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# **Emotion and Performance: Prison Officers and the Presentation of Self in Prisons**

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## Abstract

This article explores how prison officers manage and perform emotion on a day-to-day basis. Although the performance of emotion is invariably highlighted when things ‘go wrong’ in prison – perhaps particularly during prison disturbances - the emotional life of prisons at an everyday level has received much less attention. Moreover, although the sociology of the prison has acknowledged the impact of prison on the emotional lives of prisoners there has been much less interest in the emotional impact of the prison on its uniformed staff. This paper focuses on the day-to-day emotional interaction that arises out of the predicament of imprisonment; that is, on how prison officers’ emotions are *structured* and *performed* on a daily basis. Prisons are emotional places, but like all organisations, they have their own ‘feeling rules’ about the kinds of emotions it is appropriate for prison officers to express (and indeed feel) at work. In consequence, working in prisons demands a performative attitude on the part of staff, an (often significant) engagement in emotion-work and, relatedly, the employment of various emotion-work strategies.

## **Key words**

prison \* emotion \* emotional labour \* domesticity \* performance \*

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the ways in which prison officers manage and perform emotion at work. In the sociology of the prison, this is a topic that has received relatively little scholarly attention. The emotional life of prisons is, of course, a topic of much discussion when things ‘go wrong’ in prisons. This is especially true when a prison disturbance occurs; on such occasions there is usually a great deal of debate about the

(largely negative) emotions experienced by all those involved, including the anger of prisoners regarding their conditions of confinement, the disgust of prison officers at the apparently wanton destruction of the prison fabric, and the degree of confusion and fear experienced during the disturbance itself (see e.g. Fitzgerald 1977; Woolf 1991; Adams 1992). In contrast, the emotional life of prisons *on a day-to-day basis* - on the days when prisons are not beset by trouble and when nothing (much) goes wrong - has attracted much less interest. I want to argue here that the day-to-day emotional life of prisons is actually of greater theoretical importance because it is through the day-to-day performance and management of emotion that the prison itself is *accomplished*.

Moreover, while the sociology of the prison has acknowledged the impact of prison on the emotional lives of prisoners (see eg. Sykes 1958; Serge 1972; Cohen and Taylor 1981; Boyle 1984) there has been much less academic interest<sup>1</sup> in the emotional impact of the prison on its uniformed staff. Consequently, very little is known about the emotional and psychological adjustments that men and women make in order to *become* and to *be* prison officers. Drawing from key ideas in the sociology of emotions and the sociology of occupations, what I propose to do in this article is to demonstrate that prisons are emotional spaces for prison officers too. In so doing I shall outline the emotional interaction that arises out of the predicament of imprisonment - that is, I will try to show how the emotion in prisons is *structured* (in the sense of being organised in and through social structures (i.e. according to cultural expectations, customs, traditions and norms) - and *performed* (in day-to-day practices, routines and social interactions) on a daily basis. With regard to the latter, this article focuses on the ways in which prison officers play `parts` and stage-

manage their actions in an attempt to control the impressions<sup>2</sup> of themselves they convey to others (colleagues as well as prisoners). As we shall see, prison officers make particular efforts to manage those emotions least in tune with occupational norms<sup>3</sup>. Finally, and importantly, this article discusses *failures* of performance, and the implications of emotion mis-management both for the officer's self-identity and for his/her relations with fellow staff. First, of all, however, it might be helpful to the reader if I say a little about the expression of emotion itself.

### **A Note on Emotion**

Explanations of what, exactly, emotions *are* vary across academic disciplines; they range from the strictly biological, in-the-body explanations offered by experimental psychologists, to anthropological, sociological and social-psychological explanations which argue that emotions simply cannot be understood outside the context of their embodied enactment. I do not intend, in this paper, to debate the merits and demerits of these competing explanations, although I think it will be clear to the reader that I favour a constructionist approach. Readers who wish to explore different definitions and explanations may like to read the work of Darwin for a useful starting point (Darwin 1998; orig. 1872) before turning to the growing specialist literature on the sociology of emotions (see especially Hochschild 1983; 1998; Katz 1999; Scheff 1990; Barbalet 1998). All these texts are helpful in demonstrating the centrality of emotions to routine operations of social interaction.

When I use the term emotion here I use it as most of us use it in everyday life - to refer to how we are *feeling* `inside`. However, I want to also suggest that the expression of emotions should be thought of as a *language*. This language of the

emotions is *learned* in a way that is analogous to the learning of verbal language, and it conforms to a powerful set of conventions attaching to ‘proper’ exhibition and expression. Like verbal and other ‘languages’ (e.g. the more familiar ‘body language’ - the rudiments of which prison officers, like police officers, are routinely taught to interpret as part of their basic training), the language of emotions is a means by which human beings communicate and convey meaning(s). However, as the influential Russian psychologist Vygotsky asserted (see Vygotsky 1986;1987) human beings do not communicate just for the sake of it; communication always has a *purpose*. Vygotsky’s crucial point about language is that it is primarily a *tool* of social interaction, and like all tools, we use it to act more effectively on the world – for example by getting people to do what we want them to. Since emotional expression is also a language, it follows that the language of the emotions allows us to act more effectively in the world too. Like the verbal language we all acquire during childhood, the language of the emotions must be learnt and practised during childhood and is then perfected over time. Getting any language ‘right’ – including the language of the emotions - is a lengthy business at which humans have to work hard.

Mastery of emotional language develops over time and with practice. Full competency is difficult to achieve and maintain, but we know that emotional interchanges are more likely, more meaningful and more fluent in contexts in which there are high levels of intimacy, shared knowledge of context and a never-ending but intermittent ‘dialogue’. The emotional interchanges of family life are the most obvious and best example of this, and as I shall argue in this paper, there are striking

similarities between the nature and structure of relationships in prisons and those in the familial setting of the home.

The two functions of emotional language use – the structural and expressive – crucially depend on the presence of a community of competent language-users. As social psychologists such as Gergen (1999) assert, emotional expressions are thus *relational performances*. They are constituents of culturally specific scenarios – parts of a play in which others are required. This is to propose that the angry shout or the sluggish expression of depression (two stances very familiar in the domestic setting of the prison) only make sense by virtue of their position in a relational scenario. In other words, emotional performances are essentially constituents of relationship. This article explores the emotional performances that take place between those whose job it is to manage prisoners, and those that develop out of the relationship between keeper and kept.

### **The Prison as an Emotional Arena**

In the course of this article I shall explore the emotional performances, strategies for emotion management and performance failures that I encountered during a three-year study of the working lives of prison officers. This ethnographic account entailed extensive fieldwork conducted in 6 prisons<sup>4</sup> over a two-year period. During this time, I became increasingly aware of the importance of the relationship between emotion and prison work. Drawing from the sociology of emotions and dramaturgy, this article explores this relationship, and describes prison officers' efforts to i) manage the emotions of prisoners, ii) perform emotion according to the occupational norms of the prison and ii) keep their own 'real-time emotions' (Fineman 1993) in check. In

terms of the latter, it is necessary for prison officers to perform emotion management – what Hochschild (1983; 1998) calls ‘emotional labour’<sup>5</sup> and (more recently) ‘emotion-work’ - in order that they perform their job in the ‘appropriate’ manner (I will return to the question of what is deemed appropriate in a moment). I do not use the word performance lightly; on the contrary, prison officers are acutely aware that they must play parts and stage manage their actions if they are to control the impressions they convey to prisoners and, just as importantly, to fellow staff. The new recruit to the Prison Service must also learn the organisation’s ‘emotional map’. As Hochschild (1993:xi) puts it, new recruits must learn, for example, where laughter begins in different areas of the organisation (and where it ends) and where, along an accelerating array of insults, it is acceptable to take offence without too much counter-offence.

Prisons are emotional places. They are emotional places for a number of reasons, not least because they are places in which large numbers of people are held captive against their will. As we know, prison is an emotionally painful place for prisoners (see for example Sykes 1958; Serge 1972; Cohen and Taylor 1981; Boyle 1984). Here, feelings of anxiety, fear, sadness, hopelessness, frustration, regret, anger, resentment and depression are commonplace - joy, hope, satisfaction and happiness much less so. Secondly, prisoners are forced into close proximity to others (others they may fear, hate, feel disgusted by and resent) often for extended periods of time. Staff-prisoner relationships are also emotionally charged because the degree of *intimacy* involved in working with prisoners is great. Unlike, for example, police officers, whose relationships with offenders are relatively fleeting, prison officers often spend sustained periods of time with the same prisoners, many of whom will

have suffered a variety of personal traumas, difficulties and disappointments during their sentences. This is likely to be especially true in the context of long-term prisons.

In consequence, working in prisons is emotionally demanding and the emotions generated by prison work are many and varied. During my fieldwork, officers confided that they were fearful of certain prisoners, that they were jealous of colleagues who were able to do `quality work` while they pounded the landings, that they were disappointed that their prison had “gone downhill”, that they were frustrated by their managers (who are widely perceived as unsympathetic to the needs of uniformed staff and ignorant of the day-to-day realities of life at the `sharp end`), that they were bewildered (and disgusted) that some of their fellow officers actually wanted to work with sex offenders (some of whom had committed the most heinous offences against children) and that they were bored working on a wing that was "more like an old folks` home than a prison" because it was inhabited by elderly prisoners. Others ridiculed colleagues who worked in a therapeutic community, new recruits derided `old dinosaurs` and `dinosaurs` grumbled about new recruits. In the quietness of the interview room, new recruits disclosed that they felt bullied by other officers and female officers said they were fed up with sexist behaviour.

On a day-to-day basis, however, emotions are not freely expressed. Rather, prison officers try to ensure that when they perform emotion they do so in the `right` circumstances and settings. Consequently, prison work requires a performative attitude on the part of staff, an (often significant) engagement in emotion-work and, relatedly, the employment of specific emotion-work strategies. In short, prison



officers are obliged to manage their *own* emotions as well as those of prisoners. As I shall go on to show in a moment, they do so in a number of ways.

The management of prisoners' emotions is attempted at both the level of the institution and at the level of the individual officer. In terms of the former, emotion-management programmes are now instituted in a number of prisons, on the grounds that the inability to control emotions – particularly anger- is what brings many prisoners into prison in the first place. Anger-Management and Enhanced Thinking Skills classes, for example, aim to show prisoners how to respond more rationally and less emotionally to stressful situations. Similarly, one of the aims of the therapeutic regime is to encourage the 'difficult' prisoner to interact in a more reflexive and considered way.

At the level of the individual officer, emotion-management has two dimensions. First, as I have already suggested, (s)he must deal, on a day-to-day basis, with the emotions expressed by prisoners. The ability to do so varies from officer to officer; while most are confident that they can deal with prisoners' anger (officers always have the option of removing the prisoner to the segregation unit) many are ill-equipped to deal with emotions that require a tender and patient response. Second, the officer must manage the emotions that the prison generates within him/herself. This is an important issue. How officers *feel* about the work they do, and how they feel about prisoners and fellow officers has significant implications not only for the routine practices of prisons (and hence the nature and quality of imprisonment itself) but also for their relationships with fellow staff.

This article is organised around a number of emotion-oriented questions, namely “What emotions are generated by prison work and how are these emotions managed? What emotional and psychological pressures do the occupational norms of specific prisons place on prison officers? What aspects of their work do prison officers find troubling and how do they cope with them? How important are emotions in shaping the nature/quality of imprisonment? How is emotion managed and performed?” Before I continue, however, I want to say a little about the domestic character of the prison, since this has a significant bearing on the emotional character of prison life.

### **The Domestic Character of Prisons**

Domestic settings tend to be emotionally charged. In common with the home, where familiarity and boredom often degenerates into bickering and squabbles, interactions between prisoners, and between prisoners and staff are often punctuated by sulks, rows, fall-outs and minor disagreements. In the process of settling these disputes, officers and prisoners cajole, flatter, take offence, get angry, offer advice, placate, tease each other and so on - this is as much a part of the complex business of living together in a prison as it is elsewhere. Indeed, wherever human beings spend long periods of time together in intimate settings they are drawn into emotional engagement with each other. Arguably, much of what happens in the daily life of prisons is explicable once the prison is recognised as a quasi-domestic sphere.

Prisons are domestic in character precisely because they are places in which people have to *live*. In addition to being a `community` (see Clemmer 1940) each prison is, quite literally, *home* to the prisoner for the period of the sentence, sometimes for extended periods of time. It would thus be unsurprising if elements of domesticity

were absent. In prisons, therefore, we find pet birds, family photographs, gossip and rumour, shopping lists for canteen purchases, football talk, arguments over TV programmes, over personal possessions, over lack of privacy and so on. In Young Offender Institutions, we can even find rule-bending activities such as `run-around-quizzes` (prisoners are never supposed to run anywhere) organised by staff in an attempt to relieve the boredom and frustrations of institutional life.

The degree of domesticity in prisons is striking. As I `hung around` with staff on one of the wings at HMP Garth, prisoners wandered around the wings in flip-flops, jogging bottoms or shorts whilst eating bowls of corn flakes. One or two others wandered back from the showers with towels wrapped round their waists. On one of the wings of HMP Wymott`s Vulnerable Prisoner Unit, elderly prisoners sat around reading newspapers, potted around in the kitchen and made match-stick models and endless pots of tea. During evening association in the Young Offender Institutions, teenage prisoners smoked cigarettes with individual officers, played video games or pool, waited for their turn in the shower or watched TV. Every evening before `bang-up` at HMYOI Lancaster Farms, an officer and a young `Red Band` (a trusted prisoner) trundled a tea urn along the landing, delivering a hot drink and a bun to each cell (what one officer called `the sticky bun run`).

Although officers have a tendency to present their role as a very masculine one (for a discussion of this in the American prison context see for example Martin & Jurik 1996) much of the prison officer`s working week is taken up with `housekeeping` - with tasks that are traditionally seen as `women`s work` (on this see also Toch 1994). Many of these housekeeping jobs "are normally associated with the (typically female)

role of parenting young children” (McDermott and King 1990:63) and include supervising the spending of private ‘cash’, ensuring that there is an adequate supply of toilet paper and clean laundry, checking that prisoners have received the correct ‘canteen’ order (at Lancaster Farms this required that officers sort and count the contents of literally dozens of carrier bags full of toiletries, birthday cards, packets of biscuits, chocolate bars, air fresheners, books of stamps, bottles of cordial, penny chews etc.) and that cells are being kept clean and tidy (this seems to have become of enormous importance since the introduction of the ‘Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme’, especially in Young Offender Institutions). Indeed I noticed that some officers working in Young Offender regimes tend to have what Hockey (1986), writing of the experiences of army recruits, calls “a near pathological concern for cleanliness, neatness and uniformity”. Yet this aspect of their work is often downplayed, probably because telling others (and indeed themselves) that their work is risky and potentially dangerous sounds better than saying they spend their days handing out laundry (Toch *ibid.*). The contrast between male officers’ ‘war stories’ and the mundane realities of their everyday lives on the landings is marked: for example within minutes of an officer recounting how he had grappled with notoriously violent prisoners and fought his way through smoke and flying missiles at the Strangeways prison riot he was supervising prisoners behind the servery, wearing a catering hat and ladling out gravy and custard.

### **Managing Feelings**

I have already suggested that emotions can run high in prisons. I also suggested (albeit very briefly) that when prison officers express emotion they do so in clearly structured ways. I want to elaborate on that claim now, by arguing that prisons, like

other organisations, have their own `feeling rules`<sup>6</sup> about the kinds of emotions it is appropriate for officers to express (and to indeed feel) at work, and it is imperative that prison officers learn them. Feeling rules are the subtle product of working arrangements and the social history of each workplace; unspoken and largely invisible, they regulate a myriad impression-management behaviours, as well as the open expression of feelings. Those who transgress the feeling rules of an organisation risk presenting themselves as unreliable, untrustworthy or simply unsuitable employees (on this topic see also Fineman 1993; Mangham and Overington 1987; Turner 1982; Bendelow and Williams 1998). What, then, are the feeling and display rules of prisons? Which emotions can the prison officer legitimately feel and display to colleagues and to prisoners? Anger? Disgust? Anxiety? Sadness? Pity? Distress? I have already noted some of the emotions that prison officers feel at work, and the situations from which they arise; the question remains "Which emotions do they feel the most need to manage and why?" Certainly most officers understand the need to manage emotion at work since there are risks associated with the expression of emotions deemed `inappropriate` to the prison officer role. Not only will the officer feel embarrassed if (s)he expresses the `wrong` emotions (as Goffman (1959) notes, the anticipation of embarrassment is at the heart of social interaction), more importantly the acquisition of what Goffman (1964) terms a `spoiled identity` may be the price paid for ineffective impression/emotion-management. For this reason, prison officers must engage in a significant degree of emotion-work; this entails humour and strategies of de-personalisation and detachment. Because the occupational culture of prison officers continues to stress the importance of `machismo` for successful job performance, male officers often tend to be particularly careful, in their interactions with prisoners (and indeed fellow officers)

not to show qualities they regard as traditionally female e.g. sensitivity, understanding and compassion. Female officers, in contrast, may deliberately employ these qualities with prisoners in order to prevent and manage conflictual situations (for an elaboration of these issues see Crawley 2004). Both male and female officers are, nonetheless, expected to conform to the feeling rules of prisons.

The feeling rules of prisons dictate that prison officers must, on a daily basis, “deal coolly and dispassionately with people that most of us would be both frightened and disgusted to be near” (Dilulio 1987:169). Consequently, prison officers are also expected to be cool and clinical when dealing with injury and death at work. In this respect they are, occupationally, like nurses, fire-fighters and ambulance crews. Just as the nurse who panics every time she sees blood is of little use in an emergency room, prison officers who become upset, angry or fearful every time they pass by a convicted murderer or rapist are unable to perform their duties properly (ibid.169). As Dilulio notes, prison officers cannot afford such feelings; their job is to forget the crime and work with the prisoner - in short, they are expected to act in a *professional* manner. This is where emotion-management comes in:

I think when you sit down and think that you`re on a landing on your own with forty eight inmates, including rapists and murderers, and you have to go down the spur and lock them up....If you thought about it, you`d never get off the chair. The fear is not always there, but you have to be aware. (Officer, Garth)

Anxiety is a commonly felt, ongoing emotion, in the sense that most prison officers feel *some* degree of anxiety whenever they are in the prison. Anxiety arises from the unpredictability of prison life; although much of prison life is mundane and routine, the officer is always conscious that a prisoner *may* assault him, that a prisoner *may* try to escape, that a prisoner *may* try to take him hostage etcetera. New recruits

experience anxiety particularly keenly. Not only do they lack experience of dealing with prisoners (and indeed, other prison officers) they are expected to look competent, even though they are performing to an unfamiliar script. Like medical students, they learn to reduce their anxieties by enveloping themselves in a 'cloak of competence' (Haas and Shaffir 1977:75) which involves, in addition to the management of personal feelings and reactions, the adoption and manipulation of the symbols of their occupational role.

New recruits to the organisation quickly learn, through informal interactions with more experienced colleagues and interactions with prisoners, exactly when, where and which emotions should be managed, and what happens to 'deviants' who break the rules. Because emotion-work is carried out to convince a social audience that the actor is *a particular kind of person* it is inextricably intertwined with impression-management.

### **'Getting the job done': strategies of emotion-management**

As I have already suggested, the construction of an authoritative, confident and dispassionate persona entails face-work and a number of emotion-work strategies. Like others whose work entails intimate interactions with distressed individuals and the carrying out of unpleasant and sometimes frightening tasks (I have compared prison officers' work to that of medical staff, ambulance crews and fire-fighters) prison officers employ certain coping strategies. These include humour, strategies of de-personalisation (prisoners are merely 'bodies' to be counted) and a rhetoric of coping and detachment (that officers should not get too close to prisoners is an occupational norm - one that acquired even greater significance in the post-

Woodcock and Learmont contexts)<sup>7</sup> to get through the working day. Like those in the medical profession, prison officers find that the wearing of a uniform makes certain acts (e.g. strip-searching) more permissible. This is not simply because of what the uniform symbolises to the prisoner but also because the uniform provides psychological protection. The uniform signifies mental preparation for the task at hand; without it the individual may feel exposed and vulnerable (is this perhaps one reason that many prison officers react negatively whenever proposals are made to take them out of uniform?).

An important and qualifying point should perhaps be made here. Prisons are concerned primarily with the delivery of *custody* while medical and rescue services are primarily concerned with the delivery of *care*. Consequently the emotion-work that medical staff and rescue workers engage in is primarily carried out in the context of alleviating the distress of worthy individuals i.e. individuals who, as blameless patients, are seen as worthy of sympathy and compassion. Prison officers' emotion-work, on the other hand, is likely to be more problematic, since it emerges in interactions with individuals who are often perceived as *unworthy* of such emotions (this applies to sex offenders in particular). Even officers who strive to work positively with such prisoners often find it difficult to manage feelings of anger and disgust; similarly they may feel guilty when feelings of empathy do emerge (these conflicting feelings are not ameliorated by the 'nonce-bashing' attitudes of some fellow staff).

As a strategy for conveying, disguising and expressing emotion, humour plays a significant (if somewhat unexpected) role in the working lives of prison officers. As I



`hung around` on the prison wings I was struck by the nature and volume of humorous exchanges between prison officers (and indeed between officers and prisoners). I was also struck by prison officers` penchant for practical jokes, their willingness to gossip about fellow officers, and their proclivity to tell and retell (often highly embroidered or fictitious) organisational stories and myths - what Goffman (1959:25) calls `anecdotes from the past`. As Goffman notes, these reveries and cautionary tales serve a variety of purposes; they are a source of humour, a catharsis for anxieties and a sanction for inducing individuals to be modest in their claims and reasonable in their projected expectations. As in the policing context (see Waddington 1999) prison officer humour is palliative.

The type of humour prison officers appreciate is what they themselves call “sick”, “black”, “toilet” or “gallows” humour (pers. comms, various officers) which finds its expression in day-to-day banter and joshing, pranks and practical jokes. It is also employed in tragic and shocking situations, such as when a prisoner has `cut up` or committed suicide. It is here that its form and function most resembles the humour employed by those in the medical profession. Like the nurses interviewed by Lawler (1991) and the medical students interviewed by Lella and Pawluch (1988) prison officers use humour during certain hands-on, dirty, messy tasks, particularly where there is blood, excreta or vomit to be cleared away. Just as many nurses tell `dead body stories` (Lawler 1991:190) and make `dead body jokes` when confronted by dead patients, prison officers told me that they sometimes joke during, and after, dealing with dead or seriously injured prisoners. Resorting to humour in such circumstances may strike one as unprofessional and callous; indeed, when prison officers do so, `outsiders` may assume that they are simply performing true to the

stereotype of the heartless, insensitive guard. It is not so easy to rely on stereotypes when nurses joke about death and dying, however, since nurses are generally thought of as compassionate and caring individuals.

Humour neutralises, and thus makes bearable, feelings of danger and the fear of death (Mercier 1926). Through laughter and joking, emotional experiences which are hard to express verbally are made *collective*, and *communicative*; cognitive and emotional dissonances are lifted, and reality is restored" (Zijderveld 1983 my emphasis). Joking and humour can thus *unite* the members of an occupational group. The integrating and communicative function of humour is, of course, of special importance when the group feels itself to be endangered or threatened. Under threat or in danger, an occupational group might easily disintegrate in panic, but humour and laughter usually manage to keep its members together: they talk, as it were, some common sense into each other, providing energy and even hope, and thereby strengthen their morale (Zijderveld *ibid.*: 47). Humour puts things into perspective and restores social reality.

A more general defence mechanism for coping with the demands of emotionally charged work is to simply `switch off` or `go robot`. Traditionally, an occupational characteristic of a `good` nurse was the ability to hide emotional reactions and to cultivate an air of detachment - to develop a professional distance from the work. Formal nursing training dictates that staff displays of emotion are inappropriate to the hospital setting; they demonstrate that the nurse is `not made of the right stuff` to be a competent nurse. To protect themselves against emotional involvement, nurses create a social defence system which allows them to practice relatively protected from the

anxieties which threaten to overwhelm them. An important element of this is the reduction of familiarity. De-personalisation - patients are known by their bed number or disease type (e.g. `the pneumonia in bed 15`) - and a rhetoric of coping and detachment help to reduce these anxieties (for rather different reasons doctors wear the mask of “relaxed brilliance” which enables patients to feel that they are `in good hands`). The problem is that lack of affect can become the standardised and expected emotional response, in which case it excludes the possibility of sharing difficult moments in a way which allows the nurse to `make contact` with the patient existentially" (Lawler 1991:130). Although there is now a recognition that the expression of some emotions is desirable, historically, the occupational ethos of emotional control remains, nonetheless, relatively pervasive (Lawler *ibid.*: 126).

An occupational ethos in which de-personalisation and emotional detachment are distinctive features is also present in most <sup>8</sup> prisons. Prison officers, like nurses, are expected to remain emotionally detached; they are warned, during basic training, not to get too friendly nor too relaxed with prisoners, on the grounds that this may lead to `conditioning` and hence to compromises of security (see Home Office 1994 for a discussion of this). `Detachment` is a strategy commonly employed by prison officers to avoid being manipulated by prisoners. Indeed, the fear of being seen as a `soft touch` (fears that develop during basic training when, according to one officer, recruits are told to “never trust the bastards”) colours all aspects of officers` interactions with prisoners, even with regard to easily granted requests such as an extra telephone call. Virtually all of the officers who participated in this study felt that if they did not remain emotionally detached they would be taken advantage of. But emotional detachment is not always easy; on the contrary for some officers it is

very difficult to achieve. Occasionally the `front` falls, and unanticipated emotions are exposed, overwhelming officers. As we shall see below, this can be a great shock.

I want now to draw upon my interview data to show precisely how emotion in prisons is structured and performed on a day-to-day basis. In so doing, I want to show that not only is there an internal structure to emotion, but also that emotions are constructed *spatially*.

### **The Spatial Structuring of Emotional Language: Emotion-Zones**

Like all organisations, prisons have emotional zones<sup>9</sup> - places and settings which become understood in terms of particular emotions and which are socially constructed for particular forms of emotional display – solemnity, laughter, anger and so forth. Some of the prison`s emotional zones are understood as places where people can legitimately (in the terms of the feeling rules of the organisation) perform anger and `blow off steam`. In other emotional zones – for example the chapel, the hospital and the administration block – emotional reticence is more appropriate. On a day-to-day basis, the officer is expected to emote somewhere between these extremes. Just as the officer who is always angry or fearful is likely to be given a wide berth by his colleagues, the officer who is overly sympathetic and friendly is viewed with suspicion. Both may be viewed as posing a threat to the security of the prison.

There are settings and occasions, however, when the ritualised expression of emotion is appropriate; indeed it is expected. As an emotional zone which is understood in terms of anger and disgust, the de-briefing room used by Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) tutors is a particular case in point. Here, it is legitimate to

perform (often intense) anger and disgust towards the disclosures of sex offenders. It is important to note, however, that the de-briefing room also *produces* these emotions. This is not to say that emotional performances in this setting (or any setting for that matter) are superficial or calculating; on the contrary in *doing* anger (or any other emotion) we may be fully engaged “doing what comes naturally”, even if the emotion is a product of cultural history and intelligible only by virtue of the rules it obeys (Gergen 1999). Rather, I want to argue that SOTP tutors know that it is very important to emote ‘properly’ in this setting; they know that not only is the display of anger and disgust fitting, the failure to display any sign of these emotions is to risk being judged personally deficient or deviant (along the lines of “Are you a pervert too?”). As I have noted elsewhere, in the context of the SOTP, this scenario is a very real possibility (see Crawley 2000).

The emotion-zone of the de-briefing room is an interesting one for a number of reasons. First, it is a space highly charged with emotion. Second, those who use it are required to engage in an (appropriate) emotional performance for the benefit of other officers (“See, I find sex offenders disgusting, just like you”). Third, officers engage in an emotional performance for their own re-assurance (those who do SOTP work may experience feelings that threaten their sense of self, namely that they been ‘contaminated’ by their contact with sex offenders. In other words that they have ‘caught’ perverse thoughts from those they are trying to treat) (again see Crawley *ibid.*). Through the collective performance of disgust and anger (on one occasion an angry officer hit the back of a chair so hard with his stick that the stick broke in two) these anxieties may be ameliorated.

SOTP tutors may be asked by fellow staff to justify their willingness to work with those whose crimes evoke outrage and disgust both in prisons and in the wider community. The justification most often used by SOTP tutors is an appeal to higher loyalties. They justify their `dirty work` (Hughes 1971) by asserting that it may prevent further child victims. Such `vocabularies of motive` (Mills 1944) help to repair fractured social interaction and re-negotiate spoiled identities. On a day-to-day basis, of course, tutors must manage their own feelings of anger and disgust in order to deliver such programmes in a positive manner.

Emotions may also be performed in regions of the prison not normally understood in terms of emotional expression. When this happens, the performance may startle both the recipients of the performance – the audience - and the actor himself. During my fieldwork, a Senior Officer, close to tears, tore his keys from his belt chain and threw them across the control room (where they narrowly missed another officer) before storming out of the room in his frustration and anger at being "mucked about" by management. This officer's emotional performance was intended to communicate his distress and to encourage his managers to treat him more thoughtfully in the future. The performance lost some of its potency, however, when he had to return for his keys in order to get back through the gate.

### **Emotion mis-management: the intrusive script**

I want now to describe one officer's unexpected failure to manage the emotion that is potentially most in conflict with the occupational norms of prisons - sympathy for the prisoner – in an emotional zone generally understood in terms of anger and contempt. During a particularly long interview (almost three hours) a very experienced officer

(who had worked for the Prison Service for over twenty years and in a variety of prisons) recalled an occasion on which he `froze` mid-performance, precisely because the strategy of de-personalisation he had relied upon for so long failed him. In theatrical parlance this is known as `corpsing` - a term used to refer to what happens when an actor loses his/her place in the script, dries, is unable to continue, no longer believes in the play, and, seeing the audience watching and waiting, freezes to the spot, unable to continue with the `performance`. When an actor `corpses`, the entire performance is put in jeopardy and the other actors must find ways to improvise around the corpse (Hopfl and Linstead 1993:90).

During our conversation, in which my interviewee was explaining the emotional hardening that inevitably takes place amongst uniformed staff, this officer suddenly changed tack; he went on to describe a scenario which had caused him to experience feelings of shock on seeing the distress of a youth he had himself helped remove to the segregation block. The following account, in the officer`s own words, describes both the change of direction our conversation took and the officer`s feelings of shock and bewilderment at the unanticipated rush of sympathy he felt for this young prisoner - an explosion of emotion that was generated by the fact that prisoner resembled his own son:

Its like the army and killing; your emotions get hardened really..... Having said that, though.....when you`re bending them, and they`re crying...[long pause].....Just recently, I `saw` my son when I was doing it and it gave me a terrible feeling. When I saw that little con in that cell, stripped and crying, I froze inside...[Did you? How do you mean?] I can`t really describe the feeling...I feel funny even thinking about it now. It makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up....[Did you....Did your colleagues, the other officers, did they know?] (shakes his head). [Did you ever tell them?] (shakes his head again). Have you ever told them? (shakes his head again) [`Cos I was wondering if other officers have felt this..?].Apart from my missus, you`re the only person that knows. [So you don`t know if other

officers have experienced it as well?] No, because I suppose its that macho thing as well that comes into it....erm....You don't wanna let on..[Mmm] Good point, I don't know. I don't know anybody else has experienced or not. I'd be interested to know....*very* interested to know.... (Senior Officer, Lancaster Farms)

What happened to this officer was not just that he experienced unexpected feelings of sympathy; rather he experienced a profound surge of human empathy and compassion for this *person*. He had suddenly found himself in an unfamiliar emotional terrain and performing from an intrusive script from elsewhere – from home. His feelings did not correspond to his perceptions of himself as a prison officer; they were involuntary, he was unprepared for them, and hence shocked by their appearance. Three responses were available to this officer; i) to perform according to the new script and comfort the distressed prisoner, ii) to ignore the new script and make a rapid re-adjustment to the familiar one and iii) to fail to respond to either script and `freeze`. In the event, the officer simply froze; he was unable to respond to either the old script or the new one, so was unable to do anything at all.

His feelings caused him to question his perception of young offenders:

...erm, it didn't have the effect on me am I in the right job, or should I not be in this job,....erm...I suppose being in for so long, that thought never crossed my mind....I think it just re-emphasized the fact that they're *kids*....[ ] That incident down there, it pulled me up if you like. It said "Whoah! What are you doing?"

Moreover, he was afraid that these emotions would surface again. To protect himself, he had since developed a strategy of avoidance to ensure that they would not. Basically, he now keeps a low profile whenever inmates are being removed to the segregation unit. This is because there are costs if the mask is seen to slip. Corpsing is likely to have serious consequences in the prison setting - particularly *this* setting - since every officer - as a member of a `performance team` (Goffman (1971:85) is



expected to act in concert with his colleagues to present a concerted `front` while hiding from view the `backstage` of social relations. As Goffman notes, “..while a team-performance is in progress, any member of the team has the power to give the show away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct. Each team-mate is forced to rely on the good conduct and behaviour of his fellows, and they, in turn, are forced to rely on him” (ibid.: 88). It is through such cooperation that the team is able to maintain a particular definition of the situation; if an actor fails in his performance, this both demystifies the performance and calls for `repair work` from other actors if the social or corporate show is to go on (see Goffman 1952). Should anyone present signal that s(he) is not invested in the part that s(he) is performing - by forgetting his/her `lines`, falling over, bursting into tears and so on - the theatrical reality is shattered. In such circumstances, as in the theatre, others present “..are made aware of the actor *as such*, the person behind the role; the appearance of Joe, or whoever, as planner, personnel manager..[or prison officer] fails to be an imposing one and we glimpse the actor behind the part” (Mangham and Overington 1987:102). Not to support each others` performance or `face` is to disrupt the entire scene because no-one can continue in performance when others are embarrassed or shamed (ie. `out of face`). In the prison setting, where officers rely heavily on teamwork, particularly when staff perceive themselves to be in danger, the officer who corpse is likely to lose the confidence and trust of his/her colleagues. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this episode is that the officer was more likely to `corpse` in this setting (where there is a deliberate indifference to the prisoners` distress) than in any other part of the prison. This is because the discrepancy between the emotion script he was expecting to perform and the script that he found himself performing was so great.

As we can see from this officer's comments, prison officers are often afraid to acknowledge their emotions - despite the impossibility of even doing the job without emotion. Consequently, levels of emotion work are high. Moreover, his comments make clear the significance of de-personalisation in the prison setting: when asked to consider why he had never 'frozen' before, this officer remarked that generally speaking:

...you don't *think*...don't put the human aspect on it. You're doin' a job. Finished. And to suddenly have that...that feeling jump into your head that your lad is there, it's like touching a hot iron....I felt myself beginning to.....lose it.

In prisons, strategies of de-personalization are firmly in place. Officers speak routinely about the number of 'bodies' that must be fed, brought from reception, got ready for court and so on; arguably this language of 'emotional distancing' enables officers to deal with large numbers of prisoners without emotional involvement. As the same officer commented:

Although you don't see these as people, they are. But you can keep them in separate boxes...they're different people to people outside.

The routine, *bureaucratic* denial of humanity in prisons (Liebling 1998 notes the use of a 'Body Book' which officers sign when handing over prisoners) and the tendency to construct prisoners as 'Other' through the use of descriptive terms such as 'scum', 'cons', 'scoats', 'shits', 'toe-rags' and 'nonces' creates a space in which inhumane treatment may occur (for an excellent discussion of how modernity and its attendant bureaucratic institutions distance and 'Other' individuals in a way that makes brutality possible or even inevitable see Kelman 1983; Bauman 1989). As both authors note in their analyses of Nazi violence, moral inhibitions tend to be eroded if

actions are routinized and if victims are dehumanized by ideological definitions and indoctrinations. In short, it is easier to hurt people that we do not identify with and that we see as numbers or bodies rather than human beings. When this officer `froze` it was precisely because de-personalization failed and the *prisoner as person* emerged.

### **Concluding Comments**

The concept of ‘emotional labour’ is a powerful analytic lens through which to view the working lives of prison officers. I have used the concept here to argue that in addition to being places for the confinement of law-breakers, prisons are highly domestic spaces in which prison officers must perform and manage emotion on a day-to-day basis. As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this article, working in prisons is emotionally demanding and the emotions generated by prison work are many and varied. They are rarely, however, freely expressed. On the contrary, prison officers try to ensure that when they perform emotion they do so in the `right` circumstances and settings, and they draw upon an array of well-rehearsed emotion-work strategies to keep unwelcome emotions in check.

As I have suggested, the ways in which prison officers *feel* about the work they do, and how they feel about prisoners and fellow officers have significant implications both for the nature and quality of imprisonment and for relationships with fellow staff. With regard to the latter, there is no doubt that the occupational norms of specific prisons place significant emotional and psychological pressures on prison officers, since a failure to display the ‘right’ emotions is to risk the acquisition of a deviant identity – someone who is either not ‘one of us’ or not ‘up to the job’. It is

within a context of domesticity and familiarity, however, that the emotional performances of prison officers acquire their relational meaning. My central aim in this article has been to demonstrate that emotion and emotion-work are part and parcel of the predicament of imprisonment, for prison staff as well as for prisoners. Far from being an `add on` to prison life, emotions - and their management and mobilisation - are actually pivotal to the way in which organisational order in prisons is achieved and undone.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Recent exceptions include Liebling and Price (2001). Although these authors do not specifically use the term *emotion* in their study of prison officers, they make useful observations on officers' relationships with prisoners.

<sup>2</sup> Via what Erving Goffman (1959; 1967) - in his 'dramaturgical' approach to social analysis - terms 'impression-management', social actors aim to present themselves in a generally favourable light and in ways appropriate to particular roles and social settings.

<sup>3</sup> As an occupational group, the prison officers who participated in this study claimed certain group norms and assumptions (about what and should not be done by group members in specific circumstances) as central. Like the occupational norms subscribed to by American prison guards (see Kauffman 1988) these required that an officer 1) should always go to the aid of a fellow officer in distress; 2) should never 'rat' on a colleague (i.e. testify against another officer); 3) should never criticise a colleague in front of a prisoner, 4) should always support an officer in dispute with a prisoner; 5) should not demonstrate sympathy for prisoners and 6) should show positive concern for fellow officers i.e. not leave problems for officers on the next shift to deal with. These norms are not, however, adhered to to the same degree by all officers. For example, Norm 1 is generally stated to be inviolable; it is the norm upon which solidarity is based and new recruits are judged by their willingness to uphold it. I was told that in practice, however (i.e. when an officer presses an alarm bell to call for assistance) there are invariably some officers who 'hang back' - e.g. they will stop to fasten a shoe lace that has suddenly come undone or respond so slowly that they are sure to be overtaken. If these officers are in their later years, their reticence to engage in potentially violent situations is likely to be tolerated by younger staff. Similarly, a breach of Norm 5 (demonstration of sympathy for a prisoner) is likely to be overlooked if the officer has demonstrated to colleagues that (s)he can be relied upon in violent situations.

<sup>4</sup> The six prisons in which I observed and interviewed prison officers at work included three Young Offender Institutions (Lancaster Farms, Stoke Heath and Portland (the latter of which had a therapeutic community) and two adult prisons (Garth and Wymott) the latter of which had a 'special' regime i.e. a sex offender treatment wing and a wing for elderly prisoners. A limited amount of fieldwork was also carried out at Moorlands, a prison holding both adults and young offenders.

<sup>5</sup> In her book *The Managed Heart* (1983), Hochschild discusses the ways in which people manage their emotions while at work. She terms this process 'emotional labour', and by this she means the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display that is appropriate to, or consistent with a situation, role or an expected job function, and with socially accepted norms (ibid.7).

<sup>6</sup> All organizations have their own 'feeling rules' which set out those emotions deemed 'appropriate' to the occupational culture and setting; they are rooted in the organization's function, history, customs, values and traditions (see Hochschild 1983). Feeling rules are the subtle product of working arrangements and the social history of each workplace; unspoken and largely invisible, they regulate a myriad impression-management behaviours, as well as the open expression of feelings. Those who transgress the feeling rules of an organization risk presenting themselves as unreliable, untrustworthy or simply unsuitable employees (on

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this topic see also Fineman 1993; Mangham and Overington 1987; Turner 1982; Bendelow and Williams 1998)

<sup>7</sup> In the Prison Service generally it is understood that relaxed relations between staff and prisoners can 'condition' staff into being less vigilant on security matters. This concern became of particular significance in the context of escapes from two high security prisons, namely HMP Whitemoor (see Home Office 1994) and HMP Parkhurst (Home Office 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Therapeutic communities, which place particular emphasis on the development of positive, relationships between prisoners and staff, are an obvious exception.

<sup>9</sup> Hearn (1993) notes that emotional zones – for example the funeral parlour, pit-head bath and shop-floor canteen - are each socially constructed for particular forms of social display, whether it be solemnity and tears or joking and laughter .

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