WOMEN AND THE CHANGING WORK OF
PRISON OFFICERS

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Paper presented at the Women in Corrections: Staff and Clients Conference
convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology
in conjunction with the Department for Correctional Services SA
and held in Adelaide, 31 October – 1 November 2000
Prison officers and the way they do their work are pivotal to the life of prisons, but have received very little direct attention either in academic circles or in wider public debates about safe communities, crime, punishment and imprisonment.

This paper draws on South Australian Annual Prisons Department and Department for and of Correctional Services Annual Reports to chart changes to the understandings of prison officers work, associated with changed expectations of prisons in the last century. In so doing it identifies the extent to which thinking about prisons and their workers has been derived from the experience of men’s prisons and explores variations to these understandings from women’s prisons. In conclusion the paper will examine the implications of changing and contradictory expectations of prisons and their workers for the recruitment of staff.

The Para-military model of prison officer work (1900-1950s)

Early this century, as modern prisons were established in Australia, the exercise of power by prison officers was conceptualised as being similar to that of the military. The Australian prison at the beginning of the century was one in which the removal of law-breakers from their activities in society was the major goal. The understanding of prisons and how they functioned was focussed on the issue of external control, of imposing the will of the government on criminal offenders. Significant attention was paid to ensuring that prisoners undertook hard work which made a return to the community. (Gaols and Prisons Department, 1904-1921)

To achieve this goal the government recruited workers who could perform in a military type role and dressed them accordingly in uniforms. Officers were trained to keep communication to prisoners to a minimum and to avoid forming any relationship with prisoners. This was deemed to enable the effective imposition of order on an otherwise unruly mob. This model of prison relationships can be seen to have been influenced by developments in English and American prisons in the previous century that emphasised the orderly prison as one in which silence prevailed and prisoners became passive. (McGowen, 1998)

In the military tradition, officers were not females. This conceptualisation of the work of the prison officer as a male activity was reinforced by the fact that most inhabitants of prisons were male. Other analyses demonstrate that the deviant behaviours of women were punished in other ways. (Willis, 1980)

However women did end up in prison – usually for offences such as prostitution or fraud. There were always very few of these women and the processes by which they were held in custody were always seen as different from “real prisons”. (Rafter, 1992) Women officers were employed to take charge of women prisoners and in South Australia the prison officers’ award recognised this with a full scale of pay for female officers which corresponded to, although it was much less than, the male rate of pay. However, following traditions developed in the United Kingdom in the middle of the previous century the more common way of thinking about the senior woman guarding women in prison was as Matron. This reflected the understanding the deviant women were to be treated as “sick” or child-like rather than “bad”. (Rafter, 1992)

The correctional philosophy embedded in male prisons in this early part of the century can still be seen to pervade many of the prison administration practices at the end of the century. In the following sections of this paper I will describe other developments in understanding of the prison officers’ work. However innovation and change always occurs as a departure from
this para-military model rather than in an entirely different context. The demands of security remain associated with the effective use of force. Staff groups such as Emergency Response Teams (however named) in jurisdictions throughout Australia can be seen as an indicator of the extent to which this para-military model remains the base on which prisoner management rests. (Thomas, 1972)

**The “man management” model of prison officer work (1950s – 1970s)**

Changes to how the work of prison officers occurred in western jurisdictions around the middle of the twentieth century. O’Brien (1998) attributes the development in penal philosophy on which these were based to a reaction to the war and the horrors of concentration camps and other prisons that were revealed at the end of the war.

The changed penal philosophy emphasised the citizenship of those imprisoned. There were two significant adjustments to prison regimes as a result of these changes in penal policy. One adjustment was the introduction of specialists such as psychologists and social workers into prisons (Hill, 1988; O’Brien, 1998) (Thomas, 1972) The other, shaped also by practices developing in other institutions such as factories, was the development of descriptors of the control process within the prison as “man management”.

These changes can be traced in South Australia during the 1950s. The 1959-60 Annual reports the first signs of change in the understanding or prisons and prison officers’ work and the tensions involved:

> Irrespective of modern methods and modern buildings, the most important factor in the satisfactory working of any department or institution is the interest, aptitude and commonsense shown by the officers in the performance of their duties, together with ability to work together in the common cause of the department.

> The lot of the prison officer, like that of the inmate, has changed considerably over the last decade; training schemes, new approaches, human relationship and man management have been introduced. All members now have the benefit of specialised training.

Changes to the understandings of prison officers’ work continued to be developed through the 1960s. In South Australia officers were trained in Braille Writing in order to supervise prisoners in the transcription and binding of books for blind people, in fire-fighting in civil defence, in conference leadership and group work and counselling. (Gaols and Prisons Department, 1957-1961, 1961 p3)

However these changes created tensions within the prison system. The prisoner was being recognised as a citizen (Grant, 1988, pp2 & 3) (O’Brien, 1998), but the essential dilemma created by the decision to imprison the citizen of how to restrain the prisoner against his or her will remained.

There is little evidence that the understanding of the work of female prison officers in South Australia was changing alongside that of their male counter parts during the 1950s and 60s. In fact the distinctive language used in relation to the women’s prison in the 1962-63 Annual Report of the Department suggests quite the contrary.
The women’s section functions as a separate entity in the charge of a Matron and Staff. Female prisoners are trained in sewing, laundry work and cleaning. During the year women were engaged in the manufacture of sheets, towels, handkerchiefs and similar articles, from materials supplied by the Public Stores Department.

and

Members of female staff showed a devotion to duty equal to any nursing service. They have handled the women prisoners with firmness, kindness and great understanding to their personal problems. In June, when the Prison Aid Auxiliary expressed the desire to organise a concert at the Adelaide Gaol for the inmates, the whole staff, including relieving officers, volunteered for duty for the evening. (1963/64) P6

Adelaide Gaol – Female Section

However by the 1970s, wider communal debates about the role of women in society can be seen to be impacting on the Department for Correctional Services. Early in this decade the recognition of the importance of training for prison officers for the complex task in which they are involved belatedly included women officers. The first Female Prison Officers course consisting of seven officers was held in the financial year 1969-70

However this should not be seen as evidence that the comparability of the work of male and female officers had been recognised. The proposition that women prisoners have a very different nature to that of men prisoners continued to influence the understanding of the work of female prison officers with female prisoners

It is of interest to note the manner in which many former inmates retain contact with officers of this particular institution [Women’s Rehabilitation Centre]. This fact supports a statement made previously that some women find understanding, friendship and self discipline for the first time in their lives during their stay at the Centre, and quite obviously many of them appreciate the atmosphere and the efforts of the staff. (1971-2 p5 Women’s Rehabilitation Centre)

By the mid 1970s the notion that men and women may be involved in very similar work began to prevail (Rafter, 1992). In South Australia this was first evidenced by the inclusion of male and female officers in the same training programme (Department for Correctional Services, 1973-74 ) Then came the move to have male and female officers work together. The women’s prison became the site of the first experiments in having male and female officers doing this and the Annual Report of 1979-80 reports

It is interesting to see the co-operative manner in which male and female staff work together at this place and it is seen as a model for similar future distribution of staff in male prisons. (Department for Correctional Services, 1978-79)

These were decades of enormous social change. Those changes relating to work and understandings of gender roles in society effected both structures of prison officers’ work and understandings of offending behaviour and the management of women in prison. The permeability of the walls of the prison to social change are clear. However there remained significant tension within the prisons as these changes were introduced.
The tensions experienced in prisons as women took up their roles as prison officers have been documented by many observers. The invisibility of women officers until this time had meant that the job had been constructed in male terms. The solution to the basic prison dilemma about the control of inmates, now recognised as citizens, had a solution based on male understandings of the world. The solution was the use of physical force. The movement of women into work as prison officers was resisted in many jurisdictions on the basis that women would be less competent in such situations, resulting in a decrease of safety for them and their male colleagues (Farnworth, 1992). Thus the arrival, in the sense of becoming visible, of women as prison officers compounded the tensions created by the re-definition of the prisoner as a citizen.


The 1980s marks another important transition point in the development of the work of prison officers. The perception in the external social environment of the prison that appropriate change within prisons was stalled led to an emphasis on the responsibility of correctional administrators to reform prisons.

This period saw an attempt to address the conflicting aspects of the work of prison officers – the tensions that had been defined between prisoner control and working with prisoners. The understandings of prison officers’ work that developed were heavily influenced by developments in Scandinavian prisons. Visits were made to Scandinavian prisons by Australian officials and discussions of the Scandinavian models were widespread. (Hill, 1988, p9) (Vinson, 1982) DCS

The result of this, was the influence of Unit Management on prison regimes and thus the work of prison officers. Unit Management embeds the concept of dynamic security. The role of the prison officer was to be closely involved with the prisoner population in which he or she was working and thus combine the security role of the officer with the human relations role. Unit Management also sought to break down some of the de-humanizing effects of institutionalisation by associating officers and prisoners on a regular basis and creating prison environments in which prisoners were known as people. (Andersen, 1988). The skills of female staff were more widely recognised in this context in which the establishment of working relationships and the defusion of tension were valued.

Unit Management as a model of prison management whilst lauded widely in Australian departments of correctional services struggled at the point of implementation and eventually departments moved on to other language and other models. However the discussions that occurred in the 1980s established key principles about prison management that have remained well beyond the popularity of Unit Management and in a context in which the societal environment and its law and order debates have undergone significant changes.

**Prisons officers’ work in 2000**

A number of forces have shaped how these changed expectations of prison officers’ work have developed from the initial changes in the 1980s to current times. Time allows me to touch on just a couple.

Rapidly increasing prisoner numbers reflected community response to a period of rapid social and economic change. In the last decade the identification of and questioning of the ‘revolving door’ syndrome resulted in a further exploration of what we as a community expect to achieve when we imprison individuals.
At the same time the growth of the influence of managerialist thinking within government and public sector agencies led to a call for the identification of outcomes measures of imprisonment. Whilst there are many arguments about methods of measuring outcomes, there is no doubt that in the public mind and perhaps in the mind of the government the key goal of imprisonment is intended to be that the offender assumes a law-abiding lifestyle and does not return to prison. The exploration of how this is to be achieved by locking up groups of offenders within one set of walls has led to a significant focus on the work of prison officers.

Changed attitudes to the employment of women and increasing numbers of competent women qualified and available to take on a range of responsibilities has seen significant change in the leadership of prison management in South Australia. Women have, at some point in the last decade, held each of the key posts within the Department of Chief Executive Officer, Director of Operations and Manager, Yatala Labour Prison (the largest prison in the state).

At community and governmental level increased emphasis on accountability of systems and individuals within systems made demands upon prison regimes. Regimes were required to take account of the different experiences of individual prisoners and the differential capacity to contribute to the prison administration of staff of different gender and or cultural orientation. At the same time regimes were expected to provide the offenders with opportunities that would positively effect their life after prison.

Recruitment of prison officers as human services workers

These changes gave rise to a number of new perspectives on the essential prison relationships and their purpose. In these perspectives, the differing roles of the prison officer was the distinguishing feature. A variety of roles were described and became the focus of attention within different jurisdictions. These roles include the prison officer as case manager, as therapeutic agent and as a professional. The role of the prison officer as a para-military officer was also re-valued in jurisdictions that chose to adopt Boot Camp type prisons.

The impact on women of the changed expectations of the work of prison officers and of the resultant adjustments in selection processes remains undocumented. However anecdotal evidence from several jurisdictions suggests that women are applying for work as prison officers and passing through selection processes in increasing numbers. One jurisdiction using Assessment Centres found that women were passing through this process in the ratio of two women to every man.

Increasing numbers of women being attracted to work as a prison officer could be expected, if the work becomes recognised as human services work (in name or just by task). Human Services workers are predominantly female. This gender divide remains true whether you are considering human services work for which qualifications are required or unqualified areas. Women are the predominant applicants for university courses in the human services.

There is little data available at this time about the consequences of the increasing numbers of women moving into prison officers work. Many jurisdictions choose to limit the number of women employed within men’s prisons. The rationale for this returns me to the theme of changing and contradictory understandings of the role of prisons and their workers.
The reasons for limiting the number of women employed in men’s prisons are derived from understandings of security and associated processes developed over time by men in men’s prisons. In some jurisdictions strip searches of prisoners, a standard security measure, can only be undertaken by officers of the same gender as the prisoner. Focussing on this suggests that understandings of the work of prison officers as human service workers are currently underpinned by an understanding of the work of prison officers as managers of security.

The increased intensity of the law and order debate over the last two decades has raised the stakes for those who are responsible for ensuring that individuals stay in custody. The focus on outcomes for government departments and those with whom they enter into contracts ensures that the importance of secure custody is not overlooked.

Women entering the job of prison officer, perhaps attracted by its human services focus are confronted with some aspects of the job that have not developed significantly from the para-military model. This poses a significant challenge to the women themselves, prison managers and human resources managers.
References


