Achieving and maintaining prison officer-prisoner relationships: Tasmanian perspectives from a time of culture change.

Submitted by John Cianchi in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters in Criminology and Corrections in the School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania

2 June 2009
Statement of authority of access

This thesis may be made available for loan and limited copying in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

John Cianchi ........................................................

Declaration of authorship

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

John Cianchi .......................................................
Abstract

Prison officer-prisoner relationships are at the heart of prison life. This thesis seeks to understand what, from the perspective of the prison officer, is an effective officer-prisoner relationship. Secondly it asks how a prison that overtly places the prison officer-prisoner relationship as the central mechanism through which organisational and operational policies are understood and implemented might differ from a more traditional way of managing the prison.

Effective staff-inmate relationships enable staff to maintain a peaceful prison environment in which staff and inmates are able to meet their needs. They are characterised by mutual respect, trust, humanity, good communication and a clear understanding of the correctional officer role. Effective relationships are important because they contribute to a safe prison environment and greater inmate compliance. They are also necessary before officers can work with inmates to address their problems and reasons why they are in prison.

The basis for effective relationships seems to lie in the prison officers’ attitudes and beliefs about inmates. The prison officers interviewed in this study view the inmates as autonomous human beings who have individual differences and who are entitled to humane treatment. They hold values about relationships that include notions such as respect, honesty, empathy, compassion, humanity, fairness and a belief that inmates can change. Importantly the officers are able to balance the security and welfare dimensions of their role.

A prison that places the prison officer-prisoner relationship at the centre of prison management would respond to prisoner misconduct and disorder by first examining the status of prison officer-prisoner relationships and monitoring efforts to improve their effectiveness. It would endeavour to broaden the prison’s imaginative circumference to incorporate a rich correctional landscape that extends beyond simply warehousing criminals, to encompass a role that is concerned with the human rights and dignity of the prisoner, a belief in their capacity to grow and a desire to play an active part in this process.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Rob White for his advice, encouragement, support and patience. Thanks also to Max Travers for his advice and feedback about the research interviews. This thesis would not have been possible without the assistance of the Tasmania Prison Service staff who gave me their time and perspectives. Finally, I would like to thank Miriam, Freja, Indigo and Saffron for their kindness and belief in me - and for allowing me to spend many weekends in the library instead of with them.
Contents

Abstract.......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................ iii
Introduction.................................................................................................................... 1
The prison as the site for prison officer-prisoner relationships .................................... 3
  Achieving a complex task....................................................................................... 4
  Prison Standards .................................................................................................. 6
  Human rights ....................................................................................................... 9
  Humanity ............................................................................................................ 11
  The prison officer ............................................................................................... 12
  The paramilitary nature of prisons .................................................................... 13
  The effects of working in prison ......................................................................... 15
  The prisoner ....................................................................................................... 15
  The Tasmanian context ....................................................................................... 16
Summary................................................................................................................... 19

Dimensions of prison officer-prisoner relationships ................................................... 21
  Prison order and the exercise of power ................................................................. 22
  Prison officer and organisational discourses about purpose and process ............. 27
  Attitudes towards prisoners .................................................................................. 30
  How consistent are prison officer attitudes?......................................................... 31
  Role conflict......................................................................................................... 32
  Modes of staff-prisoner interaction .................................................................... 33
  Relational dimensions of staff-prisoner relationships .......................................... 35
Summary................................................................................................................... 36

An investigation into officer-prisoner relationships in Tasmania ............................... 38
  Introduction........................................................................................................... 38
  Research design & approach ................................................................................ 38
  Results................................................................................................................... 40
    The nature of successful prison work ................................................................. 40
    The values and attitudes underlying effective relationships ............................. 48
    What happens in effective relationships ......................................................... 52
    When the prison environment is too oppressive or too relaxed ...................... 57
    Too oppressive ............................................................................................... 58
    Too relaxed .................................................................................................. 59
    How other officers might develop more effective relationships with inmates 61
  Discussion............................................................................................................. 63
    What are effective staff-prisoner relationships? .............................................. 63
    Why are effective relationships important?....................................................... 63
    What distinguishes prison officers who achieve effective relationships (the subjects) from less effective officers? ......................................................... 64
    How do these findings compare with the literature? ....................................... 65
  Conclusion............................................................................................................. 67
  References............................................................................................................ 70