

Male prisoners' orientations towards female officers in an English prison

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Abstract

Drawing on material collected as part of a semi-ethnographic study of an English training prison for men, this article describes the orientations of male prisoners towards female prison officers. A number of attitudes and orientations are outlined, some of which privilege the significance of femaleness over professional identity and practices (for example through discourses of sexualization and chivalry), while others focus primarily on the officer role and professional practices and treatment. The article suggests that prisoner life experiences and the nature of imprisonment are significant influences on the relationships between male prisoners and female officers, and that the high emotional charge that characterizes many of these relationships reflects a complex set of issues around incarceration, masculine self-identity, power and desire.

Key Words

female officers • femininity • imprisonment • masculinity • staff–prisoner relationships

When Sykes portrayed the male prisoner as 'figuratively castrated by his involuntary celibacy' (1958: 70), and outlined the anxieties resulting from his sequestration in an exclusively male institution, he highlighted the significance of the prison's sexual monoculture in defining its terms and experience. The modern prison does not isolate prisoners from the external sexual community to the same degree as in the early post-war years, the heyday of prison sociology (Simon, 2000), nor does it remain an all-male (or female) domain.¹ Most male prisoners have regular phone calls and visits, and daily access to representations of women through the channels of mass media, skewed though these representations may be (Irwin, 1970). Meanwhile, the presence in men's prisons of female staff provides direct and everyday contact with the feminine 'looking glass' (Sykes, 1958: 72) whose absence, in Sykes's terms, generated a culture of masculinity

reliant upon secondary and partial indicators of manhood. We know little about the nature of this contact and its consequences.

The incorporation of women into the prison's everyday world has institutional significance beyond immediate relationships and social transactions.² Staff–prisoner relations play a vital role in reproducing prison order (Sparks et al., 1996), in determining the quality of the prison experience (Liebling and Arnold, 2004) and in shaping prisoner social life and culture (Crewe, forthcoming). In each of these roles, officers are representatives and employers of power. Researchers have disagreed about the true degree of this power, some suggesting that officers have rather less than their formal position would suggest (Sykes, 1958), and others identifying staff power as one of the most fundamental pains of imprisonment for prisoners (Mathiesen, 1965). Liebling and Price (2001) have argued that officers routinely under-use their power, holding its full potential in reserve. Clearly though, power is a key dimension of prison life and the relationships that give it its character. Those that exist between male prisoners and female staff are particularly interesting not only because of the interface that they provide between the sexes, but also because, in terms of gender, they represent an inversion of conventional power relations, where it is men who tend to be dominant, and women subordinate. That these relationships are based on formal roles and responsibilities distinguishes them all the more from the kinds of personal ties with women that most male prisoners have in the outside community. In this respect, then, the prison's sexual culture may be less starkly uniform than in the past, but it remains a highly peculiar arena.

Based on long-term semi-ethnographic research, this article describes male prisoners' relationships with and attitudes towards female officers in a medium-security UK men's establishment. Many of these privilege the significance of gender over professional identity and practices. The article outlines four orientations of this kind: sexualization and sexual desire; cynicism about professional motives; masculine validation through feminine contact; and chivalry. It also identifies two orientations in which the officer role and identity takes primacy over gender: where female officers are ostensibly seen as being the same as male officers, and where officers are evaluated on the basis of their practices rather than discourses in which gendered characteristics are presumed. In laying out these perspectives, and their imported and indigenous bases, the article describes an aspect of staff–prisoner relations that has received little attention in the UK, but which has wider implications for the role of gender relations in everyday prison culture and experience. It also aims to present a nuanced account of the masculine culture of prison life, illustrating the various ways in which, through their relationships with female officers, male prisoners assert, express and 'accomplish' (Messerschmidt, 1993) masculinity in an environment that distorts and undermines it. It is suggested that many of these masculine affirmations are precarious, and that these fragilities are often brought into relief when female officers exert their formal power and thus step outside the gendered roles that many prisoners assign to them.

LITERATURE REVIEW: OFFICERS AND GENTLEMEN

In a (2000) article in *Theoretical Criminology*, Alison Liebling described prison officers as the 'invisible ghosts of penality' (2000: 337), and highlighted the poor state of knowledge about their values and practices. With few exceptions (e.g. Jacobs, 1977), in

the early prison ethnographies, officers barely featured or did so in limited ways. Certainly, little attempt was made to extend the *verstehen* afforded to prisoners to their custodians. Until Sparks et al. (1996) centre-staged officers as the key intermediaries in securing institutional legitimacy, even those researchers who were explicitly pro-prisoner gave little attention to the role of officers in affecting their everyday wellbeing. Liebling and Price's (2001) recent work on prison officers provides a more comprehensive, appreciative analysis of custodial labour and personnel, while Liebling and Arnold's (2004) research on prisons and their moral performance represents an advanced attempt to explore the relationship between staff cultures and attitudes and the quality of life for prisoners.

Since Liebling's comments, a number of studies devoted to prison officers and their work have been conducted or commenced in the UK (Crawley, 2004; Arnold, forthcoming; Scott, forthcoming; Tait, forthcoming). Such work – alongside a sporadic North American literature (Lombardo, 1981; Kauffman, 1988; Fleischer, 1989) – has begun to shed light on areas including prison officer socialization and performance, the emotional and performative dimensions of officer work and prison officer culture. Gendered acts and meanings have been identified as salient in all of these areas. Thus, the pride taken in the most dangerous and physical elements of the work, the debasement of other aspects of the job such as programme delivery and work with sex offenders, sanctions on certain kinds of emotional expression and the prevalence of sexual banter and innuendo, can all be interpreted as expressions of a traditional, masculine workplace culture (Cockburn, 1983).³

The introduction of women into this occupational arena has illuminated and threatened to transform this culture, and has raised a number of issues. Crawley (2004) suggests that female officers challenge the ways that their male colleagues understand their work as something intrinsically masculine (see also Crouch, 1985; Martin and Jurik, 1996). Male officers look to sexualize and protect female officers in ways that reflect these understandings and suggest that women are naturally less capable than men at doing the job. Studies of officer culture in the United States have presented similar findings (Zimmer, 1986; Britton, 2003). Male officers frequently express concerns that their female colleagues will get sexually involved with male prisoners, and about their ability to carry out the security and discipline functions of the job (see also Jurik, 1985; Carlson et al., 2004). At the same time, they tend to perceive female officers as a calming, moderating and normalizing force, in effect suggesting that certain 'feminine' traits may be advantageous to prison officer work. This assumption was certainly relevant in the decisions to introduce cross-posting in men's prisons in England and Wales and in the USA (Liebling and Price, 2001).⁴ The evidence base for such suppositions is mixed and limited (see Shawver and Dickover, 1986; Jenne and Kersting, 2002). However, quantitative evaluations of competence, stress, perceptions of prisoner needs and motivations to enter the job indicate few notable differences between male and female officers (for example, Zupan, 1986, 1992; Fry and Glaser, 1987; Wright and Saylor, 1991; Carlson et al., 2003).

The literature on relationships between officers and opposite-sex prisoners is less developed, with only a handful of studies representing prisoner perspectives. In the USA, work on male officers and female prisoners has centred on sexual assault (Human Rights Watch, 1996; Calhoun and Coleman, 2002), and the resonances between female

prisoners' experiences of abuse outside prison and their experiences of power inside. In the UK, Carlen (1998a, 1998b) found that female prisoners considered male officers less punitive and less petty than female officers, and had few fears about sexual assault by male officers. A more significant concern was privacy, an unease also expressed by male prisoners in the USA about female guards (Zimmer, 1986; Richards et al., 2002). Richards et al. (2002) highlight the ambivalence that many male prisoners feel about female officers, who offer welcome glimpses of kindness, compassion and 'femininity', while also reminding prisoners of what they are missing in terms of sex and affection. In her (1986) study of *Women guarding men*, Zimmer claimed that once female officers became established in the prison, prisoners developed one of three basic attitudes towards them. Some were adamantly oppositional, based on resentment at having to take orders from women, the belief that female officers were more treacherous and petty than men, concerns about privacy and being able to act naturally, and enhanced sexual frustration. Others were neutral, seeing little difference between male and female officers. Others still were strongly in favour of female officers, claiming that the presence and company of women was a relief from the all-male world of the prison and a valuable normalizing experience, and that female officers were more helpful and sympathetic than male officers. One striking aspect of these perceptions is that, while male prisoners are more positive than many male officers about the presence of female guards, their judgements draw upon the same discourses as those used by male officers in their reservations: those of chivalry/propriety, sexualization and 'softness' (Zimmer, 1986; Enterkin, 1996; Britton, 2003). These discourses are clearly marked by gendered assumptions that both reflect and reproduce certain kinds of masculine identities.

The role of masculinity in mediating the terms and experiences of men's imprisonment has been repeatedly emphasized in recent years (Sim, 1994; Thurston, 1996; Carrabine and Longhurst, 1998; Cowburn, 1998; see also Newton, 1994; Sabo et al., 2001). Provoked by accounts that have revealed the ways that women's imprisonment is shaped by discourses of femininity (for example, Carlen, 1983; Bosworth, 1999), researchers of men's incarceration have recognized that the maleness of their subjects likewise matters: for example, in setting the terms of the inmate code and hierarchy (Newton, 1994), in management and organizational practices, and in oiling interactions with and between staff (Carrabine and Longhurst, 1998). However, much of this work has remained conceptual, or has underlined the need for more focused and systematic research. Elsewhere, in a predominantly North American literature, masculinity has been foregrounded primarily in relation to physical and sexual violence (Scacco, 1975; Wooden and Parker, 1982; Pinar, 2001; Sabo et al., 2001).

One reason for this focus is that prison rape and brutality represent the extreme manifestations of the hyper-masculine ideal that apparently saturates many men's prisons. In the terms of the gender theory commonly deployed in such work (Connell, 1987, 1995), this hegemonic ideal – the cultural standard of 'real manhood' – is not the sole version of masculinity within an institution, nor is it something that many men embody. Rather, it is the standard against which most men measure themselves and their peers, and which therefore defines, represses and subordinates alternative versions of masculinity. Descriptions of this ideal tend to highlight traits such as emotional fortitude and physical self-reliance, while the overall culture of the prison is commonly portrayed as one defined by aggression and exploitation, a preoccupation with dominance, and an

uncompromising hostility to femininity, weakness and homosexuality (e.g. Scraton et al., 1991; Johnson, 1996; Pollock, 2004). Thus, in typical depictions, prison culture 'breathes masculine toughness and insensitivity, and it impugns softness, caring and femininity' (Sabo et al., 2001: 7), and prisons serve as 'centres of excellence for the manufacture of [. . .] violent versions of masculinity' (Thurston, 1996: 139).

In seeking to explain the origins and functions of this culture, some accounts have emphasized the ways that the intrinsic deprivations of prison life – the denial of heterosexual relations; the removal of everyday autonomy and security; the dispossession of the breadwinner role – threaten the masculine self-image, leading to a defensive, shoring up of gender identity (e.g. Sykes, 1958; Newton, 1994). Other accounts, of prison and 'street life' more generally, have emphasized that these values are deeply entrenched in many male populations outside prison (Tolson, 1977; Willis, 1977; Campbell, 1986; Majors and Billson, 1992; Bourgois, 1995; Anderson, 1999; Young, 1999). It is argued that men who experience social and economic marginalization in the community resort to rigid definitions of manhood and adopt highly gendered behaviours, including sexual predation, a heightened concern with interpersonal 'respect' and the casual use of violence, to provide alternative sources of masculine status and reinstate hierarchical relations with women and other men. According to both approaches, then, masculine characteristics are exaggerated and essentialized where men have limited access to conventional means of attaining status as men: where they are subordinated, made dependent and potentially 'feminized', and where their sense of masculine self-esteem is thus made precarious. As Newton states, 'if subordinated masculinities such as those in the lower working class are seen to be threatened, those in prison are under siege' (1994: 198). To put this in an alternative form – and combining importation (Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Jacobs, 1977) and deprivation models (Sykes, 1958) of prison culture – men in prison carry masculine identities that are already vulnerable into an environment which threatens and thus hardens them all the more. The prison becomes a 'key institutional site[s] for the expression and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity [which] accentuates male dominance, heterosexism, whiteness, violence, and ruthless competition' (Sabo et al., 2001: 5).

Both prisoner and officer cultures have been consistently described through the terms described above. However, such terms do not capture the important differences in cultures of masculinity between prisons (Sim, 1994: 103), or between countries. In contemporary UK men's prisons, for example, prison rape is much less common than in the USA (O'Donnell, 2004). UK establishments are deeply and clearly imprinted by discourses of masculinity, but are not the arenas of ruthless and constant brutality portrayed in much of the international literature and in some existing work (including McVicar, 1974; Boyle, 1977; Scraton et al., 1991).⁵ Likewise, although many writers do recognize the variety of masculine values, identities and adaptations that exist within any single prison (Sim, 1994; Cowburn, 1998; Sabo et al., 2001), empirical accounts of these differences are limited and often lack prisoner voices. Likewise, as Richards et al. assert, 'the sparse prison literature that focuses on females working as guards in male prisons has generally ignored the convict perspective' (2002: 209). This article aims to provide such perspectives, to illustrate in some detail the range of gendered assumptions and expectations that mark prisoner orientations to female officers, and to outline the complex interplay between imported values and the structural terms of the prison's

sexual culture in defining these orientations. Meanwhile, if, in the prison, as in other social settings, men seek to 'accomplish' and demonstrate manliness through whichever resources are available to do so (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2001), seeing how prisoner identities are expressed and negotiated in the context of female staffing is an important project for those scholars interested in understanding the intersections of gender, culture and power within prison.

THE STUDY

This article draws on material collected as part of a semi-ethnographic study of a medium-security prison for men, HMP Wellingborough, in the East Midlands, UK. At the time of study, the establishment held around 520 prisoners on 7 wings, including a voluntary drug testing unit and a wing for long-term and life-sentence prisoners. The prison was built in the 1960s, initially as part of the borstal system, becoming a category C training prison in 1990. During a fieldwork period of around 10 months between October 2002 and August 2003, the author spent the majority of his time talking informally and conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with prisoners and staff. Keys were provided to allow unaccompanied and unrestricted access throughout the establishment, and an office was allocated for the purpose of one-to-one interviews. Seventy prisoners and 20 staff were interviewed formally, with prisoner interviews lasting between 2 and 7 hours overall. Over 300 hours of interview material was recorded, transcribed and coded using NVivo software. Less formal discussions were held with many more staff and prisoners, and were documented in fieldwork notes taken throughout the research phase.

One of the primary aims of the research project was to explore the role of masculinity in modern penal culture, and in those aspects of the prison social world that have interested researchers since the classic studies of the post-war years (Sykes, 1958; Mathiesen, 1965; Jacobs, 1977). These include the prisoner code and hierarchy, the terms of friendship, solidarity and rivalry, the flow of power within the institution and relationships among staff and between staff and prisoners. The interview schedule reflected such concerns, but few questions raised masculinity explicitly. This strategy was deliberate, reflecting research experience that suggests that invoking masculinity directly tends to discomfort interviewees. The issue of staff-prisoner relations was openly introduced. In this section of the interview, prisoners were asked to characterize the prison as an institution and to describe the nature of staff-prisoner relations, their own relationships with and views towards officers and other staff, their strategies for 'doing time' and how they believed they were perceived by staff. Most significantly, for current purposes, interviewees were asked to discuss whether their relationships with female officers differed from those with male officers.⁶ After elaboration was sought, interviewees were asked whether, if they thought an officer was about to be assaulted, their reaction would depend on the officer's sex. Assaults on staff were very uncommon in the establishment, but posing this question hypothetically encouraged further commentary on the gendered dimensions of staff-prisoner relationships. These dimensions were also depicted in responses to questions not specifically designed to unearth them, as were family roles and circumstances, and various aspects of masculine self-identity that are drawn upon in the analysis that follows.

Key categories and their properties were developed inductively during the coding process. Ideally, it would have been possible to classify all prisoners within a single category, that is, according to a single or coherent orientation. Most prisoners did express a consistent position, or one in which a primary orientation was clearly discernible, allowing some meaningful comparison between the frequency of different orientations. However, a small number of interviewees drew on different discourses at different times to describe their relations with female officers (making any simple quantification impossible). This should not be surprising, since gender is enacted in specific contexts and is never fully stable (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2001). In this respect, the categories that follow might best be seen as tendencies or preferences.

In the Prison Service of England and Wales, female staff may be employed in any rank or position, although they may be excluded from certain tasks (such as strip-searching) and informal exclusions (for example, from security teams or segregation units) are common. There are no formal rules that are applied specifically to relations between *female* staff and prisoners, for example, in relation to language, nudity or physical contact. Rules pertaining to issues such as swearing and the display of graphic pornographic material tend to be enforced according to local rules, and are not designed with only female officers in mind. Across the prison estate as a whole, women make up 21 per cent of basic grade officers, 18 per cent of senior officers, 13 per cent of principal officers, 18 per cent of operational managers and 25 per cent of senior operational managers (source: HR Planning, Personnel Corporate Database, 17 October 2005). At the time of study, just over a quarter of Wellingborough's officers were female, but at more senior levels, women were under-represented, with only one female principal officer and no female operational governors. It should also be noted that only two female officers were from minority ethnic backgrounds, making comparisons of orientation according to race/ethnicity impossible.⁷

FINDINGS

In terms of views towards women in general, Wellingborough prisoners demonstrated considerable variation. Within public discourse, the dominant strand was a view of women both as sexual objects and as untrustworthy sexual agents, and a pervasive culture of misogyny. As one life-sentence prisoner summarized:

95 per cent of the attitudes towards women you meet in prison are not good [. . .] They're 'scum of the earth', 'root of all evil', you know what I mean. I've been betrayed since I've been in prison in the relationships that I've had. But it still doesn't make me class the whole of womanhood as bitches and evil scum, which seems to be a prevailing attitude. (Prisoner interview, February 2003)

Among younger prisoners in particular, tales of sexual experiences, fantasies and intentions formed a great deal of conversational material. Women were often discussed in graphic (and sometimes violent) terms (see also Richards et al., 2002). In their life stories, such prisoners commonly described their own infidelities casually, and with relatively little guilt. In contrast, women who had been unfaithful to them were castigated and despised. Women's sexual infidelities, and their perceived social and financial betrayals, were considered outrageous and yet predictable;⁸ and while some prisoners with

shared links to external communities checked up on each other's partners, others taunted their peers with assertions that their wives or girlfriends were certain to be unfaithful, either now or in the near future. At the root of such practices was an assumption that women could not be trusted, alongside unstated insecurities about the social and sexual powerlessness that imprisonment engendered.

However, imprisonment also fostered a spirit of romance and sentimentality towards wives and girlfriends, albeit generally within prescribed spheres. Pictures of partners were displayed in cells – sometimes alongside pornographic material – provoking tender reveries; letters were collected and re-read with touching sincerity. During visits, prisoners showed forms of affection to their visitors that were extremely rare on the prison wings. In art and pottery classes, many prisoners produced goods for loved ones, often depicting romantic scenes or conveying emotion openly. Those who had creative talent could earn a decent income from making cards for other prisoners, sculpting soap (e.g.) into the shape of roses, or producing portraits for or of female partners. Although open displays of 'weak' emotions were deprecated except in exceptional circumstances (the death of a close relative, for example), acts and statements of love and commitment were not disparaged, even if they were sometimes treated with scepticism.

This scepticism acknowledged that, once released, many prisoners were quick to forget the feelings of devotion that struck them while in prison. It also recognized the practical and emotional difficulties of maintaining a relationship over the course of a long period of incarceration. Indeed, prisoners often terminated their relationships on starting their sentences. Many claimed to be doing so as a favour to their partner, by releasing her from commitment; others said that the stress of trying to preserve a relationship was simply not worth it, signalling their desire to avoid feelings of emotional dependence. Of those prisoners who did sustain relationships, many spoke of their partners in a language of purity and redemption. Thus, women were represented as moral saviours as well as corruptive forces. The contrast between 'good' and 'bad' women was striking.

Likewise, in public discourse and in interviews, female family members were often idolized as figures of beauty, innocence and integrity. As in the following quotation, mothers and grandmothers were particularly venerated:

My mum is the most beautiful woman I know. The most loving, caring woman I know. [. . .] A brilliant mum, [. . .] just a beautiful woman. Lovely, in every sense. Just my best mate. [My gran] was just so funny. So loving. She was kind of naive in a funny sort of way as well. You know – she was a beautiful woman. Lovely. She'd help anyone, you know. She didn't discriminate against no-one. No matter what colour or creed, or whatever. She was just beautiful. (Prisoner interview, April 2003)

The unadulterated love and loyalty conveyed in such descriptions was often acutely absent from prisoners' relationships with significant men in their lives. Affection and emotional loyalties were also highly limited within the prison environment (Crewe, forthcoming). It was therefore unsurprising that some female staff, particularly teaching personnel, functioned as surrogate providers of this kind of support. Thus, in classroom interactions, many prisoners betrayed a desire to be mothered and nurtured, deliberately provoking forms of censure whose affectionate tone of mock sternness had clear maternal overtones. There was little doubt that the tedium of prison

life, and institutionalized submission, had an infantilizing effect upon prisoners, as many acknowledged with embarrassment. Play-fights, practical jokes and knowingly 'naughty' acts were common. Some female staff colluded in these forms of address, acting as pseudo-counsellors for prisoners who disclosed private sentiments: 'sometimes I feel like 10 people's wives and 10 people's mothers', one teacher commented (fieldwork notes, 2002).

SEXUAL AND GENDER IDENTITY

Such familial overtones, and discourses of sexual objectification, sentimentality and reverence, also featured heavily in prisoners' discussions of female officers. These discussions revealed how, for the majority of prisoners, relationships with and attitudes towards female officers were primarily defined by assumptions about sexual and gender identity. These provided the basis for a range of views and behaviours.

Sexualization and sexual desire

Sykes (1958) described the absence of opportunities for heterosexual relations as one of the primary and intrinsic pains of imprisonment. Wellingborough's prisoners generally talked about missing loved ones in terms that were more than purely sexual. None the less, sexual gratification was frequently cited as a significant deprivation, and for around one-fifth of interviewees, female staff served primarily as an outlet for fantasies of sexual contact and conquest. When asked how they got on with female officers, many interviewees responded with evaluations of their appearance and the potential for sexual relations. Tales of prisoners having successfully engaged female staff in such relationships were recounted with relish, and when prisoners insisted that such incidents were more common than outsiders realized, they did so in a manner that sought to accentuate their sexual magnetism and imply that female officers struggled to suppress their desires. Such claims gave the impression that everyday relations with female officers were loaded with sexual tension, but belied insecurities about sexual potency.⁹

As the following quotation illustrates, some prisoners actively sought out such liaisons, asking female officers leading questions about their marital status and social life, and talking highly suggestively (see also Britton, 2003):

I flirt with her, I do, and she laughs. I don't know if she likes it or what but she does laugh. The other week I did a load of buffing, and I says 'right, I want a bonus for that'. [. . .] She said 'I'm your bonus'. I said 'Are you? Get up to my pad then', and she just laughed. I said 'you're looking nice today, you'd look better with your top off', stuff like that. She laughs, d'you know what I mean. She smiles. She probably thinks I'm joking, but sometimes I'm being serious. (Prisoner interview, March 2003)

Younger prisoners, in particular, attached status to anyone whose efforts appeared successful (even if this merely meant a friendly or non-dismissive response), generating a culture of competitive bravado. 'When they see you chatting to a fit bird, then it's a bit of an ego thing', noted one interviewee (prisoner interview, February 2003). As another prisoner summarized, 'it's competition all the time; it's subconsciously competition. Especially when there's a new female come in the prison, everybody's like a lapdog; [. . .] it's mad' (prisoner interview, June 2003).

More often, prisoners discussed female officers (and other female staff) in highly sexualized ways, but made little effort to pursue them. These discussions often made explicit reference to the impact of incarceration on sexual desire: prisoners frequently claimed that their standards had been 'lowered', and that women whom they 'wouldn't give a second look' on the streets became objects of desire to them when in prison (fieldwork notes, 2002). As one prisoner commented, representing a fairly common view,

You could have the ugliest, fattest screw on the wing, [and although] not everybody is nice to them, [they're] nicer than they would be to an equivalent male, because you want to lay them because you ain't had sex for such a long time, simple as that. (Prisoner interview, February 2003)

Likewise, in an exercise partly designed to gauge levels of desperation, some prisoners would regularly ask each other whether, given the opportunity, they would have sex with specific officers considered particularly unattractive. Self-mocking though they partly were, these discussions also functioned as public performances of heterosexuality: proof that one retained a fundamental desire for women.

Other prisoners described how prison raised their desires but also forced them to be more considered in their dealings with women than they would be on the outside:

You might see a female officer and you think 'yeah, I wouldn't mind giving her a fuck', but because she's got a uniform on, [and] because you don't know how she would react if you went up to her and said 'how would you like me to fuck you?' or 'would you give me some pussy?' – which if I'm on the out I can do – I have to put up a front. I don't want to come to ask plainly with it, like if I was on the out. (Prisoner interview, May 2003)

There's a couple of nice female officers here. And I'll be truthful, if I was ever to meet them on the street, and they weren't in their uniform, I would most probably think 'I wouldn't mind giving it a try'. I'm just a red-blooded man, you know what I mean. But obviously, you have to look at it, they're wearing the uniform, and they're the ones who got you here, so (Prisoner interview, March 2003)

Another interviewee recognized that it was unwise to comment sexually on female officers, but found it difficult to react appropriately to their formal status and suppress his inner thoughts:

[I] say rude things: 'you've got a nice bum' or 'you look nice'. I don't know why I do it, it just comes out of my mouth automatically. But the thing is, I shouldn't be doing that, cos they can have you up for it, but I just do it, like I'm on the out. I just look at them as women. (Prisoner interview, June 2003)

Here, then, the motive for restraint was prudence rather than an appreciation that female officers did not welcome sexual advances.¹⁰ Such responses revealed the difficulties of managing heterosexual desire in a context where the people who inadvertently incited it were also bearers of authority.

Sexuality and professional motivations

For a small number of prisoners, the terms through which female officers were assessed were primarily defined by cynicism about professional motives, based on assumptions

about their sexual desire and success. Several interviewees hypothesized that female officers were sexual failures outside prison, and had ulterior motives for choosing their profession: 'they've got something to gain by being in here', stated one prisoner, '[they're] surrounded by men. Wouldn't you like to work in a place that's full of women?' (prisoner interview, March 2003). These prisoners – and others, in general conversation – suggested that there must be a sexual dimension to the professional satisfaction that female officers derived: 'they love the attention, obviously. [. . .] It gives them a big ego and a turn on. It must make them wet or something' (prisoner interview, May 2003). Those prisoners who believed that female officers were motivated by sexual ambitions were generally cynical in their own lifestyles, and tended to assume the same kinds of motivations in others. In truth, while a very small minority of female officers did seem to precipitate a certain level of sexual attention (i.e. were incautiously playful or intimate), the majority had endeavoured to deflect sexual interest that was projected upon them regardless of their intentions.

Prisoners often attributed the behaviour of a certain kind of male officer to the notion that he had been 'bullied at school', and the conduct of some female officers was explained according to a comparable conception of gender and power: 'You get women officers who get treated like dirt out there, because they're not good-looking or whatever, so they come in here and take it out on the inmates' (prisoner interview, June 2003); 'I've even heard her say that she hates all men. And she's got this thing about punishing these guys in prison because she's had bad relationships out there' (prisoner interview, May 2003). When female officers were labelled as lesbians, the insinuation that they therefore disliked men was often implicit.

Among all prisoners, female officers who were perceived to use their sexuality as a mode of control or who were believed to exploit the sexual deprivation that imprisonment entailed generated considerable hostility:

I think certain female staff in here think that all the lads fancy them. And it's not that. All the lads in here are sexually frustrated. So obviously they're going to pay attention to the women. But certain women staff play on that and then they get hostility towards them because [you think]: 'who's she to fucking talk to me the way she does?'. She can turn round and say 'I wouldn't touch you with a bargepole', and that, or [you're just a] 'cuddly little boy' and all this. (Prisoner interview, April 2003)

She's the sort of person who's got no friends out there, didn't really get on with people at school, a bit of a loner, but she'll come into jail – I mean, it's a prison full of men, without women. Who haven't been with a woman for god knows how long, and they see a woman You could get Vanessa Feltz in here and men would be like that. But because they're around prisoners all day, they think of themselves as something that they're not. They love all the attention [. . .]. The lads will sit there and have a joke with them: 'where are you going out tonight miss, are you going clubbing?' But when one of the quiet lads goes 'miss, can you do this for me please', they'll turn around and look at them as if to say 'no, who are you?' (Prisoner interview, June 2003)

As this excerpt suggests, such evaluations were not normally categorical. Most prisoners distinguished between those female officers who they believed to act 'professionally', and those who they felt took advantage of the prison's distorted sexual culture and failed to do their job. However, claims that some female officers 'try to make themselves

something they're not' (prisoner interview, June 2003), were highly charged emotionally, and reflected a set of resentments about incarceration, gender, power and desire (as discussed further later). In particular, accusations that female officers had hidden sexual motives served to undermine the legitimacy of their authority, and helped to mitigate feelings of relative powerlessness. They also allowed male prisoners to objectify them sexually 'in return'. For female officers, and particularly for attractive ones, to negotiate such sentiments in a professional manner was a difficult process.

Feminine support and validation

As Richards et al. note, in prison, 'women symbolize not only what is missing sexually, but also the potential for kindness and compassion' (2002: 211). For around one-fifth of interviewees, relations with female officers were principally shaped by the need to express certain aspects of personality that were suppressed in the company of men. Such interactions were defined by gendered expectations and assumptions, and were sometimes pseudo-flirtatious. However, they were motivated less by overtly sexual goals and expectations than by concerns about masculine self-identity in an environment where female company, and the validation and meaning it normally provided, was restricted. One common theme expressed by these prisoners was that exchanges with female officers allowed them to reassure themselves of their appeal to women as a whole. As described by one prisoner: 'I like to play the banter, you know. I like to see if I've still got my . . . test your charm out on them, see if you can make them smile and stuff' (prisoner interview, June 2003).

Such statements signalled anxieties about the impact of imprisonment on sexual charisma. Although it was uncommon for prisoners to convey feelings of emasculation openly, the following quotation provides a powerful example of how incarceration could threaten forms of masculine self-esteem which were often already fragile:

I'm violent outside. I don't like people sort of looking at me. In the wrong sort of manner . . . When it comes down to female staff, sometimes I'm shy, sometimes I can't sort of – not get my words out, but you feel like a fucking virgin towards them. You know, bigger staff as well, you feel sort of out of place. [Prison] rocks your confidence. (Prisoner interview, July 2003)

In ways that reflected imported and essentialist notions of gender, power and trust, other prisoners reported finding it easier to show weakness, emotion and vulnerability with female officers than with male officers:

I can just really talk to the women. [. . .] I can sort of show weakness when I'm with a woman. I can show a female officer that I'm feeling depressed. About home, and mum and dad. But I can't with a man. [Because if] there was a big argument and that, I wouldn't want a male to be holding anything against me. [. . .] I feel that men gossip more than women, especially in a place like this. (Prisoner interview, March 2003)

I find them easier to talk to. I'd be more open with a woman. I'm not saying they don't have any prejudice, but they're just easier to talk to. [. . .] If you sit down and talk to a woman officer, it's like you are talking to them as, you know, as a woman. [She'll] be more human instead of that macho culture, you know, stiff upper lip, not to cry, all that sort of thing. Like, that's how they're inbuilt. We are a different species, aren't we? (Prisoner interview, March 2003)

Frequently, prisoners simply recognized their longing for 'female company' (see Zimmer, 1986: 61). As the following interviewee was keen to emphasize, this desire was not necessarily sexual:

It's not like I'm trying to chat up every woman screw I see, but I'm probably more likely to talk to a female than a male officer. Just because it's a lady, innit. I don't mean it in any kind of lechy way, or, you know, 'I've been in jail for so long', that kind of thing. I just mean [. . .] it's nice to see a woman, you know what I mean. Just to see a woman really. (Prisoner interview, August 2003)

It should also be stressed that, for many prisoners who sought female support and validation, although this was the foremost way in which relationships with female officers were described, it was not necessarily the only orienting force. Evaluations of whether female officers were respectful, hard-working and fair also contributed significantly to the ways in which they were perceived.

Chivalry

For around one-fifth of prisoners, relations with female officers were chiefly determined by a discourse of chivalry (see Zimmer, 1986; Britton, 2003; Crawley, 2004). Older and married prisoners were particularly likely to regard female officers as worthy of forms of respect and protection not necessarily extended to male officers. In the company of female officers (and other female staff) they avoided or apologized for swearing and vulgarity, were less boisterous and more aware of their own physical presence, and behaved in a way that was altogether more mannered than in all-male circumstances. In interviews, such prisoners expressed a range of views about female officers that reflected broader notions of femininity and sexual politics in which women were regarded as the weaker, worthier and more vulnerable sex.

Some prisoners who subscribed to these views believed that it was wrong for female officers to work in men's prisons due to the hazardous and confrontational nature of the environment, and the persistent sexualization to which female officers were exposed. More often, they presented themselves as guardians of female honour, and claimed to rebuke or apologize for those prisoners whom they believed were intrusive and predatory with female officers.

He says 'have you never had a twinge [of desire], working in the prisons?' She took offence, and I was standing listening, and, later on, I said 'I'd like to apologize for what you had to go through there'. (Prisoner interview, May 2003)

You hear [other prisoners] making brash comments to the female staff, asking them about their private life or what pubs they go to. [. . .] I take the female staff as just females, the way I treat most females. I treat them with respect in prison because it must take courage for a woman to come into a male environment and to express authority. [. . .] I have respect for that, and I'll try to make their job easier, and give them as less hassle as possible. (Prisoner interview, May 2003)

No woman deserves to get any shit. I've heard people sitting there calling certain ones a slag, and I've said to them 'I'm not being funny, but you don't treat women like that'. [. . .] They are the weaker sex and it's a lot worse for them working in a bloke jail. [. . .] When a nice

woman comes onto the wing, all cons become sex pests. [. . .] Sexual harassment is wrong. (Prisoner interview, June 2003)

In describing their own behaviour, these prisoners made it clear that they treated female officers according to a different set of principles from those applied to males. They were less likely to 'take advantage' of them, and more likely to step in on their behalf in situations where violence or assault looked possible. For such prisoners, female officers were defined as *essentially* female: 'whether she's a screw or not, she's a woman', one prisoner commented (interview, April 2003); 'she might be an officer, but she's a woman' (prisoner interview, June 2003), declared another, in a phrase that was frequently echoed. In the context of this perception, female officers were considered worthy of protection regardless of the circumstances:

No matter what, woman screw or copper, you don't hit women do you? It's out of the question. If it was a male officer who was going to get hit in front of me, and he deserved it, I'd turn a blind eye and walk off. The cunt probably deserved it, y'know. An inmate doesn't hit an officer for nothing. [. . .] But if I saw a woman getting attacked, then I wouldn't stand for it. (Prisoner interview, May 2003)

If it was a screw I didn't like, I'd make sure he got a beating, then I'd step in. [. . .] If it was a female officer, I'd step in no matter what. [. . .] You don't hit women. I've seen my mum get beaten long enough. No woman deserves a fucking beating. They weren't put on this fucking earth to be battered by blokes. (Prisoner interview, February 2003)

Such reasoning, that, regardless of their behaviour, it was unacceptable to hit women, or talk to them disrespectfully unless severely provoked, was an accepted maxim of the prisoner value system, though a small number of prisoners acknowledged that 'some' female officers were capable of dealing with violent situations. In contrast, the prevailing assumption about male officers was that they were able to 'look after themselves'. For chivalrous prisoners, there was no intrinsic reason why physical attacks on male officers were illegitimate. Far more qualifications were provided about the circumstances under which they would intervene to prevent an attack on a male officer: such incidents were 'not my business', or were considered merited if an officer was intensely disliked or provocative. None the less, many prisoners emphasized that they would not wish violence upon any officer, regardless of sex, and would seek to prevent such incidents. To do so for a male officer was a bolder gesture than it would be for any female member of staff (and many prisoners noted that their main motivation would be to protect the assailant from the consequences of a staff assault). However, relations between staff and prisoners were not so antagonistic that prisoners felt unable to defend male officers against other prisoners, if need be. Although sympathy for female officers was generally founded on their femininity, as I have outlined elsewhere, sympathy for officers was not exclusive to women (see Crewe, 2005).

As also suggested in the quotations above, protective discourses about female officers were frequently linked to recollections of family violence, or to codes of honour and morality: 'just the way I'm brought up'. 'Don't get me wrong, they deserve a good bollocking sometimes', noted one prisoner, 'but I try to refrain from doing it. [That's] just my structure and my moral stance' (prisoner interview, May 2003). Such ethics

were an important source of dignity for some prisoners: a sign that prison had not eroded their moral convictions. As one prisoner asserted, 'I've never really tolerated *any* women getting assaulted. I wouldn't let it happen on the out. So why should I let it happen in here?' (prisoner interview, March 2003).

In linking their treatment of female officers to relations with female family members, prisoners signalled how the former often served as proxy figures for the latter. In the same way that the deployment of charm allowed prisoners to bolster their sexual identities, the treatment of female officers with chivalry and respect helped sustain or recreate self-conceptions built around notions of being 'the good son' or husband. In life-history interviews, both of the prisoners cited below detailed close relationships with women in their immediate families. The first repeatedly expressed guilt at having put his ageing mother through his drug addiction and imprisonment, and described his 'main objective' as 'to secure my family ties again, especially with my mum and my sister' (prisoner interview, April 2003). The second had a distant relationship with his father, and was deeply resentful of a brother who had attacked his mother in their youth. It was significant that their discussions of female staff referenced specific women in their families:

If I talk to the female staff in prison, I talk to them with respect. The older female staff, I talk to them like me nan. The young female staff, I have a little bit of banter with them, but I always talk to them politely. Always talk to them nicely. [. . .] One of the older staff over there, I say to her, 'alright chubber, how are you?' and I always talk to them nicely. (Prisoner interview, April 2003)

You do treat women [staff] different, it's like, I tend to treat most women I come across like I'd treat me own mum. [. . .] It's like very rare that I'll swear in front of a woman officer, I wouldn't. I daren't swear in front of me mum, even though she wouldn't have hit me you know, that's how I was brought up, not to swear in front of women. (Prisoner interview, March 2003)

Female officers concurred that many male prisoners treated them with courtesy, were rarely aggressive towards them and perceived them as maternal surrogates. For example:

A lot of them do show respect for females actually, a lot of them'll say, if they've sworn, 'sorry miss'. [. . .] I think a lot of them relate to you as a mother figure. [. . .] I mean even like: 'are you going to tuck me in tonight?' [. . .] That is a jokey way of them saying 'are you going to bang me up?' (Officer interview, April 2003)

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND PRACTICES

The officer role and identity

Discourses of chivalry, charm and sexualization were publicly ascendant within prisoner culture. However – and despite the fact that there was no such thing as gender-neutral professional territory (see later), for male as well as female staff – many interviewees assessed and related to female officers according to factors that were not ostensibly based on gender. For almost a third of prisoners, gender and sexual identity was eclipsed by professional identity as the principal basis for judgement (see also Zimmer, 1986: 61).

Within this group, several interviewees invoked the notion of 'the uniform' to highlight their orientation:

I always see the uniform first before I see the female. Other lads get corrupted by the fact that they're women. And they'll kind of do anything for them. [. . .] Some guys see a woman come on the wing, a nice looking woman, and they're in love with her instantly, or in lust with her instantly. It doesn't matter how nasty a person she is. The fact that she's a woman is all they need. For me, I see the uniform before I see the woman. (Prisoner interview, June 2003)

To me, it's a uniform, I don't see them as male and female, they're uniforms to me. Y'know, some of the lads might cat-call some of the women screws and all the rest of it, I don't do it, I just don't do it. (Prisoner interview, February 2003)

Gender was not insignificant in such values. By claiming to be resistant to the power of female sexuality, these prisoners could present themselves as 'above' attempts by female officers to manipulate them, as in control of their own desires and as stronger than those peers who succumbed to theirs. Significantly though, both prisoners cited here acknowledged that if a female officer were at risk of being assaulted, their view of her would change: 'then I would see her as a woman', one declared. 'At that time, I'd see the woman rather than the uniform', noted the other: 'But I still don't know whether I'd step in. I think it would depend on what sort of person the woman was. [Some] are more evil than the male screws.'

Some interviewees did claim indifference to gender, even in situations of violence:

If you're going to talk like a bloke to a bloke you're going to get hit like a bloke. Take a man's drugs or wage, you take a man's beating. (Prisoner interview, February 2003)

If it was [a teacher] or someone like that, I would step in then. Other than that, an officer is an officer. Whether she's female, it doesn't matter what race she is, or colour, or whatever. It's their choice to be in this job. They've got to expect to have certain things. (Prisoner interview, May 2003)

In some respects then, these prisoners were meritocratic in their consideration of the legitimacy of assaulting staff. 'If the woman officer was asking for it, giving all the inmates hassle, doing nothing for no-one, I'd probably laugh if she got a clump', one prisoner outlined (interview, June 2003). Another noted that he'd seen 'women [officers] attack men with sticks and things like that and I've seen women be bitchy towards men as well. [. . .]. Some of them, I think they ask for what they get, if they were to get it' (prisoner interview, March 2003).

Prisoners who cited such views tended to hold trenchant anti-authority attitudes. As suggested earlier, they regarded those prisoners who were submissive to female officers on the basis of desire or chivalry to be weak and 'corrupted': to have abandoned good judgement and forsaken the correct prisoner role. A more acceptable strategy, according to these prisoners, was to feign good relations with female officers for reasons of self-interest. One powerful and high-status prisoner described that he could:

see [female officer X] get kicked to death. Easily. And spit. Even though I laugh and joke with her. I hate the bitch. I like her to think that [I'm good as gold]. You see, I can go to [her] and ask for anything. [. . .] I stroke her ego. (prisoner interview, February 2003)

Another prisoner reported that he would intervene to help a female officer 'not for the sake of her' but, rather, because 'it looks good' for getting parole (prisoner interview, April 2003). Here then, masculinity was asserted through claims to be impervious to or above both the sexual and social power of female officers.

Officer practices and Interpersonal treatment

For a larger number of prisoners, assessments of female officers were not *pre*-determined by essentialist assumptions about femininity or sexuality. Instead, they were based on forms of interpersonal treatment and interest which were simply more often provided by female officers than males. Thus, many interviewees claimed that female officers were more relaxed, open, respectful and friendly than male officers (see Zimmer, 1986: 61). 'I do feel that they treat you differently', noted one interviewee: 'It's more like they want to get on with you more [. . .]. They'll talk to you more on the landing and stuff like that' (prisoner interview, August 2003). Another described female officers as 'more understanding. They speak to you quietly and on a level. They don't get all aggressive and everything' (prisoner interview, May 2003).

Prisoners bearing such views cited male officers as well as female ones when listing those with whom they had good relations. Thus certain male officers were singled out as being more considerate, informal or sympathetic to family concerns than most others. As one prisoner summarized, 'I get on better with anybody who talks to me with a bit of respect' (interview, June 2003). For a small number of prisoners, it was easier to get on with male officers, either on the basis of empathy or because of shared interests such as football or motorbikes:

I don't have a lot to do with female officers. Because we've got nowt in common, for me to chat to them. Some people get on with them, they've got a lot to chat about. But with me, it's more laddie laddie stuff with the officers. Because I'm a Leicester fan, and some of them mention their team. So then the banter will start: every Saturday: [. . .] 'you'll get hammered!' But with women, that's not there, so . . . (Prisoner interview, March 2003)

Although these prisoners frequently presumed quite a lot about the likely interests of male and female officers, they did so in ways that prioritized the establishment of good relations with staff, rather than relations that were pseudo-sexual in nature or that sought to validate masculine identity.

DISCUSSION

It should be clear that many relationships between male prisoners and female officers were imprinted by forms of projection and fantasy. In the prison's lopsided sexual culture, female officers functioned widely as proxies for and representatives of other women: family members, objects of sexual desire or a more generalized conception of femininity. This contributed significantly to relationships that were generally more comfortable and less formal than those between prisoners and male officers. However, a corollary of this was that these relationships often carried an intense emotional charge. This was normally suppressed, but became particularly evident in situations when female officers had to exert authority, disrupting identities – whether chivalrous, sexual or filial – that allowed prisoners to function according to conventional masculine scripts.

Recounting incidents in which female officers had enforced discipline and formally inhabited their professional roles, prisoners expressed a level of antipathy that was much less frequently directed at male officers. One interviewee recalled an episode in which he and several friends had begun to develop good terms with a female officer in a prison workshop. She had told them 'loads of things real personal', and he had reciprocated: 'I've told her things, and she's having a laugh. And everything's safe' (prisoner interview, April 2003). However, when she later disciplined a friend, her actions were interpreted as a betrayal that was typical of female officers:

Fucking bitch. All women screws are like that. They'll go on safe at [i.e. okay with] you, laugh and joke. Then they'll just switch on you.

Interviewer: In a way that's different from male officers?

Yeah [. . .] They'll laugh and joke with you, and they'll go on like everything's alright, and next thing you're on a nicking. They've just nicked you out of the blue, no reason. [. . .] It's fucking out of order mate. If she's a really decent person, she shouldn't be striking up certain conversations with you. (Prisoner interview, April 2003)

Such tales of role confusion and resentment were common. For example:

There was one officer on the wing, yeah. One morning I had a bit of a laugh with her and I took the piss out of her hair cos she'd had it dyed some mad colour. And I come back onto the wing, and my cell was a mess [because of a cell search she had undertaken]. [So] I just blanked her, I just thought to myself, look, I'm not gonna argue with her. She's proper flirting with all the lads on the wing, she's really flirty, just like a tart, she is a tart, yeah, and I'm not bothered about that. I've seen loads of lads all round her and, you know, seen [her] sat up on the stairs with inmates and that, but I'm not gonna hang around with her, cos at the end of the day, I'm not denying she's pretty, she ain't well pretty, but she's alright yeah, but you ain't gonna get nowhere with her. She likes the attention, I'm just not with that. [. . .] I just blanked her, kept blanking her. [. . .] I just said to her, 'look, I've been on the wing for 10 months. No-one can come in and mess my cell up. [. . .] She says 'what's your problem?', and I says 'my problem is that you are a bitch, that's it, you do my head in, you're a bitch'. (Prisoner interview, April 2003)

Perhaps most fundamentally, these excerpts reveal a recurrent implication that the 'personal relationship' generally sought from female officers was incompatible and inconsistent with their deployment of power. This inference was conveyed in the common description of female officers as 'two-faced' – a term normally used in the context of interpersonal rather than institutional relations, and not used in relation to male staff. Prisoners who felt they had developed friendly relations with female officers were affronted when those officers exerted formal authority.¹¹ One interviewee acknowledged that this reaction was highly gendered: it was 'harder to accept that a woman's going to take something away from you than it is a bloke. [. . .] It's like that man thing, you know' (prisoner interview, January 2003). It was significant that the power dynamic of such exchanges was quite different from what most prisoners were used to outside prison (see also Britton, 2003).

One reason why relationships with non-uniformed female staff, such as teachers and drug workers, were less intense than those with female officers was because of the lower

level of power that these groups wielded. Wellingborough had too few senior female staff to allow a proper analysis of the relationship between increasing formal authority and relations with prisoners. However, prisoners appeared less inclined to flirt with more senior female personnel or to act chivalrously towards them. This seemed to reflect a less cynical attitude towards their professional motives, alongside greater respect for their authority and a recognition of the consequences of seeking to demean it. Second, seniority made female staff seem less attainable (and perhaps less attractive) to most prisoners. Third, senior staff did not perform the everyday roles that could 'bring out' the femininity of female officers in the eyes of prisoners: advising, listening, chiding, joking, feeding and so on.

As the final quotation above also indicates, some prisoners were troubled by an emotional contradiction of desiring female officers while resenting their actions and authority. For the prisoner cited here, 'blanking' the female officer functioned to suppress the attraction that his ambivalence betrayed. In other such cases, hostile sentiments were clearly bound up with issues of sexual desire and powerlessness, as one interviewee explicitly indicated:¹²

There are times when you think 'you fucking bitch, you're a fucking two-faced cow'. That is what's primarily said about a lot of the women screws. It's very rare you hear about an officer who's a 'two-faced bastard'. He's just a fucking arsehole, he's a twat. He won't do fuck all for you, or says one thing and does another. Whereas a woman, it's because of the nature of it all you know. She's a fucking bitch, a two-faced cow, a fucking slut, you know, and you get like that cos you know you can't shag it and you ain't shagging it and you won't shag it, you know. There's a bitter side to it. (Prisoner interview, January 2003)

When prisoners complained that female officers 'do my head in', or had 'no right' to regulate them in certain ways, they flagged up the difficulty of reconciling the desire for female officers with their unattainability, and the power relation that this brought into relief. If female officers used their sexuality in ways that prisoners considered inappropriate, their formal power exacerbated the resentment felt by prisoners about being socially and sexually powerless. As also signalled in the quotation above, the presence of desire was such that the judgements made of female officers were different from those imposed on their male colleagues, even when their behaviour was the same.¹³

Those female officers who were perceived as unprofessional or disrespectful risked double stigmatization: being censured sexually as well as professionally. Condemnations of one female officer frequently jumped from her work practices to her supposed promiscuity, while other uniformed women were routinely insulted as 'slags' in situations where they were perceived to have acted unfairly or disrespectfully. Here then, being a 'bad officer' was equated with being a 'bad woman'. Meanwhile, as Britton (2003) has also argued, female officers were vulnerable to a double-bind which demanded that they 'do femininity' in certain ways in order to merit acceptance and protection (see also Richards et al., 2002). Thus, in outlining the circumstances in which he would intervene to protect a female officer, one prisoner stated that he would only get involved on behalf of 'a defenceless type of woman' (prisoner interview, April 2003). Another declared that he would always intercede 'unless the female officer is a right bitch who is digging down inmates and *who is not acting like a woman*' (prisoner interview, May 2003; author's emphasis). In effect then, female officers who did not conform

to certain notions of femininity – who were ‘bad women’ – risked sacrificing some of the benefits of chivalry. However, it is important to state that female officers who breached conventional definitions of femininity were not necessarily or universally stigmatized. One interviewee mocked the way that many prisoners labelled any female officer who came across as physically or mentally robust as a lesbian, ‘just because she’s a strong woman’ (prisoner interview, April 2003). Another publicly challenged two peers who were mocking a female officer for being a lesbian: ‘so what if she is! She says she is, and so what?!’ (fieldwork notes, 2003). Again then, there was considerable variation in the way that female officers were perceived.

Likewise, the orientations of female officers towards male prisoners were diverse. Female officers were deeply integrated into Wellingborough’s officer culture, and their views differed little from those of male officers. Most were no more trusting of or sympathetic towards prisoners, and some were considerably more cynical in the views that they publicly expressed. One notable disposition among female officers was to be ‘tough but fair’. This may partly have stemmed from the feeling that, with colleagues as well as prisoners, it was more difficult as a female to establish authority, and that ‘softness’ would be judged as gendered incompetence rather than a deliberate professional orientation. None the less, even the more hardened female officers were scornful of a small element of male officers whose orientation towards prisoners was macho and overbearing. Some female officers accepted the maternal roles assigned to them by prisoners – one smiled as she explained her nickname as the ‘mother of the wing’ (fieldwork notes, 2003) – and appeared genuinely concerned to aid prisoners with problems. Others provided an apparently sympathetic ear to prisoners that subsequent comments to colleagues contradicted. It was difficult to discern whether this represented the performance of compassion to prisoners, or the performance of cynicism to officers. Certainly though, female officers were more likely than their male co-workers to give the benefit of the doubt to vulnerable prisoners (providing they were not too demanding on staff resources), prisoners who were polite and those who appeared to have ‘turned themselves around’.

CONCLUSION

Given the sensitivities of prisoners to issues of power and desire, and the ways that sexual and familial identities were projected onto female officers, one would expect that finding the right balance between good and inappropriate relations would be difficult for uniformed female staff. Responding aggressively or dismissively to charm and flirtation risked alienating prisoners, while engaging too flirtatiously risked leading to the sorts of powerful hostilities that I have detailed above. In this respect, although assumptions about the calming influence of female officers seemed correct at the collective level, the presence of female authority figures also had a provocative impact on the sexual and emotional state of some individual prisoners (Zimmer, 1986; Enterkin, 1996; Richards et al., 2002). This was rarely the fault of officers themselves. Although some female officers did use sexuality as a management tool – or were less careful than they should have been about ensuring that their behaviour was unambiguously professional – the majority sought to downplay the role of gender and sexuality in their occupational practices, preferring to be judged according to the same criteria as male officers. Such

strategies may have practical disadvantages, in potentially disqualifying women from protective treatment. As others have argued, to avoid sexualization, condescension and hostility while maximizing rapport, respect and interaction – from colleagues as well as prisoners – female officers have to walk down a narrow corridor of femininity (Britton, 2003; see also Richards et al., 2002). Significantly though, while it was hard for female staff to avoid gendered labels and assumptions, prisoners were more likely to respect those who acted in accordance with (putatively) gender-neutral principles of respect, decency and humanity. In this respect, the 'sex-role spill-over' (Gutek, cited in Cowburn, 1998), which dominated many perceptions of female officers did not necessarily prevent prisoners from assessing the quality of officers independently of gender, at least ostensibly. The relationships based upon such values were also less volatile than those predicated on forms of sexuality or femininity.

While overtly gendered discourses were more frequently and explicitly articulated in relation to female officers, they also influenced relations between prisoners and male officers. Conflict and camaraderie, respect and resentment were all influenced by assumptions about masculine behaviour and issues of masculine status. Prisoners expected male officers to be able to 'look after themselves' physically; they oiled their interactions with male officers through discussions of typically 'male' topics, such as football, motor-sports, action films and women; and just as some prisoners accused female officers of being motivated by sexual failure, authoritarian male officers were regarded as avenging masculine inadequacy. The standards applied to male officers differed from those applied to female officers, but were by no means gender-neutral. When prisoners said things such as 'there's not much difference between a prison officer and a woman officer' (prisoner interview, June 2003), their language highlighted the assumption that the normal officer was male, and the way that masculinity served as the unseen backdrop for most relations between prisoners and staff. This had consequences for both male and female officers.

In depriving men of autonomy, family roles and heterosexual relations, imprisonment threatens a number of aspects of male identity. In placing men under the formal supervision of women, it also inverts the power dynamic that many prisoners take for granted in their relations with women outside prison. Female officers become a lightning rod for issues of masculine identity and insecurity. When asked directly, most prisoners rejected the notion that incarceration undermined their masculine self-esteem. Yet the sexualization and the protection of female officers can be seen as different modes of reasserting masculine power in a context where it is structurally deficient, while the pursuit of various forms of feminine comfort is a more overt expression of masculine insecurity.¹⁴ One reason why the exertion of power by female officers elicited such aggressive reactions among certain male prisoners is that it punctured these strategies of masculine self-assertion and showed their precariousness. None the less, it should be clear that the removal from prisoners of many conventional forms of feminine contact and gender validation did not have homogenous effects. It is important to see the prison as a site in which gender is managed, expressed and asserted in multiple ways (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2001). Furthermore, although these adaptations often counterpoised masculinity with rigid definitions of femininity, they were not all defined by the kinds of hyper-masculine responses that are often assumed.

Meanwhile, as in Wellingborough's prisoner culture in general (see Crewe, 2005), the

relative primacy of each perspective was by no means clear-cut. In terms of masculine credibility, there was no single, hegemonic ideal. Chivalrous prisoners took honour from their identity of protective paternalism; those who saw female officers as 'uniforms' claimed kudos by presenting themselves as hardened 'cons', resistant to female power and sexuality. Those whose main orientation was sexual occupied an overtly heterosexual masculine identity. Prisoners who sought feminine validation in their interactions with female officers or who used them to express their 'softer' and 'more feminine' sides were the least likely to advertise their impulses within the prison's public culture. None the less, through relations with and attitudes towards female officers, there were several ways in which credible versions of manhood could be accomplished. These were loosely reflective of factors such as age and marital status, as well as biographical experiences. Those who saw female officers primarily as officers rather than women tended either to be experienced prisoners who identified with a former culture in which prisoners and officers had little contact or interaction; or, they were younger prisoners whose involvement in the prison's informal economy both reflected and necessitated anti-authority attitudes and behaviour. Those whose primary discourse was one of sexualization were generally younger and unmarried, while chivalrous prisoners were more likely to be older and married. (No evidence was found that minority ethnic prisoners had different orientations to female officers from white prisoners.) However, even within these small samples, there were exceptions to these patterns, while some prisoners deployed more than one discourse in their views and behaviour, depending on contextual and situational factors. In this respect, the orientations and attitudes described in this article do not represent exclusive or exhaustive 'prisoner types'.

The heterogeneity of adaptations has been found in US studies (for example, Zimmer, 1986), on the basis of similar discourses (although race is a less potent factor in the UK than in North America (see Britton, 2003)). Tracing more systematically why individual prisoners employ some views and perspectives over others would require further research and different methodological approaches. None the less, this article clearly illustrates how relationships between male prisoners and female officers were imprinted in numerous ways by biographical experiences and psychosexual processes such as transference and desire, as well as demographic characteristics and values imported from outside communities. While prison culture cannot be reduced to such factors, or extrapolated from a mass of individual life stories, the links between them and the prison's structural deprivations represent a rich seam for further research.

Notes

- 1 I hesitate to propose that the prison is no longer a 'total' institution. Prisoners in Wellingborough recognized the growing porousness of the prison walls, but described the deployment of power in the late-modern prison as highly *totalizing*.
- 2 In English and Welsh prisons, cross-posting was first implemented in 1982, and broadened in 1988, prior to which it was used in limited circumstances, with only 138 officers given opposite-sex postings (Enterkin, 1996). Women now make up 21 per cent of all uniformed staff and operational managers (source: HR Planning, Personnel Corporate Database, 17 October 2005) – a figure that has risen significantly in recent years (see Liebling and Price, 2001) – and are also employed in large numbers in prison education, probation, healthcare, administration and psychology.

- 3 Officer culture is more complex and varied than this picture may imply, and, like prisoner culture, depends on a range of factors including institutional goals, security status, geographic location, history and the social characteristics of the guard-force and prisoners.
- 4 In England and Wales and the USA, the main formal impetus for cross-posting was equal rights legislation, but cultural considerations and staff shortages were also important factors (Enterkin, 1999; Britton, 2003).
- 5 Aggression, brutality, sexism and homophobia are, of course, present in UK men's establishments, and are not trivial issues. However, the tendency for prison research and prisoner autobiographies to have charted the more tense and extreme world of high security prisons may have over-represented these dimensions of prison life. One inadvertent consequence of such portrayals, and those representations of prison life which focus only on rape and violence, is that they can present prison life as a highly alien culture, and can therefore feed into popular perceptions of prisoners as an inhuman species completely distinct from the general population.
- 6 In this respect, the issue of gender difference was raised explicitly, and this approach may have structured prisoner responses accordingly. Certainly, no claim is made that the responses outlined below represent the totality of prisoner views about female officers.
- 7 In 2000, across the estate, only 5 per cent of all (i.e. male and female) prison officers were non-white (Liebling and Price, 2001), so Wellingborough's figures were not exceptional.
- 8 Perceived social betrayals here refers to women going out to socialize despite having been asked by their imprisoned partners not to, or mixing with untrusted friends. Perceived financial betrayals could include refusing to send money into prison or spending shared money without permission.
- 9 Such relationships were proscribed, and the rules forbidding them were strictly enforced by senior officials, but clearly some relationships did develop, including one during the author's fieldwork period which resulted in a staff resignation. In informal conversations, officers confirmed in disapproving tones that there had been other occurrences of this kind in the prison's recent history. However, the frequency of inappropriate relationships is very difficult to gauge with any degree of accuracy, and official figures are likely to be well below the actual rate and the number of internal investigations. According to official data, in the years 2002–5, disciplinary action was taken against 39 prison staff for 'inappropriate relationships' with prisoners. Of these cases, 13 were against female officers for relations with male prisoners, resulting in 7 dismissals, 5 written warnings and 1 verdict of 'not proven' (Prison Service Professional Standards Unit: pers. comm.).
- 10 A minority of prisoners were oblivious to the possibility that female officers could object to comments about their appearance that were intended to be complimentary. One prisoner was disciplined for having told a female officer that she had a nice figure, and expressed complete astonishment that he could be penalized for a comment which he believed was simply flattering.
- 11 As would be expected, prisoners who sexualized female officers or sought out feminine validation from them were the most likely to accuse them of duplicity and inconsistency.

- 12 Clearly, this is not to suggest that hostility towards female officers was only a function of desire.
- 13 Female officers suggested that their male peers also employed different standards in relation to their work, applying more scrutiny to their competence than they would to that of male officers. Interviews with male officers revealed considerable admiration for female officers, but with a common perception that their skill-set differed along gendered lines. Thus, as many prisoners also claimed, female officers were seen as more capable of defusing aggression and dealing with family issues than male officers. Most female officers concurred with such assessments, while also asserting their ability to carry out tasks traditionally seen as the preserve of men. Thus, femininity was considered a bonus rather than an alternative to conventional professional competences (see Zimmer, 1986). In general, female officers saw Wellingborough's culture as one in which they were ostensibly treated as professionals. Officer banter did often have sexual overtones, but this was often directed by female officers at male officers as well as vice versa. The author saw little evidence of male officers colluding with each other or with prisoners over the sexualization of female staff. More often, it was in mocking the macho pretensions of the minority of Wellingborough officers who over-used their authority or swaggered around the wings that officers bonded with prisoners or colleagues.
- 14 In many social contexts, the protection and sexualization of women form part of a coherent discourse of objectification, based on an assumption of female inferiority. Certainly, prisoners who sexualized female officers often expressed views that were ultimately protective when discussing potential assaults against them (as did many prisoners who claimed to be indifferent to gender, as discussed earlier). However, the converse did not apply: that is, chivalrous prisoners did not tend to see female officers as sexual objects. It was unclear whether those prisoners who used older female officers as proxies for mother-figures at the same time positioned younger female officers as proxy girlfriends, i.e. as sex objects.

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