

'That's not my name': prisoner deference and disciplinarian prison officers

David Scott highlights the exercise of power and authority in prison.

It has long been documented that prisoner deference is essential if prison officers are to effectively undertake their control functions (Sykes, 1958; Goffman, 1963). Whilst there is evidence that there exists a number of prison officer working personalities (Carrabine, 2004; Scott, 2008), it is clear that a significant number of prison officers, especially those who consider security, discipline, and control to be central to their working practices, exercise power through their personal authority (Sim, 2008). It is maintained in the critical literature that for such officers, a positive interaction only arises if prisoners recognise the officer's inherent superiority. This demand for an elevated form of respect can be understood as the deployment of an 'asymmetrical status norm' (Scott, 2009).

Authority

In a recent ethnographic study, interviews were undertaken with 38 prison officers at an English prison. Officers most likely to use their authority to establish prisoner deference were referred to as *disciplinarians* and collectively they comprised the occupational culture. The research indicated that prisoner deference could be established through various means, but that the three most common were the use of names, the Incentive and Earned Privileges Scheme (IEPS) and 'prison humour' (Scott, 2009).

How prison officers and prisoners address each other illustrates the way relationships are structured and

hierarchies of power reproduced. The legitimate terms for disciplinarian prison officers when referring to prisoners included: nick names (e.g., Smithy, Jonesy); second names (Smith, Jones); first names; prison number; 'Dicks', 'dickheads', 'cunts', 'bollocks', and 'wanker'. The legitimate terms for prisoners when referring to staff were 'Boss', 'Officer', 'Mr', and 'Sir'. These forms of address by disciplinarian officers become a means of institutionalising lesser eligibility and informally maintaining a psychic divide.

There is a line between an inmate and a prison officer. I've always known it as you call them by their last name or nickname and they call you boss. You do get inmates that come in and say 'alright mate', and we tell them straight away 'we're not your mate'. It's either Boss, or Mr, you know what I mean? You have to keep a distance.

To call a prisoner by their first name implies friendship, potentially undermining authority. Names implied 'respect' and a way of showing gratification or deference to 'superiors'. Subsequently, to deserve the name 'Mr', a prisoner had to *earn* respect. For one officer 'if you want these human rights you've got to be human, so really, not to have done the kinds of things these people have done'.

They lost the right to be called Mr as soon as they got convicted of

an offence and put in prison. I see many prisoners that I've locked up and I call them Mr outside these gates. But I'll be buggered if I'm calling them Mr in here. They've lost that right. As far as I'm concerned they are a number and a surname.

Hierarchy

The use of names fed into a false hierarchy. Officers deserved respect from prisoners because they were prison officers. Prisoners did not, at least in the first instance, because they were prisoners. Prisoners were described by officers as, for example: selfish, pathetic, childlike, untrustworthy, ill-disciplined, irresponsible, bad bastards, overly demanding, inadequate, dangerous, layabouts, toe-rags, needy, druggies, contagious, scum, poor copers, manipulators, wasters, users.

The perceived legitimate terms used to address prisoners were subsequently impersonal and often derogatory or demeaning, whilst those to be used for officers automatically implied respect. Calling prisoners universally by their first names was perceived as a means of eroding one important means of maintaining existing power relations.

A second means of establishing deference by disciplinarian officers was the IEPS. Prisoners had privileges that could be withdrawn if they breached the above rules of engagement. Legal rights were either denied or acknowledged dependent upon prisoner behaviour. Officers were very keen to keep as much bargaining power as possible, and flexibility regarding 'entitlements' allowed officers to more effectively manage their interactions. For one officer, prisoners generally were 'not to be trusted' and 'how flexible you are depends on the attitude of the inmates':

If they come at me shouting and cursing they'll get abuse back. If you take someone up to the governor every time they swear at you, then no-one will respect you. But if you just tell them to fuck off, they can understand, and they'll respect that more.

Privileges were a key tool in maintaining control and intimately tied to acquiring prisoner deference. Prisoners had to deserve, or earn the right, to be treated humanely. As one officer put it, additional 'rights' could be given to those prisoners who demonstrate that they accept their subjugated position or occasionally for those prisoners who were in trouble, such as 'giving an extra phone call for a prisoner experiencing a family crisis'. Those prisoners who resist or 'try to abuse the system' should have only the most limited of entitlements.

Punitive application

The withholding of prisoner entitlements was given its clearest endorsement in the punitive application of the IEPS. Often referred to by officers as 'snakes and ladders', the IEPS was considered to work best when adopted as a means of disciplining prisoners. As one officer highlighted, in the early days of the scheme in the research prison 'there were quite a few examples of staff giving people three warnings within ten minutes, or three similar warnings to do with the same incident':

We were running the IEPS as we thought it should be run. If people were doing things wrong you'd say 'Don't put them on report, just give them warnings.' So we ended up giving them warnings. Three of them and they ended up on [the] basic [regime]. So then the governor intervenes and says 'Why the bloody hell have you got 12 basics on B wing?' so he starts picking up the history cards and reading them. And then it's not a case of 'why are these prisoners behaving badly?' it's 'why are these officers giving them warnings?' They picked out one person in particular and put him on extended probation. So staff were really aggrieved about that and said 'Well sod it.' And now they don't bother putting people on basic. It's more or less collapsed on its feet.

One further clear example of a strategy disciplinarian officers deployed to engender deference and disempower prisoners was the hidden and insidious use of humour. Prison officers in the research prison appeared to have the apparent monopoly of the use of 'jokes'. Prisoners were subjected to ridicule and degrading and humiliating experiences 'for a laugh', whilst officers maintained a position of control and superiority. Officers were the jokers, whilst prisoners were their hapless subjects. A good joke was when the officers found it funny, irrespective of the prisoner's feelings. One officer stated that 'if someone gives you a hard time and you come back with a one liner, it's better than disciplining the guy, because then they just look like a dickhead in front of their mates'. Prisoners were also subjected to practical jokes. There were numerous examples given by officers of the tricks they had played and two are given below:

The favourite one I've seen done is when you go to the cell door and there used to be a little lip on the cell door. What you do is get a bottle of lemon and lime and stand by the door so they can see your face and pour this lemon and lime underneath the door. They'd be going absolutely ape inside because they wouldn't realise that it were pop coming through not something else. (laughs a lot)

The number one cleaner has just put in for his Home Detention Curfew Order [HDC]. Now we knew this so we went into his cell with two bits of rubber gloves filled with tea, and we hid them. He did his HDC form with one of the other officers, and he walked out. Ten minutes later we said, 'Right. We're going to give you a cell search.' And these things dropped out of his drawer his heart just stopped when these two things fell on the floor. We were using them as false VDT [voluntary drug testing] tests. And his face was a picture. And we

just cracked up, and he was off. Oh he says, how we laughed. But that's the sense of humour. We find it funny, and he does now. But at the time, it wasn't. It can be a bit cruel, the sense of humour. But, if it wasn't for that, we couldn't do the job.

In some situations prison humour may be an attempt to establish connections with prisoners, or even a genuinely amusing incident that can be shared by all participants. But when placed in the context of the structuring of relationships in prison, officer humour can provide another useful tool in the armoury in upholding personal authority and control. There is more than one prison officer 'working personality', and not all occupational cultures in England and Wales are shaped by disciplinarian prison officers, but the focus on the *asymmetry of status* provides a way of understanding the *asymmetry of power* in the prison place and its dehumanising consequences. ■

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References

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