



AN EXPLANATION OF STAFF PRISONER RELATIONSHIPS AT HMP WHITEMOOR

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not have to think that I need half an hour to sit down and get the jail out of my system before I can sit and talk to my wife and children. [Officer]

The best encounters between staff and prisoners were the moments when individuals 'stepped out of role', participated in activities together, or when officers used their 'silent knowledge' (practical consciousness' - or experience and skill) to understand and resolve a conflict. They knew that you should 'always give him a way out, make it look as though you're not doing him a favour' (Officer).

The Dialogue Group, where staff occasionally joined prisoners in their 'thinking out loud', was often mentioned as a place where staff-prisoner encounters were at their best. This was a weekly discussion group meeting between (mainly) prisoners (about 20), facilitated by an outside group-worker and attended by others¹³. Its purpose was to enable prisoners and others to talk in an exploratory way together about subjects which held deep meaning for the participants, without violence or dispute: 'to enquire together through conversation' (see Garrett 1997). Relationships in the Dialogue Group were at their best because they were honest, and yet could be critical. 'It's one of the most honest places in the prison' (Prisoner). Staff sometimes attended this discussion group (although some staff refused), and we were present at many of these often powerful sessions. Prisoners felt that this was a place where staff could be seen and 'known' as they really were, and vice versa. One or two confident staff members increased the level of esteem and respect accorded to them by prisoners simply through 'being themselves' in the group. Conversations started in Dialogue would continue on the wing. Staff and prisoners would see the others' perspective, and would shift their ground, as well as develop a broader vision of each other. The conversations we witnessed (and participated in) were unusually mature, open and constructive. They were sometimes extraordinarily moving. It was as if prisoners (and sometimes staff, when they took part) stopped being in prison, and became once again, themselves. The impact of this 'space' on the individuals who participated, their relationships with each other, and on life in the prison was, we felt, wholly positive.

Circumstances Under Which Prison Officers Perform at their Best

As part of our research strategy, we employed an 'appreciative inquiry' approach, which encouraged staff (and prisoners) to reflect on the best aspects of the work, and the conditions in which their best work was possible. The recent literature on the 'appreciative inquiry' method seeks to supplement 'problem-oriented' research methodology with a search for 'affirming' knowledge and positive imagery (which might ask questions like, 'under what circumstances do you feel that you function at your best as a prison officer?'). The method has been used in developing countries and recently in the National Health

¹³ There was a meeting in the morning for the prisoners from the ordinary dispersal wings and a meeting in the afternoon for prisoners from the VP wings. We attended both.