

Chapter 4

Them and us? How officers see prisoners

Throughout the complex process of 'becoming', prison officers necessarily have to consider their relationships with prisoners. It is, I think, worth restating here why an exploration of the character and quality of staff–prisoner relationships is important. First, as noted by the CRC in 1984, positive relationships between these two groups facilitate the efficient control of prisoners and (hence) the security of the prison. Secondly, positive staff–prisoner relations clearly make the prison a less painful place for prisoners. Thirdly, they generate a more congenial working environment for prison staff – the 'human service' variety at any rate. As we shall see, however, the development of positive relationships with prisoners is not a key concern for all officers; some (albeit a minority) refuse to recognise relationship-building as germane to their role. Officers who do, however, get to know the prisoners in their care, may come to recognise their virtues as well as their frailties and, in consequence, find that they get to like some of these prisoners too.

In the first part of this chapter I briefly outline the day-to-day work of prison officers. I then go on to discuss officers' perceptions of prisoners, and what they consider the 'right' staff–prisoner relationship to be. Prison officers hold widely differing views on this topic, and this can lead to staff conflicts (a topic I discuss in depth in Chapter 7). In the next part of this chapter I focus on the question of where power lies in prisons. As I shall demonstrate, this is of unceasing concern to prison officers, and it shapes, to a significant degree, their interactions with prisoners. Finally, I explore officers' perceptions of the 'good' officer and the question of whether the 'good' officer will challenge colleagues who 'get it wrong'.

What do prison officers do?

As I have already indicated, there is much more to being a prison officer than simply being there. In addition to their primarily custodial tasks – such as locking up and unlocking prisoners, providing meals, checking locks, bolts and bars, maintaining discipline, regulating visits and the flow of prisoners to and from work – the modern prison officer is also expected to change prisoners' behaviours and outlooks and to provide him or her with care. Prison work also demands a range of interactional skills, including an ability to communicate, a willingness to negotiate and to engage in what Hay and Sparks (1991) call a 'creative use of the self'.

The moment that offenders step within the prison walls they will find that certain roles are lost to them by virtue of the barrier that separates them from the outside world (Goffman 1968: 24). Moreover, as Goffman notes, the process of entrance into the prison also typically brings with it other kinds of loss and mortification: finger-printing, the removal of personal effects, the issuing of prison clothing, the assigning of a number and a cell allows the prisoner 'to be shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery of the establishment, to be worked on smoothly by routine operations' (*ibid.*: 26). Stripped of his identity kit, the prisoner will find it difficult to present his usual image of himself to others. Prison officers, however, must get to know these prisoners *as individuals*; they must learn their foibles, personal circumstances, dispositions and ability to deal with incarceration. This knowledge (the latter in particular) is necessary for the smooth running of the regime, for security purposes and for the safety of staff and other prisoners. In order to carry out their job effectively, prison officers should be able to assess, with a fair degree of accuracy, the prisoners in their charge.

Most of my interviewees were keen to emphasise the numerous (and varied) roles a prison officer might be required to perform on any one day. Their list included 'locus parentis' (parent role), mentor (role model), counsellor (in the event of bad news), teacher, social worker, comedian (every officer noted the importance of having a sense of humour), psychologist (recognising when a prisoner is not acting like his or her usual self), filing clerk, probation officer (officers are now involved in through-care), fire-fighter (some staff are trained to use breathing apparatus and fire-fighting equipment), tourist guide (giving guided tours of the prison to outside visitors), stock controller (ensuring an adequate supply of toilet rolls, plastic cutlery, laundry and so on), security guard and, finally, police officer (dealing with disciplinary

actions). As we shall see, however, not all officers perform all these roles. On the contrary, some officers are prepared to do little more than the last three. I was, none the less, struck by the range of tasks that prison officers are *asked* to perform, and the sheer volume and variety of prisoner inquiries and requests. Some of these requests are extraordinary – or at least they are extraordinary given the context in which they are made – and they are illustrative both of the needs of individual prisoners and of the varied nature of the prison officer role. For example, one evening in the Vulnerable Prisoner (VP) Unit at HMP Wymott, a nurse from the hospital approached a senior officer to discuss a prisoner's request for a bra. It transpired that the prisoner, a man in his early thirties, was in the process of undergoing sex-change hormone treatment (which had begun prior to his sentence) and had complained to officers that he had 'leaking breasts'. In addition, the prisoner had requested that the upper part of his body should be searched by female officers and the bottom half by male officers (he had been denied permission to have his male genitalia removed surgically whilst still a prisoner). Although there was some incredulity about this state of affairs and, it must be said, a fair amount of ribaldry, on the whole the uniformed staff (the majority of whom were men) seemed to take this situation in their stride. Generally, however, much of the prison officer's day is taken up with more mundane matters (see Liebling and Price 2001 for a summary of a prison officer's 'typical day').

How do prison officers perceive prisoners?

In the main, prison officers are under no illusions that prison will deter prisoners from further crimes. On the contrary, they invariably acknowledge prisoners' resignations to a life punctuated by prison. In this regard, numerous officers recounted how often prisoners due for release had told them that they would be 'coming back'; they had no reason to think otherwise, given that they were returning to the same circumstances that they had left on entering prison. Indeed, many realised that a prison sentence was likely to have decreased their chances of honest employment. Unsurprisingly, such perceptions affect how much interest prisoners show in courses aimed at rehabilitation and, subsequently, the level of interest that officers show, and manage to maintain, in delivering them.

Much of the cynicism that prison officers feel derives from their perception that the prison's efforts to rehabilitate are impossible, either because inadequate staffing levels make it impossible to run courses

effectively, because prisoners had to go out to the same socio-economic circumstances or because prisoners are simply uninterested in being rehabilitated:

The sooner the goal of rehabilitation goes, the better. You might as well deep-freeze them for six months. We'd be better off just talking to them [than having all these courses]. All they want anyway is 'When's my parole date?' 'When's my visit?' 'When's my phone call?' They're not interested in the courses – they don't even turn up. Unless they get free tea and biscuits, and then they rob the tea boat and bugged off! [What do you mean, rob the tea boat?] They bring little jars along and nick the coffee and sugar. (Male officer, Garth)

And again:

At a place like this, with career criminals, you know for a fact that they're not gonna change – whatever courses they go on. And you know they're just paying lip-service when they're doing sentence planning and that. They know all the right buttons to press to get out. So you know it's a waste of time really. (Senior officer, Garth)

While many of my interviewees were pessimistic about the possibility of rehabilitating prisoners, they none the less felt that doing *something* was better than doing nothing, even if both staff and prisoners recognised the futility of the exercise, given the structural difficulties that prisoners would face 'on the out'. During one of our (many) conversations about rehabilitation, this senior officer (Lancaster Farms) remarked:

They're just weighting down prison officers with bits of paper. These lads *know* we're giving them bollocks; they *know* there's nothing for them [on the outside]. It's horrendous. You can talk about sentence planning and courses as much as you like, but ... [So does this not make you despondent?] Well to a certain extent, but the *alternative's* so awful. And being positive is better for morale than being negative. Obviously, we lack the one thing that'd make a difference, and that's a job for them all.

Although some officers believe that they can 'make progress' with some prisoners (in the sense of generating in them a desire to change their behaviour or lifestyle) they also realise that the majority of prisoners that have participated in the courses they have delivered will, sooner or later,

return to prison. Prisoners could perhaps be forgiven for being less than enthusiastic about being 'rehabilitated' into leading a 'good and useful life' whilst in prison; many criminologists are also sceptical of the prison's capacity for rehabilitation. As King and Morgan (1980: 16) acidly remark, prisoners have always known that prisons are really about captivity rather than rehabilitation and, in their view, there is little to be gained from pretending otherwise. There is certainly little opportunity to rehabilitate prisoners in the 'transit camp' context of the busy local prison, where resources are likely to be stretched to the limit. Indeed, of the many metaphors that prison officers use to describe the prison (see the Appendix), those of prison as 'sausage machine', 'meat factory' and 'conveyor belt' are perhaps the most commonly used to describe local and remand prisons.

The officers who participated in this study held divergent views as to the motivations for criminal behaviour: whilst many framed the problem of crime at the level of the individual (some held distinctly Lombrosian beliefs about the existence of a 'criminal mind'), others perceived prisoners as individuals who had simply chosen (or fallen into) a life of crime. Many officers are acutely aware of the economic circumstances from which most young offenders come into prison. As one such officer observed: 'You've got a forgotten generation with teenagers. They can't even get dole money. And they're restless' (male officer, Lancaster Farms).

The cynicism felt by prison officers stems in large part from officers' resignation at seeing the 'same old faces' returning to prison again and again, and of prisoners' failures to take responsibility for their actions. This can have the effect of 'hardening' officers to the pains of prisoners:

They come in here whinging and whining ... it's never their fault or they've been stitched up. Your sympathy goes. Mind you, there's always one – the odd sad case – but generally speaking you see the same faces coming through the gate. (Male officer, Wymott)

Prisoners were seen by many of the officers in this study as calculating, selfish individuals who would readily take advantage of any goodwill shown by staff. One of the most common remarks made by officers about prisoners casts the prisoner as manipulator: 'If you give inmates an inch they'll take three miles. Kindness is taken as a weakness by this lot' (senior officer, Lancaster Farms)

Prison officers have a tendency to speak of prisoners (and prisons) in terms of certain recurrent metaphors. The metaphors that officers use for prisoners are revealing of the contempt in which they are held i.e.,

'vultures'; 'bodies'; 'animals' (as in 'feeding the animals'); 'scum'; 'toe-rags'; 'inadequates'; 'children'; 'dangerous children'. Many officers also characterise prisoners in stereotypical vein; prisoners from Liverpool, for example, are invariably seen as 'gobby (mouthy) Scousers' and perceived as the worst-behaved prisoners while black prisoners are often seen as 'quick to play the race card'. All this seems to suggest that prison officers have a very 'fixed' view of prisoners; in reality, however, relationships between officers and prisoners are much more complex. To take such (metaphorical) descriptions at their face value is to adopt a 'distal'¹ analysis of prison life. As we shall see, some officers do admit to liking certain prisoners and to being sympathetic to their feelings of frustration, anxiety and regret. Likewise some prisoners admit to liking certain officers, and understand that they are 'only doing their job' (numerous prisoners, all prisons pers. comms.). In all the prisons in this study there was some degree of friendly rapport between staff and prisoners (although the degree of rapport differed markedly across prisons and between wings). At Lancaster Farms, Garth and Wymott, some officers reported that their relationships with certain prisoners were closer than they ever imagined could be the case when they first started working in prisons. Indeed, one or two of these officers admitted that with certain prisoners they were 'almost friends' (see below). This should not, perhaps, strike us as surprising, given that many officers and prisoners have similar socio-economic backgrounds and share similar interests and experiences.

Generally speaking, whether an officer can 'identify with' a prisoner (in terms of sharing interests and values) depends, in part, on the kind of prison in which the officer works, and the age and background of the prisoner. Identification depends to a lesser extent on the nature of the prisoner's offence. That is not to say, however, that a prisoner's offence has no bearing on the relationship; while many officers are willing to maintain a low level of social distance with prisoners who have committed (what officers perceive to be) 'normal' crimes – theft, forgery, burglary, minor assault and so on – they often maintain a high social distance with those who have committed certain offences (particularly sexual offences against children), particularly those who then complain about prison life: 'you get the ones that have booted somebody and put him in a wheelchair, and then they're moaning if their chips are cold. It really pisses me off that does' (male officer, Garth).

Adults and young offenders

There is a marked difference between the ways that officers speak about adult prisoners and the ways they speak about young offenders. While

adult prisoners are generally seen as wanting little to do with uniformed staff except with regard to prison-related issues, young offenders are often seen as 'needy' – as 'craving contact with staff':

Working with YOs is a different ballgame altogether from working with adults. Adults generally get on with it, and then occasionally they blow – and then boy do they blow. But YOs, they don't *think*; they need to keep asking staff questions all the time, and they're always pitching for a quick fight – then it's all over. Also, staff have to physically run round after YOs a lot more, so they're more tiring in that sense. (Senior officer, Lancaster Farms)

Working with young offenders can also be emotionally demanding: 'In an adult situation, threats have to be taken much more seriously. YOs on the other hand blow hot and cold all the time; they're up and down all the time and we go up and down with them' (officer, Lancaster Farms).

It was clear from my conversations with prison officers and from their written reports on individual prisoners that imprisonment can be particularly frightening, lonely and stressful for young offenders. Officers told me that many of the young men imprisoned at Lancaster Farms, Portland and Stoke Heath were often tearful and anxious as well as aggressive; on every wing, observation books were replete with comments about the distressed state of so-and-so, and on numerous pages staff had pinned notes from prisoners threatening self-harm or informing staff of threats they had received from other prisoners. Some young prisoners barely cope with imprisonment; as this officer observed: 'some of them cry on coming out of their cells in a morning until they are locked up in the evening. It's hard to know what to do about it really' (officer, Lancaster Farms).

Comments such as this highlight the fact that these prisoners are *children*. Officers' reflections on the day-to-day behaviour of prisoners barely into their teens make this glaringly apparent. Elaborating on his remark that the prisoners at Portland 'seem to be getting younger these days', an officer on night duty commented: 'I get a lot of little squirts in here now. At night, you can hear 'em downstairs. They're like a lot of little budgies fluttering about.'

The immaturity of many young prisoners is reflected in this officer's subsequent description of their behaviour at night; during one of his patrols of the wing, he had had to censure, in something of the style of a boarding school house master, two young men who were having a pillow fight: 'There they were whacking each other with pillows. One of

the 'em said "He's messed my bed up Sir". I said to 'im "Well make it again and get back into it!"'

There is general agreement amongst officers that young offenders are noisier and more boisterous than adult prisoners, even at night when they are locked up. Throughout the evening, especially on long summer evenings, the grounds of each of the young offender institutions in this study resounded with the noise of prisoners calling to each other from cell windows. Some of it is general banter but much of it is offensive and abusive; there is bullying of other inmates and encouragement of others to bully. Even at Lancaster Farms, where officers made great efforts to stamp out bullying, I was told that prisoners regularly force weaker prisoners to sing nursery rhymes out of cell windows, and that those who refuse to do so are likely to be punished, i.e. assaulted later. During association, or on the way to gym and/or work, young offenders routinely shout obscene comments about other offenders' families and make arrangements as to who will 'get it' next. These were alien activities to officers used to working with adults. As this senior officer working at Lancaster Farms put it:

YO's are a lot noisier and more hassle, especially at night. At Long Lartin, you could patrol around at night and it's lovely and peaceful. Here it's like a rough blooming council estate! [At Long Lartin] You might get a buzz of conversation if you're lucky, early on, but *here ...*

Culture shock revisited

Officers transferring from adult prisons to young offender institutions (and vice versa) may experience a degree of culture shock similar to that experienced on joining the service. Officers who transfer from adult prisons (particularly dispersals) to young offender institutions may be dismayed by the relatively 'tame' nature of the young offender regime and the dent that they feel their new role has made in their occupational identity. They may also be exasperated by the demands of young prisoners:

When I came here I hated it. [Why?] I hated running after inmates. You didn't *do* that with cons ... Compared to Long Lartin it's a toy jail. (Male officer, Lancaster Farms)

Others are taken aback by the school-like nature of young offender regimes. Recalling his first encounter with Lancaster Farm's version of

the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme, whereby good behaviour and attitudes are rewarded with coloured stars, one senior officer remarked: 'I couldn't believe it when I saw them [the officers] sticking stars on things. It was just like being in blooming kindergarten!' Arguably, the use of stick-on stars to indicate achievement symbolises both the childlike status of prisoners and the expectation that officers will behave like teachers.

Some prison officers find they are simply unable to cope with young prisoners. During one of my visits to Stoke Heath, an ex-dispersal officer remarked that when he saw a juvenile prisoner sticking his tongue out at him through a cell window he was completely nonplussed. He knew that he would look ridiculous if he put the prisoner on report, but in his eyes, the prisoner *had* committed an act of indiscipline. He knew, however, that if he did resort to the formal disciplinary procedures, his colleagues would laugh at him and exclaim 'but he's just a kid!' The officer was exasperated – he had not expected this. This was 'not proper prison work!' Conversely, officers transferring *to* a dispersal *from* a YOI may be shocked at the relaxed nature of the regime (for example, staff and prisoners on first-name terms, less structure, less emphasis on relatively petty rules) and dismayed to find that the working style they have developed over the years of working with young offenders is challenged by high-security adult prisoners.

On the other hand, officers who had worked for many years in adult prisons were often greatly relieved to be working with young offenders, primarily because they felt safer and in greater control. According to this basic-grade officer working at Lancaster Farms: 'When I came here from Long Lartin I thought I'd gone to Heaven.' In a very similar vein:

My first few days here [Lancaster Farms] were a shock to the system. I didn't think places like this existed; it was like coming from Hell into Heaven. [In what sense?] Well you're more in control here. And they [the staff] seem to know what direction they're going in. At Acklington you just turned up and looked forward to getting out as soon as possible. (Male officer)

Relatedly, officers tend to treat adult prisoners and young offenders very differently. For example, many officers will allow adult prisoners to be on first-name terms with them but will not usually allow young prisoners to do so. Officers working with young offenders may also be prepared to modify the regime to take account of the energies of youth. For example at Lancaster Farms some officers arranged 'run-around quizzes' at weekends when there were few formal activities:

We'll get everybody in the unit out, right, and ask them a question, 'Is it A, is it B, or is it C'? A's over there, B's over there, C's over there [pointing to different parts of the association area] and they all charge around. It is not rehabilitation, or education, its not even, technically, meaningful activity, *but* it breaks a mood. (Senior officer, Lancaster Farms)

Officers working with young prisoners try to enforce rules that they know would be unenforceable in adult prisons, particularly long-term prisons:

Its not like adult prisoners, we don't do all this bed-pack stuff with adult prisoners. Forget it! ... Really ... They will make their own minds up which way they're going ... I mean you *try*, but you can't do the pushing that we do with the youngsters. The youngsters still actually need authority figures. They don't need to like us, but they need us to be there. It's part of growing up. (Senior officer, Lancaster Farms)

Similarly:

There is no comparison between, say, Albany and Portland. YOs seem to need a lot more support from staff. Rules have to be interpreted differently at each type of jail; each establishment has a different set of rules. For example, the 'no shouting out of windows' rule would be unenforceable at Albany ... Long-term prisons are more self-managing; the level of house rules is much less. Another example, making bed-packs would be unenforceable at Albany. (Male officer, Portland)

Contrasts in treatment notwithstanding, there is a tendency for both adult prisoners and young offenders to be *seen* as childlike; when prisoners get angry and upset, officers often describe them as having 'temper tantrums' or as 'attention-seeking'. Arguably, this analysis of prisoners' behaviour is both insensitive and naive; it fails (perhaps wilfully) to take sufficient account of the painful nature of imprisonment; of the frustrations, anxieties and fears that accompany living in prison for long periods. Officers are, in short, aware of the dependent state of *all* prisoners. In turn they may acknowledge (albeit reluctantly) that their own role is rather a domestic one:

To me, sometimes, it's like being a glorified baby-sitter. Because that's, that's what you're doin', yeah. I mean you're just ... you're just looking after everything, because there's a lot of 'em [that] because they've been here a long time that's what they need, they just need, like, somebody to do everything. They have everything done for 'em. They don't have to think, some of 'em, at all. And then when they do have to think it's like panic stations, you know. What's basic to sort of you and me seems like really traumatic to them, you know. (Female officer, Garth)

Resentment of prisoners' rights

Amongst uniformed prison staff, questions about just desert and legitimate expectations are to the fore. That prisoners 'have too many rights' – indeed 'more rights than staff' – and 'get too much' (most officers hold fast to the principle of 'less eligibility'²) was a familiar refrain amongst officers working in every prison in this study. In terms of the former, officers' claims that management 'cares more about prisoners than they do staff' was well rehearsed; in terms of the latter, a significant proportion of uniformed staff were of the view that prisoners were being 'pandered to' whereas officers have to make do with what they are given. Food is a particular focus of attention in the discussion of prisoners' rights. That prisoners are allowed a choice of menu is a particular irritation for many officers. Take, for example, this remark from an officer who had recently returned from control and restraint³ training: 'It's gone ridiculous now ... We went on a C&R Advanced and we just had a cold packed lunch. You had no choice of meals. *Inmates* get one though!' (Senior officer, Moorland). Similarly, this time from a senior officer at Lancaster Farms: 'Prisoners should only get two choices – take it or leave it!'

Most officers who hold such views believe that the general public shares their sentiments:

The prisoners here have got more rights than I have. They've got entitlements for everything ... In my opinion you've got a prison system that doesn't reflect the views of the majority; they reflect the views of do-gooders. Prison Reform Trust, Howard League and so on – pro-criminal groups ... Why *should* they have rights? They should have *privileges*, and they should *earn* them. (Senior officer, Lancaster Farms)

Such resentments are part of the more general and long-standing resentment, on the part of many officers, that prisoners are viewed more

favourably than *they* are, not only by prison reformers and the courts but also by their own managers. Whether or not the latter is the case is, in a sense irrelevant; what is important is that most officers *believe* it to be the case (for a discussion of this in the American context, see, for example, Dilulio 1987). In short, what is important is how the officer (as social actor) defines the situation; as the American sociologist W.I. Thomas observes, 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'.

Generally speaking, officers feel that most prisoners do not appreciate their efforts; on the contrary, there is a common perception that any kindness they show is 'mistaken for weakness'. Officers may attempt to protect themselves by deliberately increasing social distance:

I came into this job thinking of prison officers as rough, strict and treating everyone like dirt. I thought I'd be the one to treat prisoners well. But it didn't work out like that. They just thought I was soft. The only thing they responded to was [my] being hard. I was as cynical as the rest of them within twelve months.

Those who do make efforts for prisoners are often disappointed when prisoners let them down. One officer, for example, reported that he had spent a great of time trying to persuade a local builder to employ a young offender who was due for release. He was eventually successful and the prisoner accepted the job but on the first day failed to turn up. Unfortunately (but perhaps unsurprisingly) such disappointments foster further cynicism amongst officers, along the lines of 'I won't bother in future'.

Getting the staff-prisoner relationship 'right'

Prison officers vary significantly in terms of the social distance they place between themselves and prisoners. On the whole, staff-prisoner interactions are qualitatively different from those that took place in the 1970s and much of the 1980s. As we have seen, uniformed staffs' perception of the prison in that period was that it was a place *of* and *for* punishment, not that imprisonment was a punishment in its own right. Although, as we shall see below, there were pockets of positive interaction, on the whole the staff-prisoner relationship in many prisons was brusque and overweening; prisoners *dare not* speak to officers and officers *would not* speak to prisoners. At HMP Strangeways, for example:

you used to get a lot of ex-army into the job, an', erm, they were used to, erm, discipline. They'd go past the cons with their key chains trailing and with their Dartmoor heavies⁴ and the cons wouldn't dare even look at 'em ... They used to turn their faces to the wall! The ex-army lot weren't willing to treat people as equals. You're *joking*! They were heavy-handed ... brutal in fact. (Long-serving male officer, Lancaster Farms)

Consequently, close relationships between prisoners and staff were never built up; they were simply *inappropriate*. Many prison officers would have preferred it to stay that way:

It's a working relationship, that's all. There has to be that line. Some officers will chat to inmates and even touch them. [How do you mean?] They'll pat them on the shoulder and they'll go 'Alright mate?' I don't. You've got to have that line. They're on that side and I'm on this. (Male officer, Garth)

As was noted in Chapter 1, the Home Office Control Review Committee (1984) proposed that prisons 'depend on staff having a firm, confident and humane approach that enables them to maintain close contact with prisoners without confrontation'. In short, much depends on getting the staff-prisoner relationship 'right'. As has already been noted, precisely what constitutes the 'right' relationship was not made clear. As is glaringly apparent from the comments of my interviewees, prison officers, as a group, are not clear about this either. Officers tend to have their own preferred styles; some which involve enlisting the co-operation of prisoners and some which do not. The 'proper' staff-prisoner relationship – the appropriate degree of friendliness, flexibility, willingness to negotiate and so on – was a well rehearsed topic in all the prisons in this study. Officers differed markedly in terms of their inclination to develop positive (or indeed *any*) relationships with prisoners. To ask officers how they feel about prisoners (and, relatedly, how they feel about their work) is to ask cultural questions, and the answers they give relate (at least in part) to their experiences to date.

It is difficult to capture the complexities of staff-prisoner relations. As I have already suggested, it would certainly be inaccurate to argue that the character of the staff-prisoner relationship is solely a relationship of 'Them and Us' although this is a trope that is commonly employed by prison officers. In vivid and dramatic stories officers may recount, for example, how 'they' tried to take over 'our' prison; in more mundane, everyday accounts we are told that 'they' routinely try to 'get one over'

on 'us'. Yet in the day-to-day life of the landings, staff-prisoner relations are far more nuanced than these accounts might suggest. As this senior officer working at Lancaster Farms observed:

At the end of the day, both sides are stuck in here. It's much nicer being stuck in here if you actually get on to a certain degree. I'm not talking about being their *pals*, 'cos that's not right or proper, erm, but you don't have to be in two armed camps. It's not to the benefit of *either* side for us to be in two armed camps.

How officers interact with prisoners is dependent on a range of situational and social factors, including the type of prison in which these interactions take place, the category and type of inmate (sex offender, lifer or whatever), staffs' prior work experiences and the occupational cultures of particular prisons, to which every officer is expected to subscribe. For some officers, getting staff-inmate relationships 'right' means helping and supporting inmates (Rutherford's 1993 Credo Three) while for others it means keeping a distance between 'us and them', either for reasons of efficiency (Credo Two) or to express a view that prison is for the punitive degradation of offenders (Credo One). In the prison setting, working credos dictate both the quality of the staff-inmate relationship and the approach that officers take to the job itself:

A lot of people come into the job and they've got this view of prisoners, and it doesn't help ... Some of them see inmates as the lowest of the low – as the scum of the earth. But you can't tar them all with the same brush ... Some of them *are* very dangerous people, but some of them are okay. You try and do what you can for them. (Senior officer, Garth)

Drawing the 'line': friendly but not friends

Virtually all the officers in this study referred to the 'line' that must exist between officers and prisoners, but there was a great deal of discrepancy about where that line should be drawn, even between officers working in the same prison. For example, according to one male officer working at Garth: 'He's a prisoner and I'm a screw. End of story.' In contrast, another observed: 'You can get to know them better than your family. I know it sounds stupid but ...' Numerous officers claimed that their relationships with inmates *were* friendly, and that they were glad of this. They were equally keen to stress, however, that this did not mean that officers and inmates were *friends*; on the contrary they made a sharp distinction between these two modes of emotional engagement and stressed the

inappropriateness (and potential dangers to security) of the latter relationship. Being friendly with inmates assists in day-to-day order maintenance; it 'oils the wheels' of the system. Being friends, on the other hand, suggests equality of status between two individuals and a state of mutual obligation; in the prison setting, where power and authority are supposed to lie with the staff, officers must 'draw the line' at becoming too close to individual prisoners in case mutual obligation threatens both their authority and the security of the prison. Indeed, one of the central criticisms that male officers make of women working in men's prisons is their tendency to become intimate with the prisoners (that female officers 'get off with the cons' was a commonly made remark). The 'trick' was to develop a relationship whereby staff and inmates could recognise each other's predicament and 'rub along' on a day-to-day basis with the minimum of friction.

While it was a common refrain amongst officers that 'you can be friendly but you can't be friends' since to become friends with a prisoner is to 'leave yourself wide open to all sorts of things', several officers admitted that they *were* 'almost like friends' with prisoners or that they would have been friends had they met in different circumstances. As this (relatively young) senior officer reflected:

I've known inmates that, if this hadn't been a prison, me and him would have been good friends [Talking about a lifer that he had got to know, he added] We had a lot in common. He was the same age as me, he had the same interests, we got on really well ... Yeah, you could say firm friends.

With certain prisoners and in certain circumstances, officers found that the placing of the 'line' was especially problematic, not least because they have to rely on the co-operation of inmates on a day-to-day basis. For example, 'trusty' or 'red band' prisoners given the job of cleaner tend to get numerous 'perks', such as extra association and extra food as informal 'payment' for doing certain helpful tasks. Getting these perks, however, can lull these prisoners into thinking that they have a different sort of relationship with staff than other prisoners do. While officers are often prepared to cajole trusted prisoners, they are unwilling for the line to be moved too far:

Sometimes they have to be cajoled a bit ... given the benefit of the doubt. For example, if they are late out of bed in the morning, you'll just say come on, shake a leg but you won't put them on report or anything like that. But then sometimes you'll go in and they'll be

just lying in bed with their arms folded behind their head and treating you like a mate – *that's* when you've got to draw the line 'cos they're getting too familiar. (Senior officer, Lancaster Farms)

Power in prisons; negotiation and coercion

Most prison officers (particularly those working with long-termers) concede that control – and hence order – is achieved most successfully through positive staff–prisoner relationships. Not all staff are happy with this state of affairs, however; as I stated earlier, some officers do not desire a positive relationship and would prefer it if prisoners simply spent more time 'behind their doors'. In all the prisons in this study, a significant number of staff were of the view that order in their own establishment was being achieved only because management were 'appeasing' (or 'pandering to') prisoners. As I stated in Chapter 1, the issue of 'appeasing' prisoners is a contentious one amongst uniformed staff. Amongst many of the officers I spoke to there was a strong belief that prisoners were 'getting too much' simply because management was frightened to say no to them. It can be noted, however, that what counts as 'appeasement' for one officer is perfectly reasonable negotiation for another.

Who holds the power? Negotiation and appeasement

The question of where power resides, then, is one of perennial concern to prison officers. Some officers felt that in the prisons in which they are working, or in which they had worked in the past, 'the balance of power has tipped the wrong way'. Dispersal and high-security training prisons were a popular target in this respect:

It's all a balance [between keeping control through rules and encouraging the co-operation of inmates]; it's just that at long term prisons, the balance is very much in favour of the prisoner. The management will give in to the prisoners at every conceivable opportunity, because in their eyes, that is the best way of keeping things quiet. In the middle of it, you've got, normally, totally demoralised staff, because the criminal is treated as king. (Senior officer, Lancaster Farms)

The belief that the 'criminal is king' in such prisons is held by many prison officers, particularly those with experience of working in regimes that are necessarily more relaxed. Many officers feel that a liberal regime

is more difficult to work in for two main reasons. First, officers in long-term prisons have much more *sustained* contact with prisoners (prisoners at Garth in particular spent a great deal of time out of cell). Secondly, long-term prisoners tend to be much more informal, and *more familiar with*, uniformed staff than are prisoners in other regimes. During my period of fieldwork at Garth, there was some debate amongst staff about whether the prison was controlled by staff or by prisoners. One morning, as I sat talking to a group of staff on one of the wings, an officer who had recently transferred from a dispersal remarked that his colleagues' claim to be 'in control' was mistaken, and that in his view the low level of confrontations between themselves and prisoners was due more to their lack of awareness of the true extent of rule-breaking than to their being in control. In short he felt that his new colleagues were being 'conned'. He went on to argue that if they *were* more aware of the extent of prisoners' rule-breaking there would be a higher level of staff-prisoner confrontation at Garth. The officers vigorously disagreed with this officer's assessment, and a (rather heated) discussion ensued. The new officer eventually conceded that he might be mistaken – that his definition of the situation might stem from 'dispersal paranoia' and his anxieties from Garth's combination of relatively relaxed regime, low staffing levels (relative to a dispersal) and high proportion of newly recruited staff. In addition, the officer claimed to have heard numerous horror stories (some true, some less so) still circulating about Garth. Up until fairly recently Garth had a reputation across the service as being a confrontational prison, where assaults on staff were common and staff morale, in consequence, was low. The officer remained concerned about Garth staff's reputation for 'wanting to get on with everybody' just to avoid trouble.

Working with long-term prisoners does place different demands on prison officers. On the whole (there were a few exceptions) Garth's uniformed staff were relatively relaxed, informal and friendly to prisoners (as the Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCIP 1997) put it, they have 'a light and easy manner'). Indeed, they made particular efforts to maintain a relaxed regime because they realised that the prison was also *home* to the men serving their sentences there: 'A lot of these that are here, its like ten years, fifteen, lifers ... It's like livin' with 'em really. You've got to keep, er, some sort of decent atmosphere going.'

In common with staff working in many other long-term regimes, Garth officers were much less officious, less provocative and more accommodating than many of the officers working in the young offender institutions. A paragraph from fieldnotes I made at Garth serves to illustrate this:

At one point, there was play-fighting between some of the officers (basic and senior grade) and a couple of inmates in the wing office. They were throwing a board rubber at each other. The senior officer snatched an empty plastic bottle from one of the inmates and stamped on it. It made a hell of a bang when the top blew off! After a bit of a scuffle, the same inmate pulled the senior officer's tie off (they are the clip-on type) and pretended to bash him over the knees with a long perspex ruler he'd found on the desk. After a few minutes, the officers looked like they'd had enough and needed to 'pull back' a bit. The senior officer started talking to the other officers about various tasks that needed doing and the inmates, having got the message that the time for horseplay was over, wandered out of the office.

The 'good' officer

For some officers, the above scenario would have been unthinkable since the 'good' officer never lets the prisoner up close. When asked what skills they thought a 'good'⁵ officer needs, officers listed, in no particular order, 1) confidence; 2) the powers of persuasion (having the ability to sell sand to an Arab is how one officer described herself); 3) calmness (interestingly, however, one officer commented that being *too* calm can actually provoke prisoners – he was thinking specifically of those officers who stare calmly ahead while reciting the rules); 4) being a good team-player (officers quickly get to know the officers who are afraid of confrontations and who cannot be relied upon when 'trouble' arises); 5) being a good communicator (being prepared to talk to prisoners and to explain things); 6) being assertive when necessary (and recognising when it *is* necessary); 7) being a good listener – 'You've got to be like a sponge really'; 8) being mentally tough (as opposed to being physically tough. An officer who is 'mentally weak' was regarded as being vulnerable to the pressures of both prisoners and fellow officers); 9) having patience; 10) being fair (most officers said that it is important to be fair in dealings with prisoners); 11) liking people; 12), having 'common sense'; and 13) having a sense of humour (the latter two skills were perceived as vital by virtually every officer in this study).

The personal qualities and skills of uniformed staff do, of course, impact upon the nature of staff-prisoner relations. Numerous officers commented on the need to strike a balance between friendliness and inflexibility; as one senior officer working at Wymott reflected:

You have to be approachable, but it doesn't do to be too familiar. On the other hand, it does not do to be constantly nicking, or putting on

a basic regime, inadequate or awkward inmates. [You have to] nurture him, show him the way; you have to be able to lead the horse to water and make him drink. This takes skill.

Prison officers' views on what makes a good officer differ markedly, even within the same prison. Compare these responses from two male officers working at HMYOI Portland:

You've got to have good ears for a start, and be able to listen to a lad. And you've got to be fair, and if you promise to do something, you've got to get back to them. Sometimes they'll ask me to spell something – well I might not be able to spell it, but I'll go and get a dictionary ...

In contrast: 'I think one of the best skills you can have is being able to look an inmate in the eye and say No.'

In the eyes of some officers, then, a 'good' officer is one who sees the prison world in purely 'black and white' terms and who maintains order through sticking to the rules. No *means* No, rules are there to be obeyed and the 'line' between 'Them and Us' is sharply drawn at a point which demands little prisoner–staff interaction and hence rarely entails negotiation. In the eyes of others, 'good' officers are those who are flexible and who apply the rules appropriately and at their own discretion. Retaining credibility in the eyes of prisoners involves being seen as someone who operates in a fair and professional⁶ manner; who recognises prisoners' pains and their lack of autonomy to ameliorate them. There were difficulties, however, associated with being seen as the officer most likely to help prisoners:

One of the main rules is if an inmate asks you to do something, you sort it. 'Cos if you don't, there's your credibility gone. They'll say [to other inmates] 'Don't go to him he's fucking useless!' But it can go the other way as well; they'll only come to *you* and then you've got the fly-round-the-jam pot syndrome. (Male officer, Garth)

Being a good communicator was seen by many as crucially important for conflict prevention and reduction. According to this ex-dispersal officer: 'I've never been assaulted, even though I've dealt with big guys with fighting backgrounds. Your ability to survive is your ability to talk to inmates. It's all about communication.'

Interestingly, the vast majority of my interviewees were of the view that the skills of social interaction – being 'good with people' – are skills

that cannot be learnt simply through a training course. On the contrary, they argued that being able to get on with people is not a learnable skill. This is one such comment:

[Can officers be trained in getting on with people, do you think?]
The ability to get on with people is something that is natural. I would say that would be down to the person's *personality*. It's a difficult question is that. I would say, I would say it would be very hard to train somebody like that. (Male officer, Lancaster Farms)

Similarly, when I asked a principal officer (YOI) what, in his view, makes for a professional prison officer, he replied: 'The ability to relate to, and deal with difficult, truculent people. This can only be gained by experience of life and by working with prisoners. It cannot be taught.'

Negotiation is something that does not come easily to some prison officers. These officers, many of whom were recruited from the military, believe that *dictation* is more appropriate to the prison officer role. In contrast, some officers are willing to negotiate even with very young prisoners, and on significant issues such as wing transfers. Here is an extract from my fieldnotes (Lancaster Farms) to illustrate the point:

A female senior officer has just been asked if she will swap one of her prisoners with one from a different wing. After studying the roll board for a few minutes, she selected a prisoner's name and told another officer to instruct him to pack his things. A few minutes later the prisoner came to see her in the office, pleading to stay on the wing on the ground that he had a good cleaning job which he would lose if transferred. The inmate begged and pleaded – he promised 'to be good and to be a good cleaner – only please can I stay on this wing Miss?' The interaction between this officer and this young prisoner was fascinating: she eventually said 'Alright, I'll try to find somebody else but I'm not promising. I'll get back to you'. There was then some discussion between herself and two other officers, during which they consulted the roll board again. Some minutes later the senior officer had indeed found someone else to move instead, and the prisoner was called back in. On being told he could stay on the wing after all, the prisoner, thrilled to bits, punched the air. As he went out of the office, smiling broadly, the senior officer shouted after him 'But you'd better behave yourself!'

Many officers rely on their sense of humour, their skills of persuasion and their ability to communicate effectively and fairly with people who

may feel angry, anxious or depressed. These officers are acutely aware that prisoner co-operation often depended upon their ability to persuade and cajole; indeed they could rely on very little else. As one female officer put it: 'You've got to be good at talking. At Styal you had one officer to twenty-three women, and all you had was your radio and your gob.'

Every officer has his or her own way of controlling prisoners. They have two ways of maintaining control on a routine basis – formal and informal. The informal way necessitates the officer using his or her individual personality; some use humour (Dilulio's 'clowns') while some command respect based on their reputation for being 'firm but fair' and calm under pressure (Dilulio's 'statesmen'). The formal way, in contrast, involves routinely 'nicking' prisoners for every infraction of the rules. Many officers prefer informal methods; not only does this obviate the need for 'paperwork', as the following remarks illustrate, but the ability to deal with infractions informally is a matter of honour and pride:

I always think when I put somebody on report I've abdicated my responsibility to the governor – it means that I can't cope [with that particular inmate or situation] – I've given up. A younger, less experienced officer might say [of the inmate who's getting up his nose] 'Well I'll have him', and go out of his way to get him. Older staff will just 'clock it' and deal with him at a later point, perhaps to the officer's advantage. (Male senior officer, Wymott)

Similarly:

Nicking a prisoner amounts to getting someone else [i.e. a governor] to do your work for you. The best officers are good at taking the inmate on one side and letting him know that he's been clocked. (Male principal officer, Portland)

And again:

Some officers place every act of indiscipline on report. Basically, if you've got to put people on report all the time, you're not doing your job right. Some prisoners you threaten, some you kid along, and some you can just tell. Knowing which are which comes from experience. [In my view] The worst sort of person you can have on any wing is one that's nicking prisoners all the time. (Male senior officer, Garth)

Officer-prisoner negotiation is illustrated in the following extract from

my fieldnotes. It describes a (rather amusing) incident that occurred as I was 'shadowing' an officer on the (low visibility) wings at Garth:

During wing patrol, an officer was looking for a certain inmate in order to bang him up. He looked around on the wing, shouting for him, but to no avail. I accompanied the officer on his search; we looked in doorways, in various rooms, in empty cells, etc. Eventually we passed a toilet, and the officer said he would have a look to see if he was in there. To my amazement, as the officer walked in, the inmate jumped out. He'd been hiding behind the door. The inmate thought it was funny, but the officer didn't. He said to the inmate, 'I've got some good news for you – me and you are going to see the governor in the morning' [meaning at adjudication]. 'Oh no, fuck off!' moaned the inmate. 'No, I'm not being pissed about' said the officer, and locked him in his cell. Later on, when he had been unlocked, the inmate came into the office, 'cap-in-hand', to ask if he could 'have a word' with the officer. Pleadingly, he asked the officer he had annoyed if he could do some cleaning or something instead of getting nicked. He was apparently due for his Cat C board and appearing before the governor would spoil his chances of being recategorised. In reply to his request, the officer clearly wanted to make him stew a bit, and said he would 'see'. When the inmate had gone out, I asked the officer what he would do, and he replied that he would get him to polish his boots or something instead! Clearly there is power being performed here; while the officer clearly has the 'upper hand' in the negotiation, the inmate felt that negotiation was a possibility; that he might be able to persuade the officer to deal with the matter informally.

Young offenders, like adult prisoners, attempt to negotiate (and hence make less painful) their prison lives. They endeavour, on a day-to-day basis, to negotiate with staff as to what cell they will be in, how many phone calls they can make, whether they can have extra blankets, towels or whatever, whether they can be transferred (or stay where they are), whether they can have a different sort of diet, whether they can go on a course, whether they can have extra visits, whether they can have a particular job and so on. As I have already noted, officers differ markedly in terms of the extent to which they will enter into negotiations with prisoners, particularly young prisoners. As we shall see below, some refuse to enter into any negotiation whatsoever, preferring the 'You will' approach and relying largely on the word 'No'.

Clearly, however, young offenders' negotiations *are* sometimes

successful, and this can cause resentment amongst (and between) uniformed staff. During the course of my fieldwork, officers on a particular wing were complaining that a 'difficult' young prisoner had been offered what they called 'sweeteners' to conform to the regime. In short, the prisoner was being 'given money to behave' (or at least that was how it was described to me). This was not, however, far from the truth; the officers allowed me to read a letter from a governor which stipulated the way that this particular prisoner was to be dealt with to encourage him to conform. The prisoner was to receive £5.50 wages (for cleaning) plus extra canteen if he was seen to co-operate. He was also to be moved on a weekly basis between this establishment and one other, to give staff a break. Staff raised a number of issues about this arrangement; put more graphically they wanted to know 'what the hell is going on?' First, they were incensed that a governor was 'appeasing' a prisoner – 'and a kid at that'. They wanted to know why a prisoner should be 'rewarded' with extra privileges when he refused to conform, despite having signed a 'compact'⁷ when prisoners on the other wings must, under the conditions of the Incentives and Privileges Scheme (IEPS), conform to receive privileges. Secondly, they were concerned that if other prisoners found out that non-conformity could gain rewards, they might follow suit.⁸ In relation to the latter, this was probably never very likely; arguably, most prisoners do not want to serve their sentence in such a manner. This diminutive prisoner, who had spent a lot of time in segregation was described by segregation staff as 'very demanding' of staff time when he was on normal location; he was constantly ringing his cell bell for what staff saw as 'petty' reasons, such as when he wanted a light for his cigarette. As an officer observed, however, 'He's just a kid, and kids need attention'. The inmate certainly *looked* like a child; he was 17 years old but roughly four feet ten in height and weighing approximately six stones. Another officer agreed – 'yes, he is just a kid'. Unfortunately, staff on normal location found him a pest, and got so fed up with him that whenever he was unco-operative they sent him back to the block.

Staff-prisoner conflict

Although such negotiations can and do take place, officers do wield a significant amount of power over prisoners on a day-to-day basis, and that power may be abused. Abuse of power may involve deliberate unfairness, the making of false allegations against prisoners and, on occasion, physical assault. Officers themselves often find abuse of power deeply troubling. During an interview with one such officer, the officer remarked that power 'can sometimes go to an officer's head'. Although

my discussion of staff conflict is largely confined to the next chapter, I include here a brief extract of this officer's subsequent comments since it indicates officers' disapproval of abusive staff:

Some of 'em, put 'em in a white shirt and put a couple of Hot Meat Pies [HMP epaulettes] on their shoulders and they think they're God. [Really?] There are some that are on a power trip, believe me. [How does this sort of officer get on with other officers?] The sensible ones amongst us keep away from them. [Why?] 'Cos they can get you into trouble. If you get into the habit of turning a blind eye you could end up being charged in court as an accomplice in the assault of an inmate ... Some people are just on power trips, and its best to just keep away from 'em.

Other officers also acknowledged the problems caused by such staff. They claimed that officers were often reluctant to work with them, not least because they put their own physical health and job security in jeopardy. Reflecting on the trouble caused by aggressive, confrontational staff a female officer commented:

At Belmarsh we had these gobby little scousers working with us and when they came on the shift it'd be horrible. They'd come in for a fight and – unsurprisingly – they'd have one! [What proportion of Belmarsh staff would be looking for a fight?] Those under thirty and inexperienced; especially new staff, who had to get notches on their belt if you like ... say 30–40 percent of the staff. [So how would officers go about getting a fight?] They'd target a con.

Illicit use of force

The tendency of some officers to 'target a con' is arguably a significant factor in the loss of control both at the individual and collective level. I was wary of asking officers about staff assaults on prisoners, partly because this is a very sensitive issue (and hence not one that I thought officers would be likely to discuss readily with outsiders) and partly because I did not wish officers to think I was only interested in the negative aspects of staff–prisoner interactions (as they claim that the media and general public are). *I did*, however, wish to understand *why* such violence occurs and *in what circumstances*. Just as I was wary of asking the questions, many officers were wary of telling me the answers. When most officers responded it was usually in vague terms, such as so-and-so used to happen, and so-and-so used to do this or that, and in such-and-such a prison. A small number of officers were, however, more

forthcoming and it is on the revelations of these officers that the following discussion is based. Using extracts from our conversations, I focus on 1) the role of peer pressure and machismo in such assaults; 2) the likelihood of whistle-blowing; and 3) informal modes of 'paying back' unco-operative prisoners.

Many officers perceive unco-operative prisoners as 'fair game' and some sort of informal 'pay back' is thus commonplace. Officers told me that in the past, this frequently involved violence; assaults on prisoners often took place in prisoners' cells but staff also seized the opportunity to 'pay back' the prisoner during, for example, his removal to the segregation unit (see below). Several officers admitted that they had, in the past, assaulted unco-operative prisoners, explaining their actions as stemming directly from the (widely shared) staff perceptions of the time that 1) prisoners in general were 'the enemy'; and 2) prison was for punishment. Today the norm of prisoner-as-enemy is less pronounced (though it is still adhered to by some) but in the 1970s to challenge these perceptions was to risk stigmatisation by one's peers:

I've seen inmates dragged down five landings – five flights of stairs – and then given a hammering. One inmate off the B wing for nutters was used as a battering ram [to open a gate when being moved off a landing]. He ended up with a broken shoulder and a broken arm ... [Why do some officers think it's okay to assault inmates?] Because its Us and Them isn't it? Some officers are happy to interact with inmates, but they draw the line at supporting them for fear of attracting negative attention towards themselves. When it comes to the crunch, they're the enemy, and if you stand back [when they present staff with problems] you're a black sheep. (Male officer, ex-Strangeways)

Peer pressure to engage in violence towards prisoners, and a strong reluctance to report fellow officers, were evident in Lord Justice Woolf's (1991) report of the Strangeways riot. It was clear to Lord Woolf that a minority of unprofessional, aggressive staff were spoiling the work of the majority; when I asked one officer who had worked at Strangeways whether he agreed with this interpretation, he replied:

Yes, I'd agree with that. You get that in every single prison. You've got, erm, I wouldn't say it's as bad as it was, 'cos you used to get a lot more ex-army into the job, and erm, they were used to, erm, discipline ... they wanted a more disciplined attitude. Instead of

trying to solve a problem by negotiation, it'd just be a straight forward shouting match. [Right, right.] And, erm, some people in the army were used to that attitude. They weren't willing to negotiate, or they weren't willing to treat people as equals ... Actually they were brutal. (Male officer, ex-Strangeways)

To illustrate this, he described the usual style of removal to the segregation unit, in which officers 'used the inmate as a punch-bag'. He attributed such behaviour to 'the macho image that was very prevalent in Strangeways at that time. Staff felt that they had to live up to it'. Macho peer pressure encourages officers to put on an aggressive front with their colleagues, even those officers to whom aggression does not come easily. In this regard, the same officer remarked that: 'some officers – who'd no more think of hitting an inmate than committing suicide – once they get with certain company start talking about "giving him a good hiding" and so on.'

These officers admitted that for a variety of reasons, staff assaults (verbal and physical) on prisoners do still take place, either as a means of 'nipping things in the bud' – 'the breaking of little rules is jumped on immediately to make sure that bigger rules aren't broken'⁹ – or to discipline unco-operative prisoners. At least one officer at Portland was prepared to admit that the treatment of young offenders in the prison was often abusive: 'If I'm honest, we treat 'em like dirt.'

During a somewhat scathing commentary on the social control methods preferred by Lancaster Farms (the reputations of individual establishments are well known and a source of both pride and resentment across the service), this same officer remarked that at Portland, 'we do it by fear!' Abusive treatment was seen as just desert. Recognising that illicit violence is more likely than it once was to end in disciplinary proceedings, this officer claimed that sanctioned techniques for managing dissent could be employed to inflict injury instead. From the same Portland officer:

It [inmate assault] still goes on but its more controlled now. [In what sense?] Well if an inmate's injured [though an assault by staff] officers might say he's been injured resisting control and restraint.

Challenges to solidarity: will officers blow the whistle?

I was interested to know the extent to which officers were prepared to support colleagues – i.e. subscribe to norm three – even if they knew those colleagues to be abusive. Officers found my question 'Would you

report an officer's assault on a prisoner?' a very difficult one to answer, for a number of important (and conflicting) reasons. While they are supposed to treat inmates with humanity and fairness, prison officers are also supposed to act as a team. Although a staff assault on a prisoner is a serious disciplinary offence (which can result in dismissal), before an officer decides to report a colleague to higher-ranking officers he will take account of a number of things, including 1) the character of the victim (is he a trouble-maker or pest?); 2) relatedly, whether the prisoner 'deserved' it; 3) the severity of the assault (just a slap across the head or a beating); 4) how staff generally perceive the assailant (was his action 'out of character'? Whether the officer in question is a 'good bloke really' and this episode a 'one-off?'); and so on. These factors interact to enable closure (closing of ranks) to take place. Given officers' shared understandings about the pressures and demands of the job, the perception that the offending officer is 'a good bloke really' is likely to mean that colleagues will 'turn a blind eye' or 'rally round' if such actions are exposed. There is, of course, as I have already noted, evidence that officers may also fail to report assaults because they are afraid of reprisals from colleagues.

When pressed, most of my interviewees said that they doubted they would 'blow the whistle' on a fellow officer, the primary reason being the cultural expectation of solidarity and trust between officers. Moreover, officers knew the pressures their fellow officers were under: 'I'd make it clear that I wouldn't want to work with them but I doubt if I could report them. I mean we're on the same side aren't we?' (Male officer, Garth) Similarly, from an officer working at Lancaster Farms:

[What do you do if you're faced with unprofessional staff who 'go over the top' with inmates. How do you deal with that?] There's a problem with that ... erm, we've got discipline guidelines, in here, for officers, that the officer's got to follow otherwise they end up in bother ... but, erm, I might know an officer is a bad officer, and he's doing things he shouldn't, but you're expected to work as a team, you're expected to have camaraderie, you're expected to support each other, and I might know that he does one or two things in a particularly unprofessional manner, but most of the time, he's okay. You don't wanna grass 'im up. That is the attitude. Because, basically, you understand he's okay. But, the fact is, erm, if I don't grass 'im up, and it's found out that I knew that he was doin' something unprofessional, I could be out of the job as well. It's, it's, a dodgy situation! ... I mean I always say in this job there's some

officers you don't get on with. You can't ... you can't always get on with everybody. Its like typists in a typing pool; they're all doin' the same job but they won't get on with everybody. But at the end of the day, you'll all be there supporting each other, because if the shit hits the fan ... if you like me or not, you will support me. You know, if an inmate was assaulting me, the officer would come to help, and I would do the same. So it's a difficult situation. When you're in an aggressive environment you don't want to be seen to be grassin' somebody up, you know, so that people say 'Oh, you can't trust 'im'. It's a dodgy situation.

There's more than one way to skin a cat: cheating, riding and pay back

Today, pay back is more likely to be non-violent, not least because, as I suggested above, prison officers know that illicit violence towards prisoners may result in dismissal. A vengeful officer may choose other modes of pay back, for example writing, with the help of one or two like-minded officers, a fraudulent security information report (SIR) on the prisoner in the hope that this will trigger formal disciplinary proceedings:

If you're having a bad time with an inmate, your colleagues will help you out. [In what way?] Well there's more than one way to skin a cat ... We get together and put in an SIR¹⁰ about the inmate, stating the source of the information as 'unknown'. You try to drop him in the shit. Basically, you cheat. (Male officer, Garth)

A number of my male interviewees alleged that officers, including themselves, sometimes deliberately provoked prisoners so that they could remove them from the wing. This often involved the employment of strategies to cast the inmate as the villain. The following quotations are illustrative of this: 'Some officers will look for trouble. They'll goad inmates in the hope that they'll "bite".' (male officer, Lancaster Farms) Similarly, as one officer remarked when discussing a prisoner he did not like:

There's nothing wrong with him that a good hiding wouldn't sort out. [Yes, but you can't do that any more can you?] No, we can't, but we can get up his nose so that he loses it and then we can bend him. (Senior officer, Lancaster Farms)

And again:

We don't assault them, we just manipulate them so they end up going to the block under C&R ... This can really hurt them. [How do officers manipulate such inmates? Do you mean by goading them?] Yes, kind of. And riding them [dominating and oppressing] till they go for you. (Male officer, Portland)

These comments are particularly disturbing given that they were all made by officers working with young offenders. Despite the latter officer's claim that he and his colleagues did not assault prisoners, he subsequently unashamedly recalled an incident at Portland in which he deliberately injured a prisoner during a cell removal. As he told it, this prisoner had previously engaged in a dirty protest. On this occasion (a cell barricade) he and a number of other officers (wearing full riot gear) entered the cell and flattened the prisoner against the wall with their shields. Once the prisoner was pinioned, my informant head-butted the prisoner with his helmet. When asked by a nursing officer and a governor (both of whom were waiting outside on the landing) to explain the prisoner's injury (a broken nose) my informant simply announced 'Sorry, clash of heads Sir!' He then asked me 'How can they prove otherwise?' For this officer, such actions amount to 'rough justice' rather than assault. To other uniformed staff, however, these are the actions of a 'dangerous'¹¹ officer (this is a point I shall return to later). New officers tend to have 'dangerous' officers pointed out to them by more experienced colleagues, and such officers are given a wide berth. Unsurprisingly, such officers are also given a wide berth by prisoners.

That many prisoners *do* appreciate the patience and kindness often showed them by 'human service' officers is illustrated by the fact that officers sometimes receive 'thank-you cards' from prisoners about to be released and from ex-prisoners. These officers appreciate such gestures; others are less positive. When a senior officer working at Lancaster Farms proudly showed me a card addressed to several officers on the wing (thanking them for letting him have extra showers and such like) an officer who was opening the post hastily pointed out that his name was not on it. When the senior officer asked him if he should add his name, the officer replied: 'No thanks. I'd think I wasn't doing my job right if *my* name was on it!' This comment suggests that he did not want to be liked by prisoners; on the contrary he felt that doing the job 'right' and being a 'good' officer entailed keeping one's distance. Many officers, however, are acutely aware of the narrowness of the socio-economic (and moral) divide between themselves and prisoners; they understand that

in many respects, prisoners are not very different from themselves:

It's a very thin line between wearing a blue-and-white shirt [i.e. prison issue] and wearing a white shirt ... I think if you keep that at the back of your mind you can relate to them better ... You understand them better. (Senior officer, Garth)

Similarly:

I can relate to these [prisoners] ... I've had scrapes [with the law] myself – nothing serious but I had to declare it. And I can see where they're coming from ... I was just on *this* side of the line instead of that side of the line. (Male officer, Garth)

A calming influence? Female officers

The ways in which women officers working in men's prisons view and carry out their work, and the ways in which they are seen by the men with whom they work is discussed more fully in Chapter 7. I intend here only to make a very brief comment on female officers' relationships with male prisoners. Before I do so, however, I want to comment briefly on the claim, made by some male officers, that a man's prison is simply 'no place for a woman'. The perceived vulnerability of female officers to the overtures of male prisoners was raised by these officers as sufficient justification for keeping the former away from the latter. As one male officer put it, 'Women are vulnerable to smooth talking'. This was cited as a potential threat both to the security of the prison and to the safety of the women themselves. Several officers claimed to have heard stories about, or claimed knowledge of, women officers 'running off with cons'. It is interesting to note, however, from my observations of staff-prisoner interactions, that when a male prisoner is sexually attracted to a male officer, and even when the prisoner makes this explicit, male officers are unlikely to be perceived as 'vulnerable' in the same way that women officers are. On the contrary, such overtures can give rise to much hilarity. For example, at Garth, a male probationer in his mid-twenties was rather taken aback by the attentions of a young, openly homosexual prisoner, and by the reaction of his colleagues when they found out about them. This officer's conversation with me ran as follows:

He's told all the officers that he fancies me. He said to 'em all 'He's got a nice arse!' [So what did your colleagues say?] They take the mickey out of me about it. They ask me 'How's Shirley?' and the cons say to me 'Shirley's been asking about you!'

As we shall see in the following chapter, there are conflicting views amongst (male and female) officers as to whether women officers are 1) less confrontational than their male colleagues; and 2) able to develop more positive relationships with male prisoners as a result. The view that women officers exert a 'calming' influence in men's prisons (a claim that is made by many male and female officers) is a contentious one. With regard to the first claim, at least one female officer I interviewed introduced the concept of respect into the equation; she felt that if women officers do have more positive relationships it is because they treat prisoners with consideration. With regard to the second claim, numerous officers – male and female – argued that some women officers are 'as fond of a bit of aggro' as some of their male colleagues are. These female officers were seen as 1) enjoying using physical force on prisoners, for example being deliberately rough when applying control and restraint holds; and 2) 'wanting to be part of the shouting and bawling' that goes on between staff and prisoners (male officer, Garth pers. comm.). Moreover, numerous male officers claimed that far from being a source of calmness and equanimity, some of their female colleagues (usually the younger less experienced ones) 'employ the same kinds of "wind up" tactics that some of the blokes do' (male officer, Garth pers. comm.). Arguably, like their male counterparts, female officers who behave in this way do so either because they believe that this is the 'proper' way to treat prisoners or because of (male) peer pressure to conform to dominant occupational norms. This is an issue that I return to in the following chapter.

It's all about what an officer thinks an officer should do or be

Officers' working styles impact, of course, on the nature of the regime itself. The character of the regime on a particular wing is dependent on a variety of components, not least the working credos of senior officers. The atmosphere or 'tone' of a wing can change from day to day, depending on which senior officer is on duty, and this can be extremely irritating for ordinary-grade staff who have to (to some extent at least) adjust their working styles and practices accordingly. It is interesting to note, also, that prison wings get distinctive reputations in the eyes of uniformed staff. At Lancaster Farms, for example, one wing had the reputation for having the scruffiest prisoners (because senior officers allowed them to go to work wearing prison-issue track suits when they were supposed to wear jeans and T-shirts) and for running a relatively liberal regime. The senior officers working on this wing were well aware that they were 'slagged off by the rest of the jail for giving the prisoners too much'. For example, one was in the habit of bringing videos from

home so that the young prisoners could watch them during association, and when weather permitted he was in the habit of taking them outside for a game of volleyball. He did these things partly to relieve the boredom of the 'youngsters' on the wing and partly because he felt that such efforts 'paid off' in terms of creating better staff-prisoner relations. He was aware, though, that many of his own officers did not wish to make such efforts; whether they did or not depended largely on how they perceived their role. As the senior officer put it: 'It's all about what an officer thinks an officer should do or be.'

It is easier to run what officers call a 'tight ship' on some types of wing than on others. For example, it is easier for staff to run a tight ship on induction wings than a residential unit because the prisoners on the former know that they only have to put up with the restricted regime for a limited period of time (this may also explain why it is easier for staff in large busy locals, where there is a high proportion of remands, to get away with restrictive practices).

Control can of course be enhanced by various technologies. Garth was the only prison in this study where prisoners had in-cell television, and most officers were in favour of it, because 1) it 'domesticises' and 'normalises' the evening association period (many prisoners prefer to stay in their cells either alone or with a couple of friends rather than wander about on the landings); 2) it is a useful mechanism of control (prisoners are less likely to get into arguments over who watches what when they have their own TV set and more likely to conform to avoid losing this privilege); 3) TV helps prisoners to keep in touch with the outside world; and 4) as a former Chief Inspector of Prisons has noted, in-cell TV provides a proper excuse for a prisoner to remain in his cell and avoid the predators on the unit (HMCIP 1997: para.1.19). Finally, regimes which allow in-cell television can run with fewer evening staff. At Garth, even officers who were initially resistant to the idea of prisoners having televisions in their cells had come to the conclusion that it was a good idea, primarily because it kept prisoners quiet.

In one important respect, televisions are not out of place in prisons. As we shall see in the next chapter, prisons actually have many domestic features, precisely because they are places in which people have to live.

Notes

- 1 The distinction between 'distal' and 'proximal' thinking has a long history in intellectual inquiry. Distal thinking privileges results and outcomes, the apparently 'finished' and 'complete' things or objects of thought or action.

The distal is what is preconceived, what appears already constituted and known, what is simplified and distilled. 'Proximal' thinking, in contrast, deals in the continuous and unfinished (see Cooper and Law 1995 for a fascinating discussion of the distal/proximal debate). The distal approach to social inquiry is analogous to the view from a telescope; one can see far-away places and things but only in a certain degree of (fixed) detail. The proximal approach is analogous to what can be seen beneath a microscope. Here we find that fixed, biological structures are not fixed at all; rather they move, divide and merge. We see, in short, the structures of biological life *in process*. In the same way, a proximal approach allows the sociologist of the prison to see prison structures, relations and interactions as they develop, change and reproduce.

- 2 The principle of 'less eligibility' transformed penal policy (and hence prison conditions) in the mid-nineteenth century. Essentially, prison officials came to believe that the prisoner – (re)constructed as feckless, incorrigible (and hence dangerous) – should not be so well looked after that his circumstances corresponded to his non-criminal counterparts. He was, in fact, deemed 'less eligible' for warmth, food, clothing and rest than the 'deserving poor'.
- 3 Control and restraint (C&R) is a *defensive* method of physically dealing with prisoners. It uses controlled actions aimed at minimising physical injury, according to laid-down rules of authority and accountability (Barclay *et al.* 1994: 161).
- 4 'Dartmoor heavies' was the prison officers' name for heavy, highly polished, steel toe-capped boots.
- 5 An interesting discussion of officers 'at their best' can be found in Liebling and Price 2001).
- 6 Numerous officers mentioned being 'professional' but none really knew what they meant by it. They found it easier to discuss what made an officer *unprofessional*, i.e. 1) discussing inmates' offences in front of other inmates; 2) writing adverse reports because you don't like somebody; 3) always being late; and 4) offending against the discipline code.
- 7 One strand of the Woolf Report (1991 para. 12.129) was the introduction of the idea of a 'compact' (sometimes termed a 'contract') that should be made between prisoner and prison. Under such a compact the prisoner would receive, in return for his or her promises with regard to behaviour and 'performance', certain regime benefits.
- 8 It transpired that at this particular YOI, 'problem' inmates, i.e. those who are repeatedly charged with offences against good order and discipline, are allocated a personal governor who attempts to arrange a further 'compact' with the prisoner. It occurred to me that this scenario is a very good example of the dialectic of control as it occurs in the prison setting.
- 9 Some prison officers adopt what Sparks *et al.* (1996) term a 'slippery slope' view of prisoners, which envisages a direct line between the tiniest infraction of discipline and anarchy unleashed.
- 10 An SIR is a security information report. These are passed from the wings to security staff who will act upon the information obtained. They may, for

example, bring the sniffer dog into the prisoner's cell and search the prisoners' visitors particularly thoroughly.

- 11 Officers perceived as 'dangerous' by fellow officers include those who use unnecessary force when dealing with prisoners and those suspected of bringing alcohol and drugs in for prisoners.