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Examining Prison Discourse

Extending 'Discourse, Power and Justice' to Front-Line Prison Officers

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Examining Prison Discourse: Extending 'Discourse, Power and Justice' to front-line Prison Officers

Adler and Longhurst's (1994) classic study of prison management in Scotland significantly advanced our understanding of the internal dynamics of the penal institution and provides one of the few comprehensive examinations of high-level actors within the prison complex (Duke 2002, Bennet et al 2013). Turning, as they did, the academic lens toward the 'powerful in preference to the poor', they extended into an at the time innovative sociological terrain, providing the groundwork for a succinct conceptualisation of the conflicts and complexities of pressures at the heart of the carceral matrix. Part of the book's appeal is that it turns the lens of administrative justice to the field of penology, and by doing so lays the groundwork for a reframing of penal power in terms of the institutional forces on which it rests.

Here it is argued that Adler and Longhurst's model may provide a good basis from which to analyse the discourses of power employed by prison officers on the ground. It is accepted that systemic discourse analysis is a useful tool for analysing power relations in prison, although it is asserted here that the most important expression of power in prison is to be found in the day-to-day interactions between officers and inmates. On this level the narratives involved in the assertion of power and authority may stem from the formal structures identified in the models, or may be generated by more informal cultural understandings. An interesting and fruitful way of picking up this research where it left off may be to investigate whether and/or how far the identified formal discourses are adopted and mobilised by the front-line prison officer.

The substantial barriers to conducting qualitative research inside prisons may be particularly acute where the focus is more on the prison officers than inmates, and in the current climate these questions are, admittedly, not easy to investigate. One suggestion proposed here to overcome the notorious inaccessibility of prison in this sense, might be to investigate the interactions of prison officers over social media. The following discussion unpacks the case for extending our examination of narratives to incorporate those that form part of the world views of officers acting at the coal face and proposes a means of investigating this question via analysis of certain kinds of online data. This kind of examination, it is argued, allows us to access a more comprehensive picture of the reality of prison institutional authority.

Background: Discourse, power and justice explained

The initial study innovatively merged the fields of socio-legal studies and the sociology of knowledge. Drawing on the work of Manheim (1952, 1953, 1986) and Foucault (1979, 1981) in these respective arenas, the book is designed as a platform for the formulation and development of a 'new sociology of imprisonment'. Here discourse analysis provides the underlying theoretical framework for an investigation of organisational rationalities that

allow for the contestation and negotiation of power dynamics. Adler and Longhurst argue that the prison is a natural site for studying these kind of processes, as it provides a stark example of the means of social domination:

We are ... much concerned with the discursive nature of social domination, which is particularly evident in the case of prisons. An institution, which in many respects seems to be built upon violence and brutal repression is, we would argue, also structured and maintained by discursive relations and interactions. (1994:28)

The focus here is very much on the pressures that create change. They locate these pressures largely within the policy and report documents, formal mechanisms for oversight and accountability, and the way in which various grievances are handled. By analysing these documents and supplementing this data with observations of high level meetings and selective interviews, they are able to provide a comprehensive overview of governance styles and the infiltration of certain modes of thought into prison policy and practice.

Adler and Longhurst present their analysis as a way of building on Foucault's theoretical perspective by focusing attention on 'the detailed mechanics of power relations which are neglected in his more general account' (1994:xxi). Noting that discursive relations are reflective of broader attitudes and beliefs, they map these narrative patterns and then hone in on the 'competitive struggle' that occurs between the different actors mobilising various discourses within the penal institution, with a particular focus on formal decision-making and policy. The whole basis of their thesis is that these struggles are central to the way organisational power manifests:

It is possible for the analyst to identify the patterns and structures of such discourses, which in turn act as resources to be used by social groups engaged in struggle. Further, such discourses affect the nature of domination- the result of struggles- and give it a particular cast. (1994:31).

Overlaid on this theoretical foundation is a form of identification and classification drawn from the field of administrative justice. Administrative justice is concerned with the way governmental institutions operate towards citizens; in particular, how administrative decisions are made and challenged. Adler and Longhurst use the frameworks developed in this context as a basis for a classificatory system that identifies and analyses the kinds of discursive struggles in decision-making that are occurring at the site.

The map they develop of the discourses infiltrating decision-making at prison management level are classified broadly under the banner of 'ends discourses' and 'means discourses'; where ends discourses are concerned with the overall justification of prison in society and means discourses are concerned with how prisons should be run. Adler and Longhurst asserted that each of these discourses represented the interests of certain groups and that 'such discourses affect the nature of domination... and give it a particular cast' (1994:31). Thus, the identified external and internal discursive models create pressures that are

essentially in constant conflict, entailing that ‘the penal system is the site of struggles between different social actors mobilising, constructing and re-interpreting particular discourses.’ (1994:45) They explore further these apparent tensions and their model (see table below) highlights how the various influences, the assumptions underpinning them, and their flow on effects, are prevalent in various aspects of prison administration. The resulting analysis provides us with a systematic conceptual framework for understanding the discursive foundations underpinning the exercise of power this institution.

End Discourses

Ends discourses are concerned with the underlying purpose of the prison. Adler and Longhurst categorise prevalent ends narratives in terms of rehabilitation, normalisation or control. Rehabilitation concerns itself with the ‘deviant individual’ (1994:37) who is socially maladapted in some way, where the prison aims to re-socialise and re-integrate the prisoner back into society in a way that reduces future offending. Normalisation refers to the framing of offenders as ordinary people ‘who have committed a crime’, and that aside from custody and security, life should remain as normal as possible for the inmate, ‘merely aiming to ensure the individual will not become ‘worse’ during the period of incarceration’ (1994:39). Normalisation frames the criminal justice system in terms of retribution, and reduces the role of the prison in this sense, instead focusing primarily on sentencing as the retributive act. Here, then, the prison itself has no role in exacting additional punishment (the famous saying being that a person is sentenced *as* punishment not *for* punishment) and the aim becomes ‘humane containment’ of the inmate. Adler and Longhurst highlight the deep conflict between the normalisation and rehabilitation discourses that is not always apparent to those involved in the development of prison policy (1994:39).

The control discourse is clearly central to contemporary understanding of the role of the prison, and within this frame the inmate is a source of potential trouble or difficulty (1994:40). Control is about ‘managing’ difficult behaviours; ‘it maintains that the individual should conform to whatever measures are deemed to be necessary for the maintenance of order and discipline in the prison’, and focuses on conformity of behaviours (1994:40). Adler and Longhurst have highlighted that within the institution itself the control discourse is ubiquitous, and primarily concerned with the protection of prison officers (1994:40).

Ends discourses table:

(Source: Adler and Longhurst 1994:41)

DISCOURSE	Rehabilitation	Normalisation	Control
<i>Source of legitimacy</i>	*Improving the individual	*Prevent negative effects	*Control of disruption *Smooth functioning of the prison

		*Treating prisoners like individuals in the community	
<i>Focus</i>	Deviant individual	Normal individual	Disruptive individual
<i>Dominant concerns</i>	*Socialising the individual back into society Eg training/treatment	*Minimum security Contact with family *Improved living conditions	*Good order and discipline *Protection of prison staff

Means discourses

In addition to the ends discourses concerned with the external justification of imprisonment, Adler and Longhurst also identified 'means' discourses in the prison setting; ways of framing *how* a prison should be run. Utilising Mashaw's (1983) well-known framework of analysis of public organisational accountability in the field of administrative justice scholarship, Adler and Longhurst identify how the day-to-day routine operation of the prison can be framed in legal, bureaucratic and professional terms. As with the ends discourses, the means discourses are often not congruent and may be competing forces within the organisation (1994:43). As ideal types, they each have their own conceptual framework, and according to this theory, a higher reliance on one will lead to a lessening of the others (1994: 47, 44).

The bureaucratic discourse is concerned with enforcement of rules and regulations where the employee is viewed more in terms of their role as a civil servant. From this perspective, the prison officer is a member of an administrative organisation and is accountable in hierarchical terms. The focus here is on the application of managerially dictated rules, and the bureaucratic concern should be with conformity and consistency under this administrative structure. The professional discourse views the roles within the prison in terms of their acquired knowledge and expertise and is more focused on the individual and their professional networks. Accountability here stems from the peer group and professional associations. The legal framework is instead concerned with the courts and the application of legal concepts and the rule of law in the institution. Accountability from this framework is more centred around individual rights and justice for the inmates. In the study all three frames were encountered, although the bureaucratic and professional discourses were found to be more widely adopted and the legal discourse to be 'relatively muted' (1991:45).

Means discourses table:

(Source Adler and Longhurst 1994:43)

MODEL	Bureaucracy	Profession	Legal
<i>Mode of Decision-making</i>	Applying rules	Applying professional knowledge	Weighing up arguments
<i>Legitimizing Goal</i>	Accuracy	Service to client	Fairness
<i>Nature of Accountability</i>	Hierarchical	Interpersonal	Independent
<i>Characteristic Remedy</i>	Administrative review	Complaint to professional body	Appeal to court or tribunal

Adler and Longhurst use the model above as a basis for analysing and critiquing the prison system in Scotland in a tightly specified period (1985-1990) and to make recommendations aimed at improving the system to promote more just decision-making framework. At the same time, they argue that this model might form the basis for further research:

... it is clear that our analytic framework could equally be applied to the situation of other groups of prisoners, to other areas of decision-making, to other periods of time and to other prison systems. Although we have not done this ourselves, we are keen to encourage further work of this nature.

At the time, it was suggested that this investigation was perhaps 'the first study of imprisonment in which the concept of discourse has been brought into the analysis in such a systematical way' (Vegheim 1996), which is not an insignificant contention considering the attention that Foucault (1979) famously brought to this very subject. We might then find it surprising that this invitation was not taken up more widely in subsequent research, and it is argued here that there is room for revival of work of this nature. Still now, the focus of the vast majority of prison research is on the incarcerated and, for various reasons, there has been a consistent neglect of the equally important side of the prison story; that of management and the front-line officers. It is argued here that far more of the academic gaze could be directed towards the state actors within carceral institutions, and that this could produce fruitful results as far as the potential for understanding and reform. Further, the field of penal research could be enriched by applying a discourse analysis framework in a more methodical and systematic way, and Adler and Longhurst provide a solid conceptual framework from which to base future investigations of this type.

Later Developments

Whilst the model developed in *Discourse, Power and Justice* was not employed as widely as it could have been at the time, it was picked up and modified theoretically by Carrabine (2000), who explored how it could be adapted to explain the changes in management style of the Strangeways prison in Manchester from 1965-1990. Carrabine reinforces this idea of the

centrality of discourse to the very existence of the prison, and fundamental to this perspective is an understanding that institutional action is not possible without it:

The penal system can be regarded as a composite of divisive forces, techniques, rationalities and devices which seek to regulate the actions and decisions of individuals and groups in relation to certain authoritative criteria. These criteria and the ability to *act* are performed through discourse. (2000:316)

For Carrabine, the discursive model provides us with a means for conceptually bridging the macro- micro- divide by turning our attention to the way in which power is 'translated' in prison in a Foucauldian sense (Callon and Latour 1981, Law 1993). Translation concerns the technologies of governing; the means by which power filters outwards from the central government echelons and constrains or enables action in the periphery. A focus on the mechanics of translation enables us to understand the very means by which macro-institutional forces create the capacity for micro-institutional action.

The focus from this perspective is on the political rationalities that infiltrate the 'capillaries' of power (Foucault 1991). Carrabine draws theoretically on Garland (1997) who provides a succinct explanation of this dynamic:

Power is not a matter of imposing a sovereign will, but instead a process of enlisting the cooperation of chains of actors who 'translate' power from one locale to another. This process always entails activity on the part of the 'subjects of power' and it therefore has built into it the probability that outcomes will be shaped by resistance or private objectives of those acting 'down the line'. (Garland 1997:182)

Conceptualising the prison in these terms, Carrabine argues, enables us to view it in terms of its place amongst a system of networks 'with each member actively involved in the translation of thought and action'. (2000:319). Carrabine argues that state power filters across networks via 'relatively durable associations through discursive alignments to achieve particular ends' (2000:318), and that an examination of discourse matrices enables us to make sense of the struggles involved in this space, and how new ways of thinking take hold (2000:326).

In terms of mechanics, Carrabine's model omits the 'legal' frame from the original and replaces it with 'authoritarianism' which he argues is particularly prevalent within the institutional landscape of the prison. The authoritarianism frame is derived from the militaristic style of management that is embodied in carceral institutions, where the emphasis is on 'firm but fair' routines and disciplinary procedures that are grounded in historical developments and related traditions (2000:318). This style, he argues (2000:323), was largely subsumed with the introduction of new managerialism and its focus on a more bureaucratic means of governance, leading to the widely observed and discussed conflict between the 'old school' and 'new school' type approaches to doing prison officer work (Feeley and Simon 1992, Tait 2011, Warr 2008:25). In any case, the suggested modification indicates that the models presented by Adler and Longhurst are not apparently fixed or complete

representations of the discursive landscape of the prison, and at the same time re-enforces their initial assertion about the weakness of the legal discourse.¹ It could also be the case that both the authoritarian and the legal modes of framing are influential that the level of decision-making and governance- indeed, there is no reason to limit the map to three categories- and in any event it might be best to include both in any mapping exercise, even if it is to address the absence or weakness of a certain frame.

The mapping of formal narrative frameworks in this manner takes us to the very heart of an institution and allows us to scrutinise the very mechanisms on which it rests. By identifying and unpacking these dynamics we can plainly see the ways in which various concerns may arise, compete and create pressures in various directions. Conducting this kind of analysis allows us to identify the way penal policies and practices may be developed, justified and carried out, and to deconstruct the ways in which this complex web of understandings encourages the promotion of certain concerns and the subsuming of others. Further, as Adler and Longhurst did, it allows for the identification of weaknesses in prison governance and the making of very concrete recommendations for reform. It should be highlighted, however, that the discourses outlined above are very much related to the formal framework of the prison and are to do with conceptions underpinning the institutions on a more structural, and largely managerial and political level. The means and ends discourses are closely intertwined with the formal mechanisms of power in the prison; the written rules and policies, the physical technologies in use, the formal bodies of oversight and the overall organisational structure. The question explored here is whether the narrative model might be usefully developed and adapted to incorporate the understandings of prison officers on the ground.

Possible future developments- informal discourses and the prison officer

There is no question that our institutions are constructed and maintained through discourse; even when viewed from a concrete physical perspective, the discourses prevalent about a certain institution will have flow on effects on all aspects of the institution including the kinds of technologies employed, the type and amount of resources allocated, and the built environment (Jewkes and Johnston 2012). Whilst the models discussed above provide a solid foundation for understanding the formal aspects of power within prison, a more comprehensive understanding would need to encompass the discourses involved in the exercise of power and authority from the perspective of prison officers on the front-line. This would need to include more informal narratives, which would allow us to acknowledge and explore gap between the formally generated, ideal-types of justificatory frameworks already outlined, and the culturally generated ways of understanding, as well as personal perspectives, that will invariably have a great deal of influence over the way the officer

¹ Nor were they intended to be, of course, and Adler (2003) himself later expanded the administrative justice model to include 'market' and 'consumerist' forces; frames which might expected to be very muted or absent in the prison sphere, although further investigation is possible on this point.

behaves and asserts authority. A comprehensive understanding of institutional control will always need to account for this.

Revisiting Foucault as a starting point; one of his main contributions to our understanding of power in society is that he focussed our attention on the 'micro-physics of power' (Lieb 2022); where power is the 'capacity to act on others' and is 'something that is operational between agents' (Dore 2010:739-740). For Foucault the study of 'the state' should focus on the micro-interactions between individuals which may then be utilised to infer broader social patterns (1980:102); he advocated exploring institutional power dynamics initially from the perspectives understood and shared at a ground level, that is from the perspective of individual agency, rather than as a centrally generated phenomenon. As summarised by Jessop (2007):

The study of power should begin from below, in the heterogeneous and dispersed micro-physics of power, explore specific forms of its exercise in different institutional sites, and consider how, if at all, these were linked to produce broader and more persistent societal configurations. One should study power where it is exercised over individuals rather than legitimated at the centre; explore the actual practices of subjugation rather than the intentions that guide attempts at domination; and recognize that power circulates through networks rather than being applied at particular points (Foucault 1979, Foucault 2003). (2007:36)

Understanding, as we do, that power has both formal and informal dimensions (Helme and Levitsky 2004, Jacobs 2011), and that, as has been famously and strikingly observed, the informal dimensions of power dynamics have the capacity to compel human action in extreme and sometimes confronting ways (Zimbardo et al 1971, Milgram 1974) we can safely assume that the shared cultural understandings concerning the exercise of power any institution can be as, if not more, important than the formally generated narratives, particularly at the individual level. A vast array of prison research suggests that informal mechanisms of control can be an essential and all-important tool for prison officers (Sykes 1958, Ibsen 2013, Marquart 1986, Crewe 2009, Symkovich 2018), and that interaction between prison management and lower ranked officers may in ordinary circumstances be rare (Ibsen 2013, Symkovich 2018). Gilbert (1997), for example, has highlighted that the militaristic reputation of the correctional space often belies the degree of actual management control over the front-line officers, who are expected to work in an environment where the rules designated from above are often unworkable or otherwise repugnant to their interests and views or the practical realities of front-line work. This kind of working environment encourages 'staff resistance', which means 'formal bureaucratic controls are unlikely to be effective as a guide for individual discretionary behaviour.' (1997:58). Prison officer work is largely about managing relationships (Liebling et al 2010), involves substantial emotional labour (Crawley 2004) and prison officer culture is a strong and persistent influence on officer behaviour (Garrihy 2020). Thus, whilst the managerial level analysis will be appropriate for the task of identifying the social pressures that drive changes in penal policy, there is a good

case to be made for extending the analytic lens to account for the more informal aspects of power as understood by front-line officers, who really are the coal-face of the state towards the inmate.

Previous research has highlighted that aspects of soft-power such as interpersonal skills, morality, the quality of officer-inmate relationships, and language and 'mythology' colour the very fabric of the prison, and significantly contribute to, or conversely detract from, authority and legitimacy and thus the experience of prison for officers and inmates alike (see for example Tyler 2021, Jackson et al 2010, Crewe 2011, Liebling 2004, Mayr 2003). As Sparks et al (1996) have highlighted, prisons are not cold, rational places:

.. in reality prisons quite commonly seethe and boil with human agency, passion, and conflict- in ways that are not infrequently magnified and rendered more intense precisely by the constraints and frustrations encountered there (Sparks et al 1996:68)

The personal world of any individual is in fundamental ways narratively constructed. Cultural understandings and morality, as it is understood locally, provide one of the main foundations for individual expectations of behaviours in interactions; breaches of these expectations are quite often what ultimately provoke strong emotional responses. Thus, an understanding of these informal narratives will be central to an understanding of power in any institution overall.

Administrative justice, discretion and accountability

As stated above, one of the innovations of Adler and Longhurst's analysis was in the merging of some of the tenets of administrative justice scholarship into the field of penology. Administrative justice is concerned with the way public institutions interact with citizens and it is concerned overall with the quality of public institutional decision-making (Mullen 2010). Administrative justice is not often considered part of the corrections landscape academically, however much can be usefully brought from this body of knowledge. It is widely acknowledged that the moral imperative for good governance is particularly strong in the corrections context, where inmates are extremely reliant on the state and therefore acutely vulnerable to inappropriate exercises of power (Liebling 2004, 2011, Scraton et al 1991, Calavita and Jenness 2015). Indeed, the effects of arbitrary, oppressive or apparently unfair uses of power has been widely documented (Woolf and Tumin 1991, Sparks et al 1996, Bierie 2013, Liebling et al 2013). The concern of administrative justice scholarship with 'good governance' in a qualitative sense, and its focus on institutional actors at the coal face means we can draw on many useful analytical tools that have been developed in this arena.

The manner and degree to which the various kinds of formal narrative have infiltrated the institutions themselves at a ground level can only be understood from the perspective of the front-line prison workers that implement these narratives on a daily basis. Administrative justice scholarship provides some useful observations in this sense, as it concerns exercise of decision-making power in public organisations as well as the broader institutional contexts in

which these decisions occur. At its most fundamental, it provides an analytical context for exploring the relationship/s between the citizen and state bureaucratic agents and agencies.

One of the cornerstones of administrative justice research is understanding how discretion is exercised. As Lipsky (1980) notably explored, discretion is central to the role of the street-level bureaucrat, and 'the rules' and policy will only be one part of the overall picture they consider when exercising authority in a certain kind of way. The discretionary aspect of decision-making is generally justified in rational and reasoned terms, however, as Lipsky and others have highlighted, emotions and personal biases can and do play a part in this process. Often there will be a substantial gap between what is formally designated and what might be occurring on the ground and explaining this gap has been an ongoing concern in this arena (See for example- Halliday 2004, Halliday 2021, Mcneill et al 2010, Hertogh 2010, Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022). The mobilisation of formal discourses towards the promotion of officially sanctioned policy aims is not an either/or question, and studies have suggested that a) this dynamic is best viewed as fluid and on a continuum, and b) the degree of infiltration of the ideal/formal into the daily practices of street-level bureaucrats can vary dramatically from person to person, or in different circumstances (Halliday 2004). Broader influences such as institutional culture, personal attitudes, emotions and practical considerations have consistently been shown to have an impact on the way discretion is exercised at the street level bureaucratic level (Hunter et al 2016, Sabbe et al 2021, England 2022).

Prison officer discretion has also been widely discussed in penal research, although it is not usually explored in depth as a phenomenon (Liebling 2000, Calavita and Jenness 2015, Garrihy 2020, Haggerty and Bucerius 2021). Prison officers are street level bureaucrats intensified; they exercise an immense degree of discretion in interpreting formal legislation and applying rules compared with other institutional actors, but also do so in the environment of a total institution, so that they necessarily have ongoing and close (at least in terms of physical proximity) relationships with their detainees. Prisons are *hyperlegal* in nature (Calavita and Jenness 2013:76), although paradoxically, this overload of rules and regulations has the effect of *increasing* officer discretion; where it is impossible to enforce all of the rules, selective non-enforcement is essential to maintaining order and getting through the day (Haggerty and Bucerius 2021:144, 147). Not only is there excessive regulation, prison rules are intentionally ambiguously drafted in order to afford a large degree of discretion to prison authorities (Maguire and Vagg 1985:5; Scraton et al 1991:80-86). The often vague nature of prison regulations can make them difficult to understand and interpret, which may also permit or encourage arbitrary application.

Gilbert argues that the tension between the formal system of rules and the practical daily requirements of the role 'puts officers in an untenable position' (1997:61), and the discretionary aspect of officer power is 'guided less by the formal rules and hierarchy than by an explicit understanding of the shared [62] operational values and ethical principles that govern correctional practice..' (1997:61-62). Further, prison powers and administrative

regulations can be co-opted by officers and/or prison authorities and applied in ways that are apparently in conflict with formal policies, sometimes in disturbing ways (Gostin and Staunton 1985:87-88). Where the officer has the power to frame events in formal written reports, and significant structural and cultural barriers exist for the inmate in pursuing formal means of accountability (Calavita and Jenness 2015, De Krester 2007), the informal prison culture and informal social sanctions may take on a more primary role in shaping behaviour.

Adler and Longhurst, in devising their model, were particularly concerned with the different frames of accountability and the flow on effects in terms of governance. One important means for ensuring that decision-making and discretionary power is exercised in accordance with regulatory requirements is through the provision of an accessible and effective system for the independent review of first-instance decisions, and in prison, the primary driver of internal accountability will necessarily be the inmate (Harding 1997:53, Feeley and Rubin 2000). The carceral organisation by its very nature lacks transparency and involves a stark power imbalance between the inmate and the custodial officer, hence, what may appear on the surface to be a legitimate formal structure for the fair resolution of complaints and review of decisions can in reality operate as nothing more than a symbolic mechanism for absorbing confrontational friction. This effect has been observed in prison ethnographic studies. Crewe, for example, observed that in terms of grievance processing, from the perspective of inmates, '[i]n practice.. 'paperwork' was the institutional black hole into which problems could be cast without further explanation' (2009:112), and Calavita and Jenness (2015) in their comprehensively in-depth study noted that internal grievance processing disadvantaged inmates to such an extent that 'the very term *dispute* seems quaintly euphemistic' (Calavita and Jenness 2015:186). This brings into question the degree to which the concerns arising from existing formal accountability structures become real concerns of the institutional actors on the ground.

Accountability has a cultural dimension, however. Prison officers may feel themselves informally accountable to each other, to inmates and to their own internal sense of morality. Cultural understandings about the exercise of authority in prison will underpin the way officers conceptualise the scope of legitimate action and thus the way they act. The informal attitudes, values and beliefs of prison officers has been shown to have a significant effect on the way they carry out their work (Gilbert 1997, Liebling et al 2010, Tait 2011), and internalised discourses are the very building block of these. Additionally, many scholars have noted that the formal prison governance structure often belies the actual power of the inmate; and officers are often discussed as somewhat disempowered in real-life terms. Sykes unpacks this in detail, highlighting how the 'defects of total power' in practice may undermine the institutional authority afforded the officer (1956:52-58), and the informal constraints on the use of the officer's institutional authority has also been discussed in much subsequent prison literature (Liebling 2008, Crawley 2013, Arnold et al 2008). Where formal controls over social order are insufficient or lacking, an informal social order may emerge that relies on prisoner self-rule and extra-legal governance (Symkhovych 2018). Informal normative

frameworks have their own, perhaps less obvious, means of motivating behaviour, which will invariably include informal consequences (violent and non-violent) for breaching shared expectations.

Inmates' use of informal social sanctions was observed by Mathiesen as a specific type of *ensoriousness* (2012:12-14). Censoriousness is the 'pointed finger' whereby inmates may draw attention to shortcomings in the way officers exercise their power and can include appeals to generally held values as fairness and equality. Censoriousness by its very nature requires shared understandings, and even when there is intense ideological struggle between groups, various discourses will be mobilised to that aim. Mathiesen highlights how these individual acts of censure can reinforce the normative framework of the prison and can operate as an important check on excesses and improper use of power (2012:187).

Legitimate authority becomes undermined when an officer deviates from accepted boundaries of conduct, allowing an inmate a means to criticise the officer's use of power by referring to shared norms. For Mathiesen, censoriousness is a means by which an otherwise 'weak' inmate can influence an officer. Although Mathiesen was mostly concerned with the effect of this on the inmate, he does describe how the 'pointed finger' can be felt on a personal level by officers; along with a loss of face and legitimacy in the eyes of the prison community, an act of censure has the potential to impact an officer's self-esteem. The exercise of authority in prison requires a considerable degree of confidence, and constant legitimate censure can undermine authority both in the way an officer feels internally, and in the way others respond to them. The potential effects of this should not be underestimated; if a criticism is felt personally by an officer, repercussions have the potential to extend well beyond the event/s at hand. This is how personal narratives can become central to institutional action.

Social media and the research of professional cultures

The beliefs and perceptions of front-line officers and the way they frame the exercise of power in prison is not an easy topic to study. Up-close observation, shadowing, interviewing officers and gaining their trust over an extended period has traditionally been the best way to access the kind of data needed to pierce the institutional veil in this manner. Scholars have noted that, even whilst prison populations have exploded in recent times, unfortunately, prison ethnography and other in-depth qualitative sociological enquiry into this site has declined (Wacquant 2002, Simon 2000). Institutional challenges to access abound, and even where access is granted, constraints on researchers are the order of the day (Sloan and Wright 2015, Rhodes 2014). Only the most determined researchers will be able to overcome these barriers, and even with substantial perseverance it may often be the case, as with my own research, that the prison remains closed off. This has led researchers to become increasingly creative in terms of how they access this space (Jardine 2022, Ellis 2021), and we have been more or less forced to reconsider how we might be able to access pertinent data.

Whilst the physical world of the prison officer in many ways may remain an enigma, the way they think and feel about their work may be accessible in other ways. In our contemporary society, many of our social interactions have moved online and people's informal online interactions are more accessible than ever. Social media provides us with a direct and highly personalised window into the lives of all kinds of groups, and a proliferation of professionally oriented chat rooms allow us to examine the way people discuss their working environments. It is asserted here that it is possible to use these kinds of discussions to examine the prevalent narratives involved in doing prison officer work. Although online data is one step removed (at least) from any given physical space, it is also one step closer to the internal world of the social media user, and thus this data has the capacity to inform us in a more personal and authentic manner of the narratives and belief frameworks including more informal culturally generated understandings.

In my own project I have proposed using the Reddit sub-group 'r/ontheblock' as a way of accessing the informal aspects of the prison officer world. Social media chat groups such as Reddit, allow for users to post topically and communicate with their peers, and this includes professional peer groups such as prison officers. The anonymous nature of Reddit, the fact that it is in some ways less restrained than other sites (for example Twitter with its restricted character limit), and the manner in which the site is organised into topical *sub-reddits*, means that the site is more conducive to frank discussion of relatively sensitive topics than other social media sites (Henninger 2020). The amount of research conducted into Reddit has been increasing significantly in recent years (Proferes et al 2021:5), and the capacity of Reddit to elicit sensitive information means it has increasingly gained the attention of many researchers into these areas (See for example Bohrer 2020, Maxwell et al 2020, Du et al 2019, Lavis and Winter 2020).

Relevantly, Reddit has also been identified as a useful space for accessing data in relation to professional and or trade-related interactions such as the collective curation of knowledge (Gray and Kou 2019) or the formation of professional identities (Staudt- Willet and Carpenter 2020). Henninger (2020), for example, looked at the interactions of medical professionals on the site and found that it provided a window into the expression and resolution of professional problems, the validation of decisions, comfortable exchange of opinions and an invaluable informal arena for professional support. In terms of reliability of research data, comparisons between participant recruitment via Reddit and other recruitment methods suggest overall that the data can be reliable and relatively representative (at least when compared to on-campus recruitment, for example; Jamnik and Lane 2017).

In granting us access into a more personal kind of interactive space, the anonymous professional online group on Reddit may allow us to examine the ways in which prison officers make sense of their working lives. In focusing on discussions around the topic of power and authority in this site, we can examine some of the informal dimensions of power and the associated narratives. Although these will, of course, very much be determined and

influenced at a local cultural level and will likely vary significantly from place to place, it is also likely that common patterns will emerge and that these patterns will include both formal and informal narratives concerning power and authority. This might enable us to fill in or explain some of the potential gaps in the more formal kinds of maps outlined above.

Conclusion

Adler and Longhurst brought our attention to the discursive technicalities involved in the development and maintenance of the prisons in their study, and in conducting their in-depth analysis they laid the groundwork for further work in this area. The ideal-type models they developed were intended to be applied beyond their initial study and here it has been argued that they can be used as a basis for examining whether and to what extent formal policy discourses are adopted by front-line officers, and even extended to account for the informal discourses that may subsume them.

Prison officers on the ground are at the very core of this institution and occupy the interface between the state and the individual in this intensely regulated site. The question of how power is understood and justified by them is central to our understanding of carceral authority. It is argued here that for various reasons, formal rationalities will invariably form only part of the world-view of the prison officer, and that more informal discourses and rationalisations will also be influential to varying degrees. A more complete model may be developed that allows for the incorporation of more informally generated narratives. To this aim we might extend more of the academic gaze into the world of prison officers and also seek out more innovative research methods. It is argued here that one fruitful way of learning about the way prison officers make sense of their work is to study online social media interactions in specialised professional online sites. Although this is not a perfect way of studying officers, online interactions do make narrative contents available in ways that other kinds of interactions do not, and this kind of research may compliment some of the more immersive research that has and is being conducted in this arena.

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