
- an ability to defuse conflict in a professional and sensitive manner.

*Source:* Prison Service website.

### **Figure 3.1** Prison officer job description

states and a single 'ill-considered word or action' can sometimes precipitate violence or tragedy. It is plain enough that the prison is a 'strange and demanding environment' (see the Prison Service website for further details).

Despite the apparently simple daily tasks of a prison officer ('you will unlock prisoners, deal with any requests they may have, make sure

they are where they should be and doing what they should be doing') it is the relationships an officer establishes with prisoners that hold the key to being a successful prison officer. These should be 'honest', but officers also need to know how to cajole, negotiate, persuade – 'you will require good listening, assertive, influencing, negotiating and verbal communication skills'. Further, these relationships have to be seen within other dimensions of this complex job: maintaining security, providing care, performing routines efficiently, balancing sometimes contradictory goals, and so on.

There is little in this formal definition about the rewards of the job of prison officer, other than the implicit suggestion that making a positive contribution to the care of those in custody might be rewarding in itself. We get an idea of the kind of personality that might be involved: someone that has 'strength of character, a balanced and mature approach to life, plenty of patience, understanding and common sense' – here, it is already possible to see why many prison officers compare their role to that of a parent.

However, the outline does not say much about how a prison officer might be expected to go about these many difficult tasks, nor does it provide any basic detail about the structure of a typical prison day, the working environment or their colleagues, for example.

Much sociological literature suffers from the same deficit – a lack of attention to the work and responsibilities of the prison officer. Some empirical studies have been carried out, many of these in the US (for example, Jacobs 1977, 1978; Johnson 1977; Johnson and Price 1981; Lombardo 1981; Toch and Klofas 1982; Klofas 1986; Marquart 1986), some in Australia (for example Williams 1983; Williams and Soutar 1984) and some in the UK (Morris and Morris 1963; Emery 1970). Many of these studies are now dated, in particular in their depiction of the nature of prison work, although there are useful insights which remain of interest (such as the finding that officers share a liberal socio-political perspective on the causes of crime and may have a 'greater commitment to rehabilitation than the academic penologists and prison administrators' (Jacobs 1978: 193). Some significant recent work conducted in the UK (Biggam and Power 1997; Liebling and Price 1999; Arnold 2008; Shefer and Liebling 2008), Australia (Rynne, personal communication) and the US (Gilbert 1997) suggest that officers may define their role differently, some preferring a mainly custodial interpretation, others having a 'treatment' orientation. These basic orientations are linked to staff perceptions of prisoners, their attitudes towards non-custodial staff and the type of rewards they seek in their work (Williams 1983). The need for clarity may

encourage officers to adhere to a disciplinary or rule orientation, to treat all prisoners alike and to develop individual and collective psychological defences in the form of negative stereotypes over time (Williams 1983: 53–4). Officers in the modern prison deliver (and help to deliver) professional treatment and development programmes for sex offenders, violent offenders, drug users and others, and arguably have developed a strengthened ‘treatment intervention’ role over recent years. Research has shown that officers who have a favourable or human services orientation towards prisoners have a more satisfying occupational experience (Whitehead *et al.* 1987).

Despite the research mentioned above, we would argue that prison staff have been generally neglected in the academic literature. Writing in 1991, Hay and Sparks (1991: 1) wondered whether ‘the role of the prison officer [had] become so poorly defined, or alternatively so contradictory, as to make it unusually hard for anyone to occupy it satisfactorily’. Hay and Sparks felt that policy documents and official pronouncements on the role of the prison officer – like the job description above – said little about what officers should do on a daily working basis. Prison officers ‘have not been well served by those above them whose job it is ... to provide them with a clear and consistent sense of identity and purpose’ (Hay and Sparks 1991: 3). Within what guiding principles should officers work? How should they describe what they do?

The role of the prison officer is a difficult one to explain accurately. Most of the work is ‘low visibility’ and staff work to overall goals that may be in conflict with each other. How individual prison officers reconcile these problems in individual situations encountered during a typical working day is one of the main subjects of this book (see especially Chapter 6 on the use of discretion).

First, this chapter provides a basic description of prison officer work. We illustrate a typical day for a prison officer, using research we conducted as a template. There are over 140 public and private sector prison establishments in England and Wales, and each one operates slightly differently. As a result, the routine outlined below is a composite picture; it contains some of what we have seen of how officers might spend their time and a sense of the different roles that can be assumed by an officer. The chapter then goes on to define the role of the prison officer from the ground, using research that explored with prison officers and prisoners what qualities were considered important in being a ‘role model’ prison officer (Liebling and Price 1999; see also Arnold 2008).

## **A typical day for a prison officer**

We focus here on the landing officer: arguably the key role in any prison. What might a day look like to an observer?

The amount and type of physical interaction between an officer and a prisoner varies depending on the designated role of the officer and the individual prisoner.<sup>1</sup> Landing officers unlock a landing in the morning and, generally, remain on the wing or spur while breakfast is served, controlling the flow of prisoners collecting their meals. Interaction might occur about the order in which the spurs are to receive breakfast, or a question or comment about some other aspect of the prison routine might come from a prisoner.<sup>2</sup> When most prisoners are off the spur at work (with officers sometimes needed to chivvy one or two along or to check why a prisoner is not going to work that day), landing officers are normally placed on the required daily task of checking locks, bolts and bars (LBBs) or another spur-based task (searching, for example). Teamed up with another officer, they move round a spur one landing at a time checking each cell and all communal areas. Within the wing, this is usually the quietest period of the unlocked day – both prisoners and officers are working at set tasks. Officers on LBBs speak to prisoners, perhaps asking them to step out of their cells if they are ‘banged up’ (not at work) – this is often a quick and relatively formal interaction, although some officers might banter and talk with prisoners (particularly those they get on with well) more than others. The prisoner might request to fetch some hot water or to hand in an application (written request) before he is locked up again. LBBs are often carried on during the afternoon work period. Thus the role of the landing officer is one of maintaining security and control, and in carrying out both relating effectively to prisoners.

The afternoon activity (work, training or education) period is more relaxed – much of the set work of the day is done both by prisoners and officers. On occasions, officers and prisoners might be observed leaning over the railings together chatting, often about prison issues but more general conversation might develop: the progress someone is making on education, a family issue, a crime, the news, a football match. When prisoners return from their activities – in the morning or the afternoon – the wing becomes much busier, and interaction between officers and prisoners is more varied and frequent. Longer and deeper conversations are normally reserved for an office or a quieter period of the day. The progression of prisoners to get their lunch or dinner often produces rapid bursts of talk – good humoured

insults are traded – but prisoners are usually too anxious to get their meal and start eating to talk for longer than a few minutes.

Evening association tends to be seen as ‘prisoner time’. Some officers play pool or table tennis with prisoners or chat, but other officers are either busy and unable to talk or prefer to leave prisoners alone unless they wish to approach an officer. This does not stop the occasional casual remark or round of banter, however. Prisoners approach officers – particularly officers they know well – at any time, often to talk about any (prison-related) issue: a problem with a visit, a request for an application form, a query over private cash or a part of a procedure or the regime. Conversations are generally cooperative and civil. All-out arguments are rare – raised voices and emotions are more common among prisoners, with officers more frequently taking on the ‘peacemaking’ role.

There are occasions where there is a more formal opportunity for officers and prisoners to talk to each other about subjects other than prison – in sentence planning or personal officer interviews, for example – but general conversation about subjects other than prison is relatively rare. In part, this may be due to staff fears about ‘conditioning’ and ‘boundaries’ but it also reflects each side’s knowledge of the reason for any relationship in the first place – often an instrumental one (‘they need us, and we need their cooperation’).

Staff shifts are an important factor in the physical structuring of their relationships with prisoners. Prison officers are contracted to work an average 39-hour week (meal breaks not included) and most work every other weekend. Because prisons operate 24 hours a day, a complex pattern of shifts determines the deployment of staff. This inevitably means that in the course of several weeks prisoners see a number of different officers. With time used for training, holidays and sickness (which can be high among officers), officers work on average 31.2 ‘effective’ hours each week, scheduled in shifts covering the 24-hour period. The structural constraint of this lack of continuity is an important factor in the development and endurance of relationships. Events constantly ‘happen’ that affect a wing’s operation (e.g. tensions between prisoners, staffing and management changes or disagreements, and general ‘events’ – a fire, an alarm, a successful parole result, a fight, a cell change, or even – as we once witnessed – a bird flying on to the wing where a staff member who was afraid of birds worked). Each event can bond, sever, strain, generate laughter or lead to a different atmosphere on the wing. Officers who come back on duty having been off for a week sometimes find it difficult

to catch up on all the small and subtle but important changes that have occurred. Similarly, prisoners often express frustration that they have not been able to see their personal officer for an extended period because of shift patterns and leave. In local prisons where the turnover of prisoners is particularly high, a change in the mix of prisoners can have a profound effect on the wing.

In one day, an officer can be a supervisor, custodian, disciplinarian, peacekeeper, administrator, observer, manager, facilitator, mentor, provider, classifier and diplomat. Different situations require slightly different blends, and different types of establishments or populations may demand a slightly different mix. Versatility and flexibility are key requirements.

### **Role model prison officers**

The above sketch gives a brief idea of the many tasks in which officers are engaged during a typical day, from turning down a request, to giving unwelcome news, to assisting a prisoner with their sentence plan, to rub down searching or strip searching.<sup>3</sup> It illustrates the centrality of relationships to prison life. At every point of the day, the relationships an officer has established with prisoners are called upon: to unlock prisoners successfully without rancour, to cajole stragglers along to work, to make sure that the visits policy is explained clearly to dispel anxiety in a prisoner who is missing his or her family. Even in seemingly 'technical' matters – for example, censoring letters (an officer can draw upon their knowledge of a wing and the prisoner in reading letters) or in completing the locks, bolts and bars (checking around a prisoner's cell – their home – in a way that does not disturb or upset them) – relationships matter.

These relationships are mediated through the officer's own personality. What kinds of personal skills are required to be a successful prison officer? Is it possible to identify a 'role model' officer? A study in Denmark (Kriminalforsorgens Uddannelsescenter, 1994) addressed those questions. The team of researchers asked prison officers and their managers to identify the qualities that the ideal prison officer might have. They asked staff to nominate an individual who they thought operated effectively, handled conflict situations well and set a good example for other staff. The researchers then interviewed these nominated officers about their working styles, attributes and thoughts about their work. They were then able to produce a long profile of the skills that an ideal prison officer should possess. A selection of these qualities is listed in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1** Role model characteristics of prison officers

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**1 Physical characteristics**

- good physical condition
- satisfactory strength to respond to hard working conditions
- ability to act with reasonable self-confidence and personal authority
- verbal skills

**2 Mental capacity**

- ability to think
- able to hold many things in mind at the same time

**3 You should have the ability to:**

*(i) Learn:*

- have the ability and need to learn new things
- be receptive to new ideas and alternative solutions
- understand consequences and connections in what oneself and others do
- come up with ideas and proposals and be able to see them through
- view and assess complex situations and deal with them

*(ii) Watch:*

- be alert and aware of yourself through observations and information
- be able to see, understand, evaluate and account for a situation without distortion
- be able to overview several activities at the same time without confusion
- be able to 'control' own attitudes and prejudices when people act in ways that disturb or annoy you, and to keep these people in order

*(iii) Make decisions:*

- use new information, understand it, form your own opinions and make your decision
- be loyal to decisions already made
- be flexible and able to change opinion when the circumstances change

*(iv) Solve problems:*

- be able to mentally prepare information to solve problems
- try to reach solutions which will be understood and accepted
- relate to others in a way that brings opinions from them
- be satisfied with half-solutions when the perfect solution is impossible

*(v) Do administrative tasks:*

- handle 'paperwork' exactly and quickly
  - be organised
  - understand and accept the necessity of routine work
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*Table 3.1 continues over*

Table 3.1 continued

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**4 You should be able to:**

- interact with others
  - bear difficult emotions
  - seek to understand other people's thoughts and emotions
  - be sensitive in personal interaction
  - be interested in one's environment as much as in oneself
  - stand out as trustworthy
  - live with the fact that from time to time it is hard to see the overall context
  - live with the negative societal picture of the prison officer and imprisonment
  - have a sense of humour
  - lead others and create respect around oneself without becoming aggressive
  - have self-confidence and self-esteem
  - handle conflict situations
  - communicate ideas clearly and easily and influence others
  - express oneself in a clear and obvious way that is right for the person and the situation
  - give clear signals that cannot be misinterpreted by the other person, and make sure that the receiver understands the signals
  - acquire verbal and non-verbal signals from different individuals and groups with varied cultural characteristics
  - build trust by one's actions
  - possess self-confidence
  - acquire positive energy outside the institution
  - be professional enough to act 'sensibly' under pressure from colleagues and prisoners
  - live with and strengthen relationships with others
  - stand alone without support when the situation demands
  - say 'no' when the situation demands
  - be reliable, trustworthy and responsible for the tasks given to you
  - be flexible enough to handle more than one duty and long irregular working hours
  - understand different people's attitudes and behaviour and be able to express the reasons for their attitude and behaviour
  - keep going, even if there is no pressure on you to do so.
- 

Source: Kriminalforsorgens Uddannelsescenter (1994).

What is evident from this profile is that many of the attributes required to be a 'role model' prison officer are in tension. If we look at the section titled 'Make decisions', for example, two attributes follow one another: be loyal to decisions already made; and be flexible and

able to change opinion when the circumstances change. 'Solutions' requires the officer to be satisfied (and, implicitly, be able to recognise this point) with 'half-solutions' to problems but other attributes require the right solution to be sought. The profile is an aspirational one – no one person can be all of these things. If these are the attributes of the 'perfect' prison officer, can such an officer exist?

### **Role model officers at Whitemoor prison**

We were intrigued by the Danish study and used it in our study of staff-prisoner relationships at Whitemoor. We asked prison officers, their managers and prisoners which prison officers they admired most and why. One general conclusion was that a mix of officers was necessary:

You need the friendly and the fair; you need the very strict; you need the very easy. You need all of them. *Porridge* is the closest that outside people understand. You need your McKays and your Barracloughs, as well as everybody in-between. If we were all exactly the same, the job wouldn't tick, would it? (Officer)

You need professional skills – leadership, decision-making, problem-solving skills, good communications skills; and the correct personal qualities – integrity, energy, enthusiasm, taking personal responsibility ... but you need a blend. You don't want too many people with the same quality in one area. I don't think that there is a perfect officer. It's all about how you get individuals generally using common sense working with other people, being reasonable to their colleagues as many people of one type. (Senior manager)

Importantly, we found that slightly different 'role model' officers, and reasons for the choices of these officers, were given for different locations within the prison and by different groups. For example, managers were more likely to cite factors such as reliable attendance, enthusiasm and smartness; officers looked for reliability and willingness to do jobs when asked, the ability to 'keep a calm head' and the ability to resolve conflict. Prisoners preferred officers who were 'down to earth' and not 'petty'. However, throughout these different areas and the many different viewpoints, there was a common 'core' of desirable characteristics that were relevant in all locations and that were identified by senior managers, prison officer

colleagues and prisoners alike (see Table 3.2). Good officers had verbal skills of persuasion, could use authority appropriately, had human relations skills and leadership abilities and could use straight talk or honesty. They had the ability to maintain boundaries – all boundaries – with different departments, between management and staff, and with prisoners. They had personal strength or ‘moral courage’ and a sense of purpose. They needed patience, empathy, courage and a professional orientation.

**Table 3.2** Factors common to ‘role model’ prison officers

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- Having known and consistent boundaries. It did not matter so much precisely where these boundaries were, provided they were effectively communicated to prisoners and consistently policed.
  - A quality for which we were unable to find a better term than ‘moral fibre’ – confidence, integrity, honesty, strength or conviction, good judgement (flexibility).
  - An awareness of the effects of their own power.
  - An understanding of the painfulness of prison.
  - A ‘professional orientation’.
  - An optimistic – but realistic – outlook: the capacity to maintain hope in difficult circumstances.
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The ‘professional orientation’ is usefully described by Gilbert, who uses work descriptors or typologies first used by Muir in relation to the police (Gilbert 1997; Muir 1977). Gilbert argues that studies of prison officers have not typically recognised the ‘rich diversity of work behaviours’ displayed by staff, and he supports our view that those characterisations which do exist tend to consist mainly of negative stereotypes (Gilbert 1997; see also Liebling *et al.* 1999). He developed a typology which characterises prison officers’ working styles as ‘professionals’,<sup>4</sup> ‘reciprocators’, ‘enforcers’ and ‘avoiders’. These working styles – into which we could place many officers we have encountered during fieldwork – provide a useful conceptual scheme for understanding the professional role described to us by prisoners and staff.<sup>5</sup> The nature and the extent of discretionary power used by prison officers differs, Gilbert argues, in these four broad ways:

- *The professional* – is open and non-defensive, makes exceptions when warranted, prefers to gain cooperation and compliance through communication, but is willing to use coercive power or force as a last resort.

- *The reciprocator* – wants to help people, assists them in resolving their problems, prefers clinical or social work strategies, may be inconsistent when making exceptions, prefers to ‘go along to get along’ and tends not to use coercive authority or physical force even when it is justifiable.
- *The enforcer* – practises rigid, ‘by the book’ aggressive enforcement, actively seeks out violations, rarely makes exceptions, has little empathy for others, takes unreasonable risks to personal safety, sees most things as either good or bad, and is quick to use threats, verbal coercion and physical force.
- *The avoider* – minimises offender contact, often does not ‘see’ an offence, avoids confrontation and coercion, views interpersonal aspects of the job as not part of the job, often backs down from confrontation and blames others.

What is interesting about Gilbert’s typology is its usefulness in linking the variations we have witnessed with ‘what should be’ in most of our respondents’ views. We would not always agree with Gilbert’s normative judgements and his work is based on US examples. But this account is intended to provide empirical descriptions and some of the conceptual tools required to think about the work of prison officers. We hope to assist in this way with the more difficult normative task. What should officers be like? There is overlap between some of the categories – for example, some of the ‘role model’ staff identified at Whitemoor could be described as a combination of the ‘professional’ and ‘enforcer’ types. This version of the ‘professional’ officer may be the desired type in this sort of setting. Gilbert provides a detailed list of what he calls (after Muir 1977) ‘work style descriptors’ (see Table 3.3).

The best officers we saw were discerning, committed and unafraid to use force. They were neither over-eager to resort to force, nor reluctant. They were confident, physically fit (usually) and had a fairly clear sense of their broader purpose. They did not bear grudges (see Wilson 2000) and were enthusiastic, despite setbacks.

According to each particular wing of the prison, these role model characteristics changed a little, to adapt to the different circumstances and ‘working way’ of each area. Whitemoor (a high security or dispersal prison<sup>6</sup>) had four wings. At the time of our original research, A and B wings housed vulnerable prisoners (VPs); C and D wings were mainstream dispersal wings. There were subtle but important differences within each ‘pair’ of wings. In addition to the common

**Table 3.3** Gilbert's 'work style descriptors'

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*The professional*

- Develops the housing unit (wing)
- Takes educated risks
- Provides prisoners advice on rules and regulations
- Increases pressure over time to change behaviour
- Uses the 'write-up' (adjudication) as a last resort
- Tries to preserve the dignity of prisoners through the use of non-demeaning behaviours and attitudes
- Views offenders as not much different from self
- Empathises with the human condition of prisoners
- Allows for exceptions in own and others' behaviour
- Uses coercion and force judiciously
- Calm and easy-going
- Articulate and open
- Focuses on ensuring due process and decency in security and control tasks
- Views most other officers as being enforcer-oriented

*The reciprocator*

- Allows prisoner leaders to keep the wing quiet – a mutual accommodation
- Uses clinical/social work strategies to help prisoners 'worthy' of assistance
- Rationalises situations
- Attempts to educate, cure or solve the prisoner's problems
- Low tolerance for rejection of offered assistance
- Easily frustrated
- Often does not use coercion when it should be used
- Inconsistent job performance
- Irrational behaviour by prisoners stymies the officer
- Often displays a superior attitude towards others
- Highly articulate

*The enforcer*

- Aggressive rule enforcement
- Issues many 'tickets' (places many on report)
- Actively seeks violations
- Frequently uses force or excessive force
- Tends to view treatment functions as what 'others' do with/for prisoners
- Strict security and control orientation, limits service delivery duties
- Little or no empathy for the human condition of prisoners
- Prisoners often submit grievances over this officer's behaviour

- Rigid, rule-bound, makes few exceptions even when appropriate
- Maintains a dualistic view of human nature (good/bad, officer/prisoner, strong/weak)
- Dislikes management
- Postures for effect – Crazy/brave ‘John Wayne’ behaviours, takes unnecessary risks
- Views other officers as ‘soft’/‘weak’ if not like him/her
- Views officers like him/her as being the majority of officers

*The avoider*

- Often leaves situations as quickly as possible
- Tends to view human communications with prisoners as not being part of security and control
- Uses the mechanical aspects of security and control to reduce contact with prisoners
- Often among the last to arrive at an emergency scene
- Likely to select isolated/prisoner-free positions
- Plays the ‘phoney’ tough and frequently backs down
- Tends to blame others for avoidance behaviours or inadequacies
- Structures the work to avoid observing infractions and use of coercion
- Avoids confrontations and interactions with prisoners

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Source: Gilbert (1997).

‘role model’ characteristics above, prisoners and staff in the different wings put emphasis on different characteristics of their most admired officers. While the function of many of these and the specialist wings at Whitemoor has changed, as is so often the case in prisons, we draw on this account to illustrate a typical range of wing functions and styles.<sup>7</sup>

On *A Wing*, a vulnerable prisoner wing which housed the Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP: an intensive offending behaviour programme), role model officers were often those engaged in SOTP work. These officers ‘stood out’ and were perceived by prisoners as caring and working hard for them. A Wing role models were patient with prisoners, knew their prisoners and were not afraid of interacting with them; they were comfortable in close relationships with prisoners, but were aware of their boundaries and unafraid to enforce the rules where necessary. Officers had a paternalistic-therapeutic orientation towards prisoners – they recognised their problems and were willing to help. They had a sense of humour with prisoners and colleagues, although this was generally not the quick-fire banter often found on C and D Wings, the main dispersal wings.

For *B Wing*, a VP wing without the explicit focus on the SOTP, role model officers were also listeners; they too could recognise that some of their prisoners had problems and difficulties – although such problems were less likely to be as explicitly offence-oriented as on A Wing. It was important that officers did not judge prisoners or cast moral aspersions on their offences. Good staff were aware of their power and of the difficulties of exercising it properly on a VP wing.<sup>8</sup> Role model staff appreciated respectful treatment from prisoners, but were prepared to forgive transgressions, up to a point. Rather than the ‘close’ and often personal relationships found on A Wing, officers on B Wing had ‘working’ relationships, which at their best were ‘understanding’ and ‘helpful’.

Role model officers on *C Wing*, a dispersal wing, were efficient and competent. They expected to work hard, but they also expected some cooperation from prisoners. They would permit the expression of some of the frustrations of prison life, but had clear boundaries that were effectively communicated to prisoners. Their ‘line’ was a stricter one than on D Wing (see below). They would use their discretion, but within clear parameters. They were also individually (and, to some extent, as a team) consistent over time. They worked well with other staff and with some common sense of purpose, linked to maintaining ‘a tight ship’ and clear boundaries on the wing. There were fairly formal relationships with prisoners, but this was informed by a close knowledge of individuals on the wing. One area of the wing, known as ‘blue spur’, was the ‘incentive spur’, where prisoners on the enhanced level of the IEP scheme could apply to be placed as a reward for their good behaviour. On this spur, the general C Wing formality was broken and the relationship became one of ‘shared’ investment in a small community.

On *D Wing*, the other traditional dispersal wing, role model staff were confident but had a more relaxed and interactive style than their colleagues on C Wing. They were prepared to respect the agency (individuality) of prisoners (perhaps a little too much in the eyes of some of their colleagues and managers) and to joke and banter with them, but could be absolutely firm when this was needed. They were willing to take on extra duties when requested by colleagues and would tackle tasks without prompting. There was less commonality of working styles between officers on the wing compared to C Wing, but there was good teamwork and a strong sense of attachment to the wing. Relationships between staff and prisoners were very good humoured and traded on mutual insults – but there was clearly respect on both sides for the abilities and ways of the other. The ‘peace’ was

kept on D Wing, paradoxically, through a lot of noise and a lot of talk. D Wing had a lot of ex-SSU staff<sup>9</sup> who were also keen gym attendees. There was no doubt that strong, articulate, challenging prisoners respected strong, street-wise and confident staff.<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that every good officer on each wing matched their role model characteristics; indeed, it could have been the case that no officer was a perfect representation of the desired role model. A broad mix of officer styles, skills and attributes was considered vital to the efficient running of a wing.

We observed that in general, officers from A and B Wings (the VP wings) were nominated less often, or less quickly, as role models than officers from the ordinary dispersal wings. In particular, senior managers mentioned officers from C and D Wings and we sometimes had to prompt them specifically about the VP wings to elicit mention of officers from that part of the prison. Once asked, officers came easily to mind. This 'invisibility' seemed linked to a common perception that somehow work on VP wings was 'easier' than the 'real prison work' found on ordinary dispersal wings. This was not our experience, as both halves of the prison seemed to us to bring special difficulties and to require special skills. C and D Wings were more visible and seemed to require and receive more senior management attention, with prisoners arriving and departing more frequently, often to the segregation unit.

## **Wing differences and adjudications**

All adjudications at Whitemoor over an eight-month period were analysed in order to explore possible differences between the wings empirically.<sup>11</sup> Adjudications are not a simple measure of either prisoner behaviour or officer style, but they are an interesting starting point for exploring possible differences in both. Wings which accommodate prisoners who are part of an intensive offending behaviour programme (like SOTP) are less likely to contravene the rules because of the sort of prisoners they are as well as because the relationships they are required to establish with staff are different. The nature of offending behaviour courses may encourage a more 'consultative' or 'conciliatory' approach by prisoners. Other factors, such as the number of formal complaints, formal applications, the length of time prisoners have served and the overarching vulnerability sex offender prisoners may feel could further qualify statistical adjudication differences. However, knowing all this (and, to some extent, controlling for some of these

variables), the results of our study showed clear differences which seemed to be related to some of the observations made above. The number of proven adjudications were low on A Wing (a VP wing), but much higher on D Wing (a dispersal wing), and highest of all within the segregation unit, as Table 3.4 shows. An incident leading to an adjudication occurred approximately every ten days on A Wing, but every two and a half days on D Wing. They were almost daily occurrences in the segregation unit. Although the segregation unit had a population of around 25 prisoners – compared to well over 100 on the wings – it contributed well over a third of all adjudications at the prison.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 3.4** Proven adjudications at Whitemoor by location of incident (July 1997 to February 1998)

| A Wing |      | B Wing |       | C Wing |       | D Wing |       | Seg. |       | Other* |      | Total |      |
|--------|------|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|------|-------|--------|------|-------|------|
| 24     | 5.1% | 58     | 12.3% | 72     | 15.3% | 99     | 21.0% | 178  | 37.7% | 41     | 8.7% | 472   | 100% |

\*‘Other’ comprises all areas of the prison other than the wings and the segregation unit, for example healthcare, visits and the workshops.

The total number of adjudications on C Wing (a mainstream dispersal wing, but the less lively of the two) was influenced by the fact that one spur held ‘enhanced’ prisoners only: of all adjudications from C Wing that were traceable back to a specific location, only one occurred on this spur, with 15 each occurring on the other two spurs over this period. There were also differences between the wings on the types of offences (or rather, those for which prisoners were most commonly placed on report). Four offences arose most often:

- *paragraph 9(a)* – possession of an unauthorised item (17 per cent);
- *paragraph 17* – threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour (17 per cent);
- *paragraph 19* – disobeying a lawful order (26 per cent);
- *paragraph 20* – failing to comply with any rule or regulation (16 per cent).<sup>13</sup>

Together, offences against these paragraphs made up over three-quarters of all disciplinary offences at the prison. Paragraph 1 – used if a prisoner committed any assault – contributed a small but

significant proportion to the total number of adjudications (6.8 per cent).

Figure 3.2 shows offences against these four main paragraphs according to the amount they contributed to the total number of proven adjudications on each wing. Paragraph 17 (threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour) made up 33 per cent of A Wing's total adjudications (though this was only eight offences of a total of 24). Paragraph 9(a) (possession of an unauthorised item) contributed almost the same amount to D Wing's total (though this amounted to over 30 separate incidents). Two interesting trends can be seen in Figure 3.2.

- The contribution offences against paragraph 17 (using threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour) made to each wing's total declines from A Wing to D Wing.

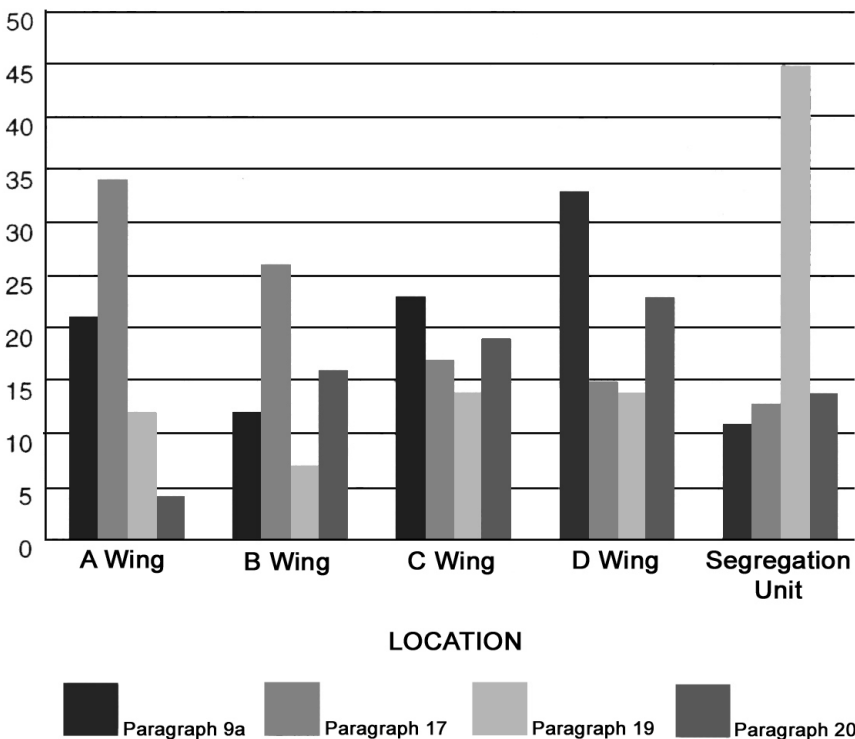


**Figure 3.2** Adjudication arising from paragraphs of Rule 47 broken (percentage) (HMP Whitemoor, July 1997–February 1998)

- Conversely, the total contribution of offences against paragraph 20 (failing to conform with any rule or regulation) went up from A Wing to D Wing.

Both prisoner behaviour and officer responses to prisoner behaviour differed according to location and population. Our observations (and the rest of the data) led us to conclude that officers on the VP wings were more inclined to sanction small resistances (see also Sparks *et al.* 1996), and that prisoners on vulnerable prisoner units tended to confine their misbehaviour to verbal complaints. Prisoners on D Wing were 'allowed' a certain amount of 'resistant language', but were sanctioned instead for more serious breaches of the rules, including trade.

Incidents that led to proven adjudications also differed according to the day of the week, with incidents rising in number from a low on Sunday to a high on Wednesday and then declining again towards the end of the week. Again, this pattern could be linked to routine features of prison life, such as pay day, and an arguably more relaxed atmosphere at the weekend (see also Sparks *et al.* 1996).

## Conclusion

This outline of different role model staff in just one prison and the extent of variation between wings illustrate the wide range of roles that prison officers can adopt, but tries to demonstrate the common 'core' characteristics of the best staff as identified by prisoners and their officer colleagues. We found that many officers gravitated to a particular wing or section of the prison whose working style suited their own personality. This point demonstrates the need for officers to 'be themselves' as far as possible – to invest the role of the prison officer with their own personality and characteristics. The prison may be a highly artificial environment, but values of truth, honesty and integrity were vital. Officers were certain that you could not be effective if you were not yourself. There was an important need to be 'professional', but this professional orientation was best achieved through working with the grain of your own personality.

One of the most significant themes to arise from our own research was the question of role and whether this was clear. What was 'being a prison officer' at Whitemoor about? Did the prison have a clear purpose and direction? The answer differed slightly from officer to officer. All were convinced of the need to maintain security, and

the need to keep order on the wing (a version of Dunbar's term 'dynamic security', Dunbar 1985). The emphasis given to helping prisoners tackle their offending behaviour was greater for some officers than for others. Some officers, for example, were keen to stress the importance of helping prisoners to maintain family contacts. What this meant was that each officer had their own 'bigger picture' consisting of a view about the role of imprisonment, the role of their own prison, the role of their particular wing and, therefore, their own role as a prison officer. This individualisation of some of the most important questions in a prison was in some ways unfortunate and detracted from the otherwise impressive work being carried out. We look at role diversity in the next chapter. Some diversity of role is inevitable and desirable, particularly given the diverse nature of the prison population and the need to have a wide range of officers bringing different strengths to the job. There are limits to this need for diversity when it comes to overall purpose. One of the main conclusions of our research at Whitemoor – and we have heard this plea from prison staff elsewhere – was that it might have been an outstanding establishment if its own best work had been channelled in a more consistent and recognised direction. This is a point we return to in Chapter 6.

## Notes

- 1 For example, a censor usually saw a large number of prisoners for very short, relatively formal periods at his (or her) office door during the morning. (Censors are allowed to open both the incoming and outgoing mail of any prisoner, except for legal correspondence. All correspondence to and from prisoners held in units housing any Category A prisoners, and to and from any prisoners on the E list, must be read 'as a matter of routine' (Security Manual, 36.14). All letters to and from prisoners in closed prisons must also be examined for illicit enclosures.) A cleaning officer had more sustained contact with a smaller number of prisoners throughout the day, from morning and afternoon labour to the serving of breakfast, lunch and dinner. The 'default' job of the prison officer – the landing officer – brought with it numerous occasions on which he or she might interact with a prisoner, adding up to at least ten or fifteen minutes of conversation with certain prisoners each day.
- 2 With breakfast served, the landing officer gravitated towards the 2's gate (the gate onto the second landing) and the centre officer to check prisoners' names off as they moved to work or education. Again, comments and interaction were generally limited at such a time – a

- 'morning' or equivalent as the prisoners passed through. There was much more interaction between prisoners – particularly on some wings – than between prisoners and officers.
- 3 The searching of a prisoner's body and clothing for unauthorised articles including concealed drugs or weapons.
  - 4 Gilbert uses the term 'professional' here as a categorisation. As employees, he refers to prison staff as 'paraprofessionals', that is they are not professionals in the 'classic' sense of the term but they do apply a 'specific body of knowledge and skill' in their work (see Gilbert 1997: 50).
  - 5 Other similar 'prototypes' appear in the literature, for example Ben-David and Silfen's 'punitive', 'custodial', 'patronage', 'therapist' and 'integrative' (see Ben-David and Silfen 1994).
  - 6 Dispersal prisons contain a high proportion of category A (maximum security) prisoners.
  - 7 For a more recent account of wing differences and characteristics at Whitemoor, see Drake (2008).
  - 8 Sparks *et al.* (1996) found that some prison officers in the Vulnerable Prisoner Unit (VPU) at Albany were unaware of their own power and used it carelessly, often offending prisoners who felt that they in turn were powerless to say anything in their defence.
  - 9 Special Security Unit – a unit within Whitemoor which housed exceptional risk category A prisoners, those deemed most dangerous to the public and most at risk of escape. Following the escape of six prisoners from the Unit in 1994, the regime followed was very strict, with a minimal use of discretion among officers. The Unit also encouraged officers to work closely as a team and appeared to inspire a great deal of confidence in the officers who worked there. The management of the Unit at the time of our research is discussed further in Chapter 5.
  - 10 The role of D Wing is now very different. See later.
  - 11 An adjudication is a formal hearing following a charge of misbehaviour or rule breaking by prisoners.
  - 12 A substantial number of these adjudications were straightforward – one prisoner was placed on report 17 times over the period (a far greater individual total than any other prisoner over this period) simply for refusing to return to normal location.
  - 13 These reference numbers refer to the pre-1999 Prison Rule 47 paragraph numbering.