PRISON SERVICE
JOURNAL

Guarding the ghosts of time:

Working personalities and the prison officer-prisoner relationship

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I think it used to be a question of switching on into a certain mode as you walked through the [prison] gates, and then, when you went out, you would switch off and be your normal self again. I remember in the first two or three years of the job, when my fortnight summer leave came around, half way through my wife would say to me, 'you've changed — you are back to your old self again'. She could not explain what it was, and I could not see it myself. But over the years that stops happening, because you actually become a different person. Talking to the lads generally, I do not think we are nice people. Prison does not change you for the better. Instead of switching on and switching off, we do it subconsciously. You become that same person all of the time.[1]

Prison officer working personalities arise as a result of an officer's shared experiences and social situation with other colleagues, leading to the development of a common way of interpreting actions and events. Collectively they create an occupational culture which informs 'the way we do things round here', determining the construction of what is, and what is not, considered suitable prison work. A number of different prison officer working personalities can co-exist in any given prison, each shaped by its historically contingent evolution, folklores, memories, identities, and practices. The existing literature points to four main prison officer working personalities: *careerist, humanitarian, disciplinarian*, and *alienated 'mortgage payer'*[2]. Whilst working styles are likely to be more diverse than such simplistic categories allow, the above ideal types may prove helpful in indentifying distinctive prison officer orientations to their relationships with prisoners. This paper draws upon 38 semi-structured interviews with prison officers in a local prison in the North West of England to illustrate and evidence these four working personalities and to highlight their implications for the recognition of the shared humanity of those they guard in their daily interactions.[3]

Careerist

King and Elliot have described the central motivation of this working personality as 'making a career'[4]. Careerists expected to be promoted quickly through the ranks of the Prison Service, wishing to make the right impression to their superiors through developing positive relationships with managers and embracing official thinking. Two prison officers who were interviewed adopted a careerist working orientation. For these officers there was little criticism of management decisions or personnel. Indeed quite the reverse: 'I have got a fantastic boss and a really good job and I love my work'. There was also the adoption of management speak at times: 'I think in the end we need to have more focus on joined up services', 'our customer is the inmate' and even talk of adhering to a 'performance culture'. The careerist officer was concerned with meeting key performance indicators and targets, improving the quality of the regime and deeply concerned about the prison's position in the league tables.

We need to deliver on our KPI's and KPTS. Unless we actually achieve our KPTs we are seen as a non-performing prison. I think as a manager it's a good tool because officers know that if we don't perform we drop down the league table. I think the whole system could work but it needs to be looked at better integrated, and we need to decide as a service which way we want to go. But I do think it is

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1. The quotations from prison officers in this paper are all from an ethnographic study undertaken by the author. For further details and full references please see Scott, D (2009) *Ghosts Beyond Our Realm: a neo-abolitionist analysis of prisoner human rights and prison officer occupational culture*, Milton Keynes: VDM.
2. See for example Colvin, E (1977) *Prison Officers: A Sociological Portrait of The Uniformed Staff of An English Prison*, Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Cambridge; King, R D & Elliot, K W (1978) *Albany: Birth Of a Prison – End of an Era*, London: RKP; Kauffman, K (1988) *Prison Officers and Their World*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; Carter, KW (1995) *The Occupational Socialisation of Prison Officers: An Ethnography*, Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Wales College at Cardiff; Crawley, E (2004) *Doing Prison Work: The Public and Private Lives of Prison Officers*, Devon: Willan Publishing; Liebling, A (2004) *Prisons And Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality And Prison Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Carrabine, E (2004) *Power, Discourse and Resistance: A Genealogy of The Strangeways Prison Riot*, Aldershot: Ashgate; and Liebling, A, Price, D & Shefer, G (2011) *The Prison Officer (2nd edition)* London: Routledge.
3. See Scott, (2009).
4. King and Elliot (1977: 269).

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fair to say the new initiatives we are bringing in are quality initiatives not quantity initiatives.

Careerists had a reasonably positive appraisal of prison life and found their job an affirmative experience. The two careerist officers interviewed had the benefit of extensive specialist training and had amicable relationships with their managers. They believed that if they used their initiative they would go far in the Prison Service hierarchy. Careerists generally mirrored existing management commitments and this was reflected in their attitudes towards prisoners. The two careerist officers interviewed had a humanitarian ethos, promoting the rehabilitation of offenders and a commitment to the government goals to utilise the prison as a special place to reduce re-offending.

We should treat prisoners decently; we should treat them like human beings, because that is the only way that they are going to change their attitude. Don't get me wrong; there will be a minority that will never ever change — but 60 per cent of prisoners will not take a lot of helping. We can make a big impact on their life.

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Notably though, both of the careerists had developed specialist roles within the prison and now had only limited contact with prisoners. It was therefore difficult to ascertain if the commitment to prisoner wellbeing was something they genuinely believed or if it was merely lip service. Careerists, and especially those who entered the service on graduate entry schemes, met with considerable officer hostility from colleagues in the research prison. For example, one principal officer stated that such 'careerists' could be seen 'running around trying to impress the governor, but they just don't really know what this job is all about … we are promoting the wrong kind of people'.

Humanitarian

This working personality is underscored by a humanitarian commitment to ensure prisoners are treated as fellow human beings. Its adherents have been identified in the literature as, among others, 'implementing rule 1'[5], 'weathermen'[6] 'reciprocators'[7] and 'professionals'[8]. The humanitarian prison officers worked within a human services framework valuing fairness, impartiality and the consistent application of the rules. The humanitarian aimed to help prisoners and was prepared to negotiate to maintain order. Seven officers, six of whom were senior officers, described themselves as 'humanitarians', though they were often referred to by other staff as 'care bears'. Only two women prison officers were interviewed and both were part of this occupational orientation.

Humanitarian officers were friendly, open and operated through inclusionary stereotypes. Prison work was viewed as positive and rewarding and they welcomed outside scrutiny. Humanitarians looked for support and acknowledgement from both the Prison Service hierarchy and those on the outside. Unlike the careerists, however, humanitarians did have a general dislike for managerialism. There was some mistrust of management and recognition of the irrationality of some managerial policies. As one officer put it, 'if prisoners have got a problem I might want to spend time with them but I've also got this audit tray'. Humanitarians focused rather on their professional role. They understood the term 'professionalism' to involve the duty of care and a commitment to help prisoners.

I find myself listening to human beings talking about experiences rather than prisoners. We should look upon them as if they are members of our own family and treating them as though they are our fathers and relatives because that's one way that staff immediately see a way of justifying the humanitarian role. If the prison officer treats somebody the way he expects to have his brother or son treated in prison then it makes them look on prisons in a different light.

The humanitarian officers who worked on the wing in close physical proximity with prisoners were also likely to have a close sense of emotional or 'psychic' proximity with the prisoners. Breaking down the 'us and them'

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5.   King & Elliot (1978).
6.   Carter (1995).
7.   Gilbert, M J (1997) 'The Illusion of Structure: A Critique of The Classical Model of Organisational and The Discretionary Power of Correctional Officers'. In: *Criminal Justice Review*, 22(1), pp 49-64.
8.   Carrabine (2004).

scenario, the humanitarian officers look to treat all prisoners the same with the recognition prisoners are not necessarily that different from themselves.

> *I go up on the wings and I can feel it when I am talking to the prisoners, I can feel that those prisoners have been neglected. I can tell with the questions they ask, they come with these questions, lots of them, and they are all little short questions that take two minutes to go and find an answer. It's a bad thing in a prison when prisoners start to feel their requests are being totally ignored.*

In the research prison humanitarian officers were relatively marginalised, experiencing hostility from other members of staff who believed that they were 'outsiders' or not proper prison officers. As one officer explained:

> *Yesterday another officer criticized me … he even suggested that I shouldn't be wearing the uniform, that I should be wearing civilian clothes. That's how he viewed my position, not as a prison officer anymore. I explained to him that wearing the uniform and being a humanitarian were very much tied in together and that I wouldn't renounce the uniform because that would take me away from the prison officers and perhaps reinforce a traditional view of prison officers as disciplinarians.*

Disciplinarian

Identified variously in the literature as 'negatively detached'[9], 'black and whiters'[10], 'enforcers'[11], or 'authoritarians'[12], this working personality privileges order, security, discipline, respect, control and personal authority. Of the 38 interviewed in the research prison, 23 officers identified with the terms 'dinosaurs', 'traditional officers', or most commonly 'disciplinarians'. There was a strong sense of loyalty, solidarity and occupational identity among disciplinarian officers. For many disciplinarians their circle of friends was determined by the prison place and subsequent socialising with colleagues. 'We all know what that feels like, so it does become a bit like an extended family with the prison staff. It's your mates that keep you going'. The disciplinarian working personality was grounded in a trust deficiency of management, prisoners, and politicians which ultimately bred insecurities, cynicism and suspicion. The sense of occupational isolation was summed up by one officer, who stated 'It's us, them and them. Senior management, inmates and then us, it is like we're getting attacked from two areas'. Some disciplinarians were concerned that managerial reforms were 'not there to help the prisoners, but to make staff more accountable. It is so that we can say that somebody has done something'. The KPI's were considered to be 'meaningless garbage', a 'waste of paper' and that the 'tick boxes' were used as a 'management tool'.

> *KPI's are a bag of shit to me. They don't mean anything. It's a governor's problem. It's all to do with their pay structure, their performance. I'm not interested in it because it's all about them saying they're doing their job right, and they're not doing their job right.*

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Disciplinarian officers also proved to be cynical and reluctant to embrace change. As one officer stated 'we have seen them come and go — this change will not work and will be replaced by something else that will not work'. Disciplinarians believed that they were doing an important and socially valuable job but failing to receive recognition. The prison officer was 'under siege, under threat, under-valued'. Disciplinarian officers used the following terms to sum up their experiences and feelings about themselves and their treatment by the Prison Service:

> *'Bitter', 'resentful', 'under-valued', 'undermined', 'stressed out', 'under-appreciated', 'powerless', 'threatened', 'fearful', 'sold out', 'betrayed', 'fed up', 'misunderstood', 'de-motivated', 'unstable', 'edgy'.*

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9. King & Elliot (1978).
10. Carter (1995).
11. Gilbert (1997).
12. Carrabine (2004).

As one prison officer argued, 'all the shit lands on us because we're at the bottom of the pile. We've basically become cannon fodder'. A macho sense of toughness, physicality, and invulnerability exemplified the disciplinarian working personality. This macho 'front' was seen as an essential for psychological survival in prison, especially when dealing with prisoners. In the words of one officer, 'prisoners are superb at reading people, as soon as the inmates see a chink in your armour, they'll rip it wide open'.

Disciplinarians had little or no empathy with prisoners. The doctrine of less eligibility fed the myth that prisoners are the only 'criminals' in society, and that they are weak, inadequate people. The starting point for relationships or interactions with prisoners was rooted within a stereotype that *all* prisoners are lesser and do not deserve to be treated as fellow humans. The devastating implications of the pains and suffering of imprisonment were clear to disciplinarians in terms of how it dehumanises officers, but such an understanding did not necessarily stretch far enough to encompass prisoners. In this way for the disciplinarian the prisoners' needs and lived realities became virtually invisible in the daily penal regime[13].

Alienated 'mortgage payer'

Described in the literature as 'marking time',[14] 'burn outs',[15] 'easy lifers',[16] and 'avoiders'[17] this working personality is characterised by minimum of work, officer interaction and prisoner contacts. Six of the prison officers interviewed had alienated working personalities, which were described colloquially as *mortgage payers*. Alienated 'mortgage payers' were looking for an easy ride and had no great attachment to their role. These officers were just going through the daily motions. Characterised by a sense of moral indifference and ambivalence, the alienated 'mortgage payer' had no sense of mission and did not appear to find their work rewarding. Though this working personality shared many similarities with the disciplinarian, the exposure to the inherent pains of

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prison life seems much more pronounced — these officers were often isolated and appeared to struggle to survive psychologically in prison. The alienated 'mortgage payers' were not just insecure. They were also profoundly unhappy. As one officer stated, 'you've got no job satisfaction whatever'.

Staff on the landing just seem to come in on autopilot, go through the motions of doing it and come out. I think that is why probably the morale is so low because you don't have the fulfilment you used to have.

The experience of alienation appeared to shape both their work and private lives and the job was seen as damaging personal relationships outside of the prison. Ultimately these officers prioritised being paid. 'I'll just take my money. Do the job and go'. For such officers the job was a 'distraction to their primary aim of accumulating money in the bank'.

The only thing I'm loyal to is that account at the end of the month. It's the state of the job now, I just keep thinking of the cash. I've only another 12 years before my mortgage is paid.

Though they found their work could be 'unpredictable', it was also 'repetitive', 'routine', 'dull', and 'undemanding' — they largely constructed their labour as 'unskilled', their role as 'restrictive' and lacking 'autonomy' or 'choice'. Alienated 'mortgage payers' felt powerless, and some were also bitter, resentful, angry and quick to blame others.

The job is on its arse. The job is crap now. It's not a job. We're glorified bell boys. We're at the bottom of the ladder. Above us is the inmates, then you've got the teachers and education, then on top of that there's the governors. The job really is crap. Some people think 'you miserable git'. But I'm just common.

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13. See Scott, D (2008) 'Creating ghosts in the penal machine: the prison officer moral universe and the techniques of denial' In: Bennett, J, Crewe, B and Wahidin, A (eds) (2008) *Understanding Prison Staff* Devon: Willan; and Scott, D (2011) "'That's not my name': prisoner deference and disciplinarian prison officers" In: *Criminal Justice Matters*, June 2011.
14. King & Elliot (1978).
15. Kauffman (1988).
16. Carter (1995).
17. Gilbert (1997).

Their sense of loyalty to the prison and fellow officers was limited whilst negativity became most pronounced in relationships with prisoners.

The most of them are just pathetic now. It pisses me off. It's all this 'I want! I want!' It's like dealing with your kids. You're dealing with selfish adults and that's it. If they weren't so selfish they wouldn't be in prison. That's what they're in for, for being selfish. Robbing and thieving instead of going out and getting a job. But then again why should they. They don't have to do much to get by. If I had a choice I'd probably come back as a criminal in my next life, because it's a piss easy life. Especially with all this human rights. 'Excuse me. I'd like to make a complaint. It wasn't actually hot enough when I got back to my cell.' Then you'll get some silly slap arse filling in papers, saying that they'll see to it.

The alienated 'mortgage payer' saw no intrinsic value in developing pro-longed interactions with prisoners, demonstrating a high level of resistance to any forms of helping prisoners or responding to their requests. Such officers did the minimum, for example to 'sit and read the newspaper' on the wing, or 'skive off, have a chat with other officers and drink tea'. Senior staff sometimes referred to alienated 'mortgage payer' as 'lazy bastards' and they were unpopular among more committed members of staff, whether it be to their career, humanitarian interventions, or maintaining discipline and control.

Working personalities and the prison officer-prisoner relationship

The prison officer—prisoner relationship should not be underestimated though it must be located within the context of the inherent harms of the prison place and the damage it imparts. The dullness, boredom and saturation in time awareness characterising the prison place provides a threat to pre-existing meanings and sometimes the foundations of a person's sense of who they are. The dehumanising penal context presents serious threats to the wellbeing of both prisoners and prison officers, yet acknowledgement of prisoner suffering by prison officers is not always forthcoming. In response to the painful immersion in time consciousness some prisoners psychologically and emotionally withdraw. At its most extreme, this concealment can lead to the virtual disappearance of their former personalities, creating or exacerbating mental health and other problems[18]. Those prisoners who attempt to 'invisibilise' themselves are described by Stan Cohen and Laurie Taylor as the 'ghosts of time'[19]. Importantly, those *guarding the ghosts of time* can also invisibilise prisoners and it is here that the distinctions between the four prison officer working personalities become most significant.

In many prisons there is evidence of a strong occupational ethos emphasising distance and detachment in prison officer-prisoner relationships[20]. The form and extent of distancing is likely to vary depending upon the working personality adopted. The relationship between the careerist prison officer and prisoners may in the long term be one characterised by physical distance. Through specialisation of tasks and greater engagement with 'prison business' direct contact with prisoners may

Table 1: Four Ideal Type Prison Officer Working Personalities			
Working personality	*Orientation to work*	*Relationships with prisoners*	*Key priorities*
Careerist	Positive and often adopt official thinking	Official commitment to rehabilitation	Reflect management concerns
Humanitarian	Positive but sceptical of management	Empathy and development of positive relationships	Duty of care
Disciplinarian	Positive regarding group solidarity but disappointment and hostility and towards management	Prisoners as lesser beings or othered as potential danger to officers	Control, discipline, respect, personal authority and safety
Alienated 'mortgage payer'	Negative to all and aim for minimum of work and interaction	Moral indifference	Pay cheque

18. Scott, D & Codd, H (2010) *Controversial Issues in Prisons*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
19. Cohen, S & Taylor, L (1972) *Psychological Survival: The Experience Of Long Term Imprisonment*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
20. See for example Kauffman (1988); Crawley (2004); Carrabine (2004); Liebling (2004); Scott, (2009); and Liebling et al (2011).

become minimal and experiences of working face-to-face with prisoners somewhat limited The commitment to management policies, procedures and priorities may lead to the adoption of a 'managerial morality' where the interests of the prison bureaucracy over-ride the needs and welfare of prisoners, and perhaps also fellow officers. When people become merely numbers and figures the chances of dehumanisation increase.

The humanitarian officer is also likely to utilise some form of distancing when establishing the prison officer-prisoner relationship. Grounded in recognition of prisoner suffering, humanitarians empathise with prisoners and look to foster positive interactions as they undertake their duty of care. Humanitarians may find though that in the dehumanising prison place, whose main function is the deliberate infliction of pain, that there work is never done. Prison officers are employed to be 'caretakers of punishment' — that is to ensure that day in and day out prisoners *remain* prisoners[21]. In addition, in at least some prisons humanitarians will be in the minority facing considerable hostility from other prison officers.

For the disciplinarian officer distancing and detachment may arise through the belief that prisoners will view familiarity and empathy as a weakness and attempt to manipulate them. These officers are likely to try and use their personal influence to secure prisoner respect and create a safe, disciplined and controlled environment. Interactions and relationships with prisoners are likely to be fashioned, at least initially, through an unequivocal hierarchy placing the officer in authority. Consequently, the creation of emotional or psychic distance by these prison officers is likely to be grounded in the assumption that prisoners are lesser beings, often undeserving of their help or support. Though drawing some parallels with the disciplinarian, the alienated 'mortgage payer' officer aims for minimum commitments and prisoner interactions. Exposed to the dehumanised penal context without colleague solidarity these officers experience their own profound sense of pain, isolation and suffering, ultimately generating moral indifference to the plight of prisoners. Albeit for different reasons, for prison officers who adopt either the disciplinarian or alienated 'mortgage payer' working personalities, prisoner suffering once again become invisible.

It is easy though mistaken to point to the damage created *through* incarceration as the cause *for* incarceration. Prisoners are not a breed apart, just those people who have been caught and handled by the criminal process. These are often people with great needs or demands that society has thus far failed. Therefore it remains crucial that prison officers acknowledge the social backgrounds of prisoners and the painful realities of imprisonment for all and that every effort is made to foster feelings of psychic closeness with prisoners as fellow human beings. Yet, by its very nature prison work is brutalising and dehumanising. The negation of humanity is structured within the prison's very existence. Prisons will always be painful places undermining human dignity, respect, autonomy, security, meaning and sense of self. All prisoners, by definition, remain vulnerable to dehumanisation through the negative stigma of the application of the label itself. Consequently, whatever the working personality adopted by prison officers it remains questionable whether the penal manufacture of human suffering can ever be deemed legitimate. Such an acknowledgment though does not remove the demand upon humanitarians, whether working within the system as members of staff or as critics, policy makers or interested observers on the outside, to do what they can when they can to mitigate the harms of imprisonment and facilitate the recognition of the shared humanity of prisoners.

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21. See Scott, D (2006) 'The caretakers of punishment: prison officers and the rule of law' In: *Prison Service Journal* Number 168 November 2006.