The Changing of the Guard: conceptualisations of prison officers' work in three South Australian prisons

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Table of Contents

Summary

The prison officer is central to prison life, yet understandings of this role are limited. This thesis argues that the two overarching (and often competitive) conceptualisations of prison officers' work as custodial work or human services work are limited. Eight conceptualisations of prison officers' work from the correctional literature are identified - *Para-military officer*, *Security Officer*, *Warehouser of prisoners*, *Public Servant /bureaucrat*, *Professional*, *Manager of Prisoners* , *Therapist* and *Case Manager.*

These conceptualisations are defined and related to one another by examining their construction through discourses of prison purpose and prison process (Adler and Longhurst 1994).

The thesis develops the analysis of du Gay (1996) that organisations use discourse as a means of constructing work identities for their employees and the work of Halford and Leonard (1999) who argues that workers are active agents in this process and do not always take on the identity the organisation is seeking to promote.

The thesis addresses three research questions

- How has the role of the prison officer been conceptualised by the South Australian Department for Correctional Services over time?
- How is the role of the prison officer currently conceptualised by personnel working within South Australian prisons, what influences the way the role is conceptualised and what purposes do these conceptualisations serve?
- To what extent have the new conceptualisations of the role of the prison officer, articulated by the Department for Correctional Services in the last ten years, been

adopted by staff within prisons and what determines the influence of these new conceptualisations?

These questions are addressed using qualitative research techniques of document analysis and semi-structured interviews.

The thesis identifies that in recent decades the Department has emphasised conceptualisations of the role constructed from normalisation and rehabilitative discourses.

Interviewees, forty-four working in three South Australian prisons, (both departmental and privately managed), conceptualised the work of a prison officer as complex and unique and identified three influential audiences for the performance of prison officers' work – prisoners, officers and their colleagues, and the Departmental hierarchy. Interviewees constructed the role of the prison officer in terms that would earn respect for the work from each of these audiences and manage the vulnerability of the officer as a worker and a prison officer. Half of those interviewed conceptualised the prison officer based on a *Manager of Prisoners*. Other interviewees, critical of the role within their prison, described it as a *Warehouser* and saw the competition between custodial and human services roles as irreconcilable.

The thesis argues that Departmental discourse can be seen to have a significant influence on the conceptualisation of the prison officer's role by those working within prisons, but that it competes for influence with the discourse of the other powerful audiences for the performance of prison officers' work – prisoners and other staff.

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text. The thesis does draw slightly upon the research undertaken for my thesis for the Masters in Public Policy and Administration entitled *An Examination of the decision to privatise the management of the Mount Gambier Prison.*

Susan T King

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I have described this research as partnership research and in doing so acknowledge that the thesis builds upon conversations with staff in corrections throughout South Australia, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. I appreciate the generosity of all who have discussed the work of prison officers with me over the last decade, including the many individuals in the South Australia Department for Correctional Services. In particular I acknowledge the insights and passions of those whom I interviewed for this thesis. I have been inspired by the thoughtful approach to working in prisons demonstrated by so many within South Australian prisons.

I acknowledge also the support of my colleagues at the University of South Australia and in particular those within the School of Social Work and Social Policy. Without their willingness to juggle priorities and their encouragement to see this project through to the end, the process would have been far more difficult and stressful. The preparation of this thesis has been physically supported by the excellent transcriptions of interview tapes by Meredith Hosking.

The confidence to start on a project of this magnitude and to continue to move it along, albeit on a part-time basis, was not developed in isolation. I thank my friends, my companions in Cennednyss Community and my family for their support over the years. In particular I thank Claire and Rachel, who can barely remember life without my thesis and David Bamford whose belief that this work matters has been a foundation in my endeavours.

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

 Tables

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

Prison officers, doing their work, are central to every prison. The mechanics of prison life are implemented by prison officers performing the repetitive acts of locking and unlocking doors; watching and counting prisoners; talking with prisoners; supporting and helping prisoners. The prison officer is responsible for the secure containment of the prisoner and the delivery of the prison regime determined by prison policy.

This thesis sets out to identify and explore a range of conceptualisations of prison officers' work in the literature and in correctional practice in South Australia and to understand how these conceptualisations are used by the Department for Correctional Services and by personnel within South Australian prisons. To achieve this, the research focuses on three central research questions

- How has the role of the prison officer been conceptualised by the South Australian Department for Correctional Services over time?

- How is the role of the prison officer currently conceptualised by personnel working within South Australian prisons, what influences the way the role is conceptualised and what purposes do these conceptualisations serve?

- To what extent have the new conceptualisations of the role of the prison officer, articulated by the Department for Correctional Services in the last ten years, been adopted by staff within prisons and what determines the influence of these new conceptualisations?

The analysis for this research identifies two broad conceptualisations of the role of the prison officer as a custodian or a human services worker and eight more specific conceptualisations of prison officers' work - as a *Para-military officer*, *a Warehouser*, a *Security Officer*, a *Manager of Prisoners*, *a Professional or semi-professional,* a *Public Servant*, a *Therapist* and a *Case Manager*.

Despite the role of prison officer as central agents of the state, which in recent years has imprisoned increasing numbers of its citizens, the work of prison officers has received only limited attention. Beyond the sentence of imprisonment from the court, there is little public interest in the conduct of prisons. Those who do give attention to what follows the delivery of the sentence, most often reformers or academics, turn their gaze to the prisoners and their experience and position prison officers as a homogenous group on the periphery of the prisoners' lives. As a result, until the last five years, little theoretical attention has been addressed to the prison officer, particularly in the Australian context.

Recognising that the experience of imprisonment is significantly shaped by the performance of prison officers' work, this thesis places the work of the prison officer in the centre of the research focus. This focus then brings to the foreground not just the mechanics of the work of the prison officer, but the meaning constructed for these tasks in the diverse prison contexts in which the work is performed. Furthermore the officer can be recognised as performing the role both of a prison operative and an employee in an organisational context.

This focus highlights the complexity of prison officers' work. The role is one that is performed in very diverse prison settings, ranging from maximum security complexes to prison farms. The role is performed within prison systems that are shaped by very different understandings of the purpose of imprisonment and different expectations of prison procedures. Closer attention to the work of prison officers reveals that the expression prison officer is used to encompass a range of understandings of the role of the worker within the prison. It is these conceptualisations of the role of the prison officer that are the focus of this thesis.

Tracing the construction of prison officers' work from discourses of prison purpose (rehabilitation, normalisation and control) and prison process (bureaucratic, legal, professional and entrepreneurial)(Adler and Longhurst 1994) this thesis identifies the emergence of new conceptualisations of prison officers' work over time within the South Australian Department for Correctional Services. In particular the analysis identifies an intensification of Departmental discourses of change in prison purpose and process in the decade 1993 to 2003 and a strengthening of the promotion of conceptualisations of the prison officer as a *Manager of Prisoners* and a *Case Manager*.

Qualitative research with staff within three South Australian prisons, in Adelaide, Port Augusta and Mount Gambier, found that the work of the prison officer was conceptualised as unique and complex and that specific conceptualisations of the role of the officer were utilised by staff to garner respect for the role of the officer and to minimise the vulnerability of the officer. The most appropriate specific conceptualisation of the role of the officer was contested within the prisons with

differential patterns of conceptualisation of the role being influenced by the length of time individuals were employed in corrections and the prison within which they worked.

Interviewees who had worked in prisons for less than ten years were more likely than their longer serving colleagues to utilise the newer Departmental discourses to construct the role of the prison officer. In particular 80% interviewees at Mount Gambier prison utilised the *Manager of Prisoners* conceptualisation to describe the role. The analysis in this thesis explores the influence of length of time working in corrections and of particular prison contexts on the adoption of the newer Departmental discourses by exploring how these factors influence the audiences for prison officers' work and thus interviewees' construction of the role to garner respect and minimise vulnerability.

In this introductory chapter the social and economic importance of prison officers' work is explored, this particular research project is described and located in the broad context of Australian prisons and the thesis structure is outlined.

Prisons: the context for the work of the prison officer

Imprisonment is, at this point in time, the most severe punishment that can be inflicted upon a citizen by the Australian state and is intended to be utilised only as the punishment of last resort.[1] It is thus a punishment of legal and ethical significance. Imprisonment is legally important as the ultimate punishment used in our legal system, as the pinnacle of the exercise of legal power of the state over its

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[1] S11 Criminal Law (Sentencing) Act (South Australia).

citizens. It is of ethical importance in that it involves the deprivation of liberty of citizens and an imposition on citizens of living conditions over which they have no control. This exercise of power imposes obligations and responsibilities on the state and its agents.

Prisons, the structures that have developed to administer this significant social sanction, are both physical and social entities. The physical entity that is the prison, seen by many as a symbol of the power of the state to punish (Garland 1990:259), is both the context for the prisoners' lives while imprisoned and the workplace of the prison officer. Whilst fashions in prison exteriors and structures have changed significantly over time (Garland 1990:258; Woodham 2005) the physical structure of prisons is strongly influenced by historical solutions to the problem of containing a large number of non-compliant individuals and by the durability of individual prisons.

However prisons, as the context of this research, are primarily the social institutions that have developed over the past two hundred years as the inevitable and essential means of administering the punishment of imprisonment (Garland 1990:3, 4). Through the exercise of state power, citizens are removed from their normal physical and social environment and required to live together in a particular social configuration subject to the authority of prison officers and their managers. At the end of the time of imprisonment, these citizens are intended to return to our society and take up lives as law abiding members of the community.

Although it is common to treat prisons as homogenous institutions (Sparks 1996:44), the literature reporting studies in a range of prisons suggests that the different prisoner populations, prison histories and prison regimes result in prisons that differ from one another markedly in terms of the experiences they offer prisoners and the experience of staff working within the prison (Jurik and Halemba 1984; Liebling 2005). Liebling (2005) identifies that these differences have important consequences for the performance of prisons in areas as fundamental as vulnerability to riots, escapes and prisoner self harm.

The prisoner population

At 30th June 2005 there were 25,353 prisoners in Australia, of whom 20% were unsentenced prisoners either awaiting trial or awaiting sentence (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005:10). This was a 5% increase on the number of prisoners at 30th June 2004 and a 45% increase on the number of prisoners a decade earlier at 30th June 1995. These prisoner numbers reflected an increase in both male and female prisoners, with female prisoners increasing at a greater rate than male prisoners (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005:7).
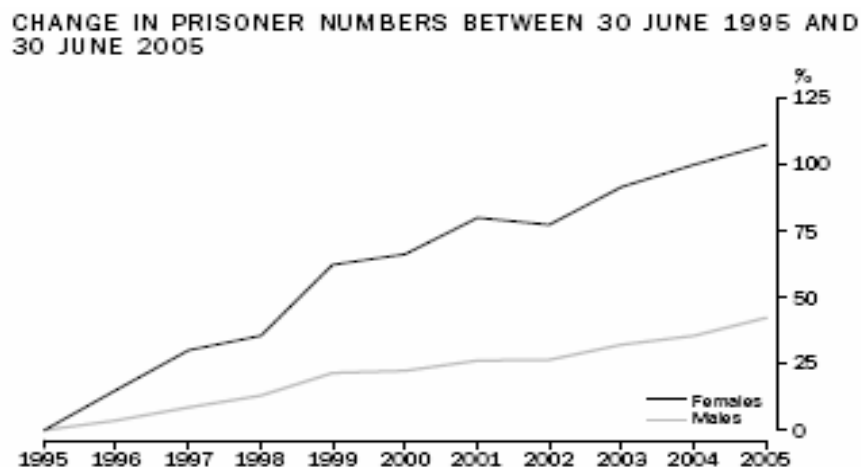
Figure 1.1 Change in prisoner numbers between 30 June 1995 and 30 June 2005, Source: ABS Prisoners in Australia 2005 (Cat. No. 4517.0 p7)

This trend of increasing prison numbers is not reflected in South Australian prisons. Although the population within South Australian prisons over the decade has fluctuated, the population of 1475 on 30th June 1995 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000) is almost identical to the population on 30th June 2005 of 1473 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005).

The number of indigenous people in custody (5,656 at 30th June 2005), is disproportionate to their representation in the Australian population (12 times in an age standardised comparison to the non-indigenous population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005:7)). The South Australian indigenous imprisonment rate (13.8 in an age standardised comparison) is slightly above this national average (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005:14).

Ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous Age Standardised Rates of Imprisonment

(a) Rate per 100,000 adult population.

Figure 1.2 Ratio of Indigenous to non-indigenous Age Statndardised rates of Imprisonment, Source: ABS *Prisoners in Australia 2005 (Cat. No. 4517.0 p6)*

Nationally, not only has there been an absolute increase in the number of individuals imprisoned, but the proportion of individuals imprisoned relative to the adult Australian population has increased. At 30th June 2005 the imprisonment rate was

163 prisoners per 100,000 adult population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005:30).

This is a 3% increase on the imprisonment rate of 30th June 2004 (Australian Bureau

of Statistics 2005:4)and 26% increase on 30th June 1995.

IMPRISONMENT RATES(a)

(a) Rate per 100,000 adult population.
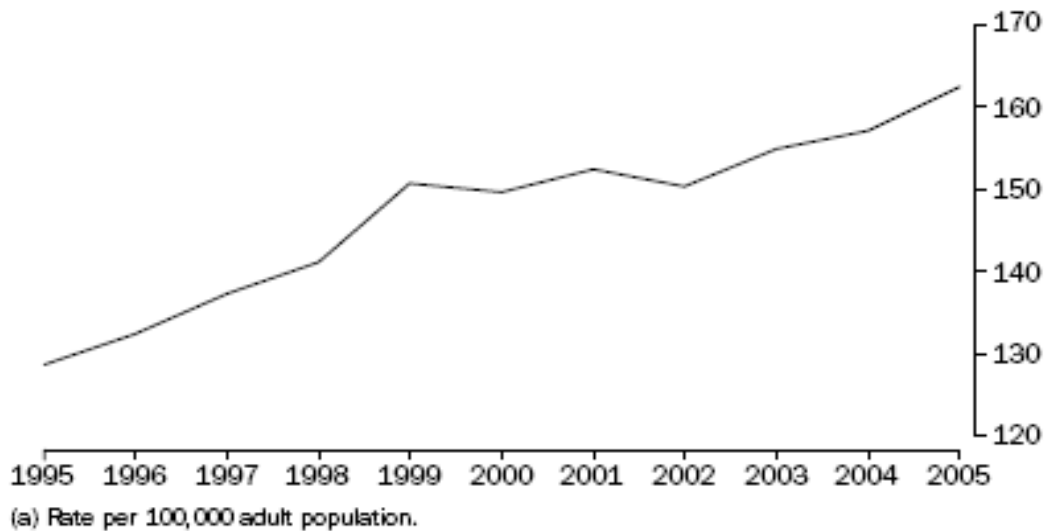
Figure 1.3 Imprisonment Rates,Source: ABS Prisoners in Australia 2005 (Cat. No. 4517.0
   p5)

South Australian imprisonment rates have fluctuated, varying from 126.1 in 1995, up

as high as 132.8 in 1997 and as low as 113 in 2000, but the 2005 rate of 123.2 in

2005 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005:31) is one of the lowest of the Australian

states. The Victorian rate of 94.2 is lower, whilst Tasmania (149.9), Queensland

(176.7), New South Wales (187.6) and Western Australia (229.3) all have higher

rates.

Although South Australian prisons have not been subject to the same intensity of

pressures from rising numbers that have been experienced in other states, the prisons

have been effected by the changing prison population that is identified in all

jurisdictions. National trends identify that increasing proportions of the prisoner

population are held as a result of violent offences (homicide, assault, sex offences

and robbery) (Australian Institute of Criminology 2005:86). However, other than the data about the number of Indigenous Australians in prison, there is little available data on other characteristics of the prisoner population that appear to be placing significant strain on the operations of prisons. For instance there is no national data available on the mental health and cognitive skills of prisoners (Howells et al. 2004: 33) and little data available on the use of drugs and alcohol of prisoners prior to incarceration (Howells et al. 2004:40).

The prison as a centre for employment

Whilst the responsibility for imprisonment rests with the government whose courts sentence the individual, governments in Australia both own and manage their own prisons, own but contract out the management of prisons and buy imprisonment services from privately owned and managed prisons. In 2005 120 Australian prisons were owned and managed by governments and 7 were privately managed (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2006:7.3). The increasing usage of imprisonment as a punishment option has resulted in a large and growing expenditure by Australian governments on prison operations (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2006). The cost of running Australian prisons in 2004-05 can be calculated to be almost $1.5billion.[2]

Staffing costs are the largest proportion of this expenditure (O'Toole 2005). Correctional Services employs approximately 18,000 people in Australia and of these

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[2] Calculated from average cost per prisoner per day - $170 Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2006, *Report on Government Services 2006,* Productivity Commission, Canberra. multiplied by daily average prisoner population -24092Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2006, *Report on Government Services 2006,* Productivity Commission, Canberra.. multiplied by 365.

approximately 10,000 are prison officers (O'Toole 2005:214). The significance of prison officers within the prison is derived both from the fact that they are the majority of the workers and also from the fact that the other workers within the prison are divided into much smaller professional cohorts. The eight thousand employees who are not prison officers fill administrative and management roles, provide professional services directly to prisoners as doctors, nurses, psychologists and social workers and support the infrastructure of the prison in its daily operations in trade and professional roles. Each of these occupational groups will have only a few members within each prison.

Not withstanding the significance of the prison officer as an employee within a prison, the role is not one which is recognised as having a high status. Prison officers are employed on starting salaries that are, on average, below those for occupations with which they might be compared, such as police, firemen, ambulance officers and probation and parole officers, although above that of a commencing customs officer. Averaged across Australia, the commencing salary for a prison officer in 2003 was $31,600[3] (O'Toole 2005:215).

However. despite this lack of status, the prison officer can be seen to occupy a position of great influence. within the prison. As Grant (2005:191) argues prison officers control the lives of prisoners through their management of the movement of prisoners, their discretion about locking and unlocking spaces and their structuring of

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[3] This figure does not include overtime and shift loadings (see reference to 'base salaries' in introductory comments to data presentation in O'Toole O'Toole, S 2005, 'Human resource analysis of the Australian corrections industry', in *Corrections criminology*, ed S O'Toole and S Eyland, Hawkins Press, Leichhardt, NSW.

access to telephones and visits. This role places them in a position of influence both over the daily lives of prisoners but also over the capacity of others to work with prisoners. Other staff within the prison need the cooperation of prison officers to be able to provide services and to establish the routines within which they can perform their professional roles.

Recognising that the prison is both a site of containment of prisoners and a place of employment for prison officers broadens the theoretical perspectives that inform the study of prisons and prison officers. It suggests that whilst the prison has many unique features, it may also share attributes of other complex human service organisations. The study of prison officers' work can be informed both by sociological studies of prisons and organisational theorists' observations of other organisations.

Studying the prison officer in the prison context

Although prison officers' work has received limited attention, understandings of prisons have been explored consistently by sociologists since the middle of the last century. Studies of individual prisons and prisons as institutions have used the analytic tools of studies of social relations, of sub-groups and sub-cultures to illuminate the experience of prison by prisoners (Sykes 1958; Clemmer 1965 (first published 1940)). Following the work of Goffman (1961b) prison sociologists have studied prisons as 'total institutions' as the context for every aspect of the lives of their inmates. These studies, exploring the way roles within institutions are allocated, reinforced, supported and subverted, have studied the use and abuse of power within the closed institution of the prison. A major focus of these studies has been the prisoner or inmate and the rituals, structures and processes by which the individual

sentenced to imprisonment becomes transformed into a prisoner, compliant or defiant (Sparks 1996).

The role of officers within the prison has received far less attention (although Thomas' (1972) study of the English Prison officer stands out as an exception to this void) (Kauffman 1988; Liebling and Price 2001 DiIulio, 1987). Many studies have not recognise the prison officer as a player within the prison at all, for example Greer (2000) explored the changing nature of interpersonal relationships in a women's prison without mentioning officers within the prison. Neglect of the prison officer is difficult to explain, in the light of the recognition of their importance by some of the most influential observers of prisons as Ross (1981:1) commented,

> It is remarkable that so little study of the correction officer has been made when one considers how often, and how eloquently, eminent spokesmen on corrections have acknowledged the critical importance of the guard in the functioning of correctional institutions. For example, Sykes (1958: 53) referred to the guard as "the pivotal figure on which custodial bureaucracy turns".

However others, including Hawkins (1976:Chapter 4), suggest that although Sykes (1958) and Clemmer (1965, first published 1940) acknowledge the importance of the prison officer they also contribute to their later invisibility by failing to give substance to the prison officer in their description of the prison community. The phenomenon of the worker being treated as invisible is not unique to prisons. Barley (1994) who studied a similar phenomenon in scientific laboratories argued that the workers get ignored by sociologists because the focus of study becomes the endeavour. An alternative explanation of the lack of research attention to prison officers is that researchers feel that the officer is not worthy of research attention, feeling

> disdain for people who would work in what is often considered a low paying lack-lustre job in an unattractive work-setting in which one must live in

> unavoidable proximity to individuals who are often hostile, belligerent, abusive, and sometimes destructive and assaultive" (Ross 1981:2)

A consequence of the failure of sociology to produce a body of studies focussed on the prison officer at work has been the ease with which the officer has been demonised (Cullen et al. 1985:506; Edney 1997:289,290). Lack of detailed exploration has made it easier for the prison officer to be portrayed in broad brush as intellectually limited, prone to violence and insensitive (Edney 1997:289,290; Crawley 2004a:xiii). Additionally ignoring the officer has made their work within the prison invisible (Sparks 1996).

And yet as Edney (1997) argues, the position that people are sent to prison as a punishment and not for punishment places

> incredible trust, considering the chequered history of humanity in the benevolence of the state and its functionaries. We expect that the custodial staff of these institutions – prison officers- will respect the rights of prisoners and act towards them in a professional and dignified manner (Edney 1997:289)

That correctional staff do not always perform their role as the correctional organisation or the justice system would expect has been documented over time in reports of Royal Commissions (Nagle 1978; Johnston 1991). However, there has been little systematic exploration of what McCarthy categorises as misfeasance (misuse of the occupational role), malfeasance (illegal or improper activities) and nonfeasance (negligent activity) by prison officers (Grant 2005:196,7).

Recent Australian research within corrections highlights the importance of ethical behaviour within prisons and the lack of research within Australian prisons that would enable an understanding of how the prison as an organisation affects the behaviour of staff members in particular prison officers (Grant 2005).

In the last two decades, the research neglect of the prison officer has been noted by researchers (for example Liebling and Price (2003; 2001;1998b; 1998a) Liebling (2000) Crawley (2005; 2004a) and Kauffman (1988) who are including or focussing primarily upon prison officers in their work (Lambert, Hogan and Barton 2002:115; Dowden and Tellier 2004:3). However, there is still very limited research within Australian prisons and in particular focussing on prison officers, the occupational group whose work most powerfully impacts on the lives of prisoners.

The research for this thesis makes a contribution to addressing this lack of research on the work of the prison officer within 21st century prisons in Australia. The thesis adopts a research focus that places the prison officer in an organisational context. This context is identified as being both a broad departmental context and a more narrow prison context. In adopting this focus the thesis seeks to explore the interaction between official organisational discourse and the conceptualisation of the role of the prison officer by individuals within the prison. The thesis explores the idea that whilst correctional organisations will express views (that change over time) about the role of the prison officer, individuals working within the prison have agency in their capacity to adopt, reject or adapt these ideas (du Gay 1996; Halford and Leonard 1999; Halford 2003)

The potential contribution of this research to increased understandings of prison officers in their prison context is limited by the narrow scope of the research, in three prisons in one Australian jurisdiction, and as a result the thesis can only claim to offer insights into how the work of prison officers in those prisons is being conceptualised. Although the research for this thesis will not directly address the question of officer corruption or abusive behaviour it will address the relationship between the organisation and the prison officer and the extent to which the organisational context of the work influences the way officers see their role. To this

extent it may provide a platform for further work about the possibilities of organisational influence on ethical behaviour within prisons.

The research process demonstrated the interest of some prison officers and other correctional staff in developing a body of knowledge within their industry and confirmed the very different contexts for the work of prison officers provided by different prisons. Both of these factors should encourage further research within Australian prisons. The research also identified common themes between these Australian prisons and that of prisons in other jurisdictions. At times the words of Australian prison officers were almost identical to those reported by their English counterparts. This suggests that research across jurisdictions may be a fruitful way of advancing our knowledge of prison officers' work and our understanding of the impact of organisational and other changes to the working context of the officer.

The research project

Notwithstanding this lack of detailed research about prison officers in Australia, the impact of the significant changes in expectations of prisons in a variety of jurisdictions including Australia can be seen to be affecting the working life of prison officers (Josi and Sechrest 1998; Liebling and Price 2001:76; Grant 2005; O'Toole 2005; Crawley 2004a; Liebling 2005). The prison has become a high profile tool of governments' law and order policies, and a complex and often contradictory set of expectations of the prison are embedded both in policy and in popular discourse. Directly and indirectly penal policy and "'penal sensibilities' shape prison life internally" (Liebling 2004:44).

However little is known about the response of those working within prisons to these new expectations and what is known encourages the belief that staff are resistant to change (Vinson 1982; Liebling and Price 2001:4). Although staff are not always blamed for their resistance to change (see Crawley 2004a:15) the image of staff as cynical and unconcerned by the broader goals of the prison is perpetuated in these reports.

One response to the observed resistance to change of prison officers has been an attempt by correctional agencies to change the characteristics of the prison officer group through the introduction of women, prison officers from indigenous backgrounds and officers whose cultural and linguistic background reflect that of the population they serve. Although Australian agencies have not been particularly successful in their attempt to broaden the diversity of prison officers (O'Toole 2005:213) women are now employed in significant (15-20%) numbers in Australian jurisdictions. The impact of this change in the prison officer work force, whilst explored by many researchers at the individual prison level, has still to be explored in terms of its effect on the professionalisation of the prison officers' role and the impact on role status in comparison to other occupations.

This thesis seeks to explore the interface between prisons policy and workers within prisons and in particular to identify the extent to which changes in prison policy affect the conceptualisation of prison officers' work within the prison. The thesis addresses this issue by first examining prison policy within the South Australian Department for Correctional Services (as expressed in the Annual Reports of the Department). The policy is analysed in terms of the discourses describing the

purposes and processes of imprisonment (Adler and Longhurst 1994) from which it is constructed. The conceptualisations of prison officers' work that are constructed from these policy discourses are identified.

The thesis then explores the response of those working within prisons to these articulations of prisons policy and in particular to the conceptualisations of prison officers' work articulated through this policy. The research in three South Australian prisons focussed on how the role of the prison officer is conceptualised by staff (managers, senior managers, auxiliary staff and officers) working within the prison.

The research finds that the influence of departmental policy discourses on the conceptualisation of prison officers' work within the prisons can be identified, but is limited. The role of the prison officer is constructed by those interviewed for this research as complex and unique and requiring a balance of human services and security roles . However the most appropriate conceptualisation of prison officers' work is contested.

Conceptualisations of prison officers' work are demonstrated to be influenced by the desire to garner respect for the work of the officer and defined and managed the vulnerability of the officer. In this process recent departmental policy discourses can be seen to be most influential amongst staff employed within corrections for less than ten years, and staff working within the private prison at Mount Gambier. This differential influence of the policy discourses can be explained in terms of the importance of the audiences for whom prison officers perform their work and in particular the influence of other officers and staff and prisoners.

Naming the officer

As the research hinged upon the identification of conceptualisations of the prison

officer's work through the use of particular names for the role of the officer, the

language to be used in the research and the writing up of the research was of

particular importance. The use of a particular term to describe the work of the prison

officer can convey a position in the debates about the appropriateness of particular

conceptualisations of the work (Jenne and Kersting 1996; Josi and Sechrest 2005)

and thus risks either distorting the research interview or conveying inappropriate

meaning.

The importance of naming is recognised in Merlo's (1995:174) comments about the

inappropriateness of some references to prison officers.

> The general public still refer to us as "guards" or "warders". These terms
> conjure up in my mind pictures of the old convict days. I always feel a bit
> offended that people haven't changed their ideas with the times and don't
> realise that the role the officer now plays within the system is completely
> divorced from the stockade days. They also have a very limited idea of how
> dangerous and stressful the job can be…

There has been little critical discussion (except Johnson (1981) and Toch (1978))

about this naming of the officer either in academic literature or in practice. Those

authors (e.g. Toch 1978; Johnson 1981; Jurik 1985a; Kauffman 1988; Kommer 1993;

Merlo 1995:174) who actually discuss the naming of the work of prison officers are

often using this as a device to explore the question of the conceptualisation of the

work and to enter the debate from their own perspective. This is exemplified by

Kaufmann (1988) who uses a discussion of the appropriate name for referring to

prison officers to make a point about the conceptualisation of the work, arguing

> I depart from the standard practice of referring to individuals employed to
> maintain security within prisons as "guards" or "correction[al] officers". My
> use of the term "prison officer" reflects my orientation toward those I

> studied and their role within prisons. "Guard" is too suggestive of a static relationship, something one does with inanimate objects. In any case, its connotations are derogatory and belittling. "Correction officer" conveys a fanciful (and, to my mind, unseemly) notion of the relationship between keeper and kept. "Prison officer" simply denotes an individual granted official authority within the specific domain of a penal institution." (Kauffman 1988:5)

Many authors avoid making their own statement through naming by using the term that is officially recognised within the organisation they are studying. This may be correctional officer (Banks 2003), guard (Clemmer 1965 (first published 1940)) prison officer (Merlo 1995; Liebling and Price 2001) or other terms (e.g. correctional services officer (Jurik 1985b) that may be in vogue within organisations at a particular point in time.

An organisation may use changing the name of the "prison officer", to convey a changed conceptualisation of the work within the organisation. In the United States the movement amongst correctional staff to avoid using the expression "prison guard" was seen as an indicator of 'dissatisfaction with the working conditions that go with being a "prison guard"' whose

> work consists largely of key-turning, counting and herding inmates, conducting searches, and manning a post when most persons are supposed to be asleep. (Johnson 1981:79)

Whereas the "Correctional officers"

> would see themselves as agents of change dedicated to moving inmates toward acceptance of themselves as law-abiding citizens. The officers would prefer persuasive techniques of influence and would selectively utilize coercion only as a last resort for a short-term effect (Johnson 1981:83)

Jurik (1985a) also identifies an organisational change process in the movement from correctional security officers to correctional service officers. Similarly in Holland the name change "from 'bewaarder' (keeper) to 'penitentiair inrichtingswerker'

(penitentiary institution worker usually abbreviated to piw-er)" (Kommer 1993:130)

reflected a new policy in which

> prisoners are not primarily seen as objects to be locked up or as criminals to be rehabilitated, but as people who, for that very reason, are to be treated humanely (Kommer 1993:130)

The use of a name change to suggest a change in work practice has been identified in other arenas of practice. Trotter (1999:4,5) identifies that a change of name to describe workers with involuntary clients from 'case workers' to 'case managers' has been used to denote a change in responsibility from problem solving and therapeutic services to planning and oversight of cases. This is a theme that is also explored in considering the conceptualisation of the work of the prison officer as a case manager.

However, Toch (1978) argues that a critical approach must be taken to occupational name changes proposed by organisations. He poses the question 'Does the advent of the "correctional officer" augur an emerging role in penology, or is such an officer a rebaptised Keeper of Cons?'(Toch 1978). He argues that name changing in itself is insufficient to bring about change and that organisational support is required for people to undertake a new role.

The linking of organisational strategy (in these cases conveyed by name changes) and the conceptualisations of prison officers' work is central to this thesis and is discussed in more depth in the context of organisational communication and the use of conceptualisations of work within organisations in Chapter 4.

For the purposes of this research it was necessary to identify a relatively neutral expression that would allow interviewees to express their own views about the

conceptualisation of prison officers' work and the writer to address the issues without signalling a position had already been adopted. Ultimately two terms were needed to achieve these purposes. For research within the prisons, both government managed and Group 4, the term *correctional officer* was adopted. This was the expression used by the organisations to specify the role that interviewees were being asked to address. It was a clear and respectful designation and no interviewee found it necessary to clarify the role to which the research referred, although a couple of interviewees challenged its appropriateness.

> *No, I actually don't see us as being correctional officers. I think we are still custodial officers. I think there are very limited resources available for the women to address their offending behaviour. [Interviewee 27]]*

However for writing purposes it was recognised, as argued above that the expression *correctional officer* had been adopted by organisations to convey a particular conceptualisation of the role at a point in time, and was likely to create confusion if used in the analysis. The most generic description of the role is that of prison officer, being the name associated with the ASCO (Australian Standards Classification of Occupations) code for this occupation (State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training 2006). This is the term that is utilised within this thesis when the writer is using her own words[4]. In adopting this term it is recognised that some people will see this as a rejection of the term correctional officer and the values it conveys. This is not the intent of choosing the term prison officer, rather the intent is to step back

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[4] When quoting either from interviewees or from writings, no alteration has been made to the language used in the original.

from the language in use and invite reflection on the conceptualisations conveyed by correctional officer and other discourse in current use.

The history of the research

The topic for this thesis arose from the observation of developments in the training and education of prison officers in South Australia. In 1990, the Department for Correctional Services contracted with Adelaide TAFE to join the Certificate in Justice Studies creating a correctional services stream to sit alongside streams created for police and legal services commission personnel. In 1995 the (then) new CEO of the Department for Correctional Services asked that this education program move from TAFE to the University of South Australia to enable the University to provide prison officers (and later other staff) with a Diploma in Correctional Administration (under license from NSW Centre for Professional Development). This new initiative created a partnership between the Department for Correctional Services and the University of South Australia to provide education opportunities for its staff. Units in the Diploma in Correctional Administration were to be compulsory for new staff (particularly prison officers) moving from probationary status.

Discussions with senior managers and staff within the Staff Development Branch over the years of this partnership provided a background to this research. In particular discussions with the CEO, senior managers and training staff at the time of the transformation of the TAFE Certificate of Justice Studies into a University of South Australia, Diploma in Correctional Administration, centering on the role of university education for prison officers highlighted the intensity of the discursive transformation that the department was trying to perform. Initial awareness of the nature of the debates that surrounded this transformation and the passion that fuelled

the divisions between those who conceptualised the work of prison officers as custodians and those who conceptualised the work as human services work, developed from discussions with staff both in head office and within the prisons. The research focus that developed from this engagement with the Department for Correctional Services, on the conceptualisations of the work of the prison officer involved exploring the sense that is made of prison officers' work and the organisational dialogue through which this meaning is contested and negotiated.

This research has been supported by staff throughout the Department for Correctional Services and in the private prison management company, Group 4. At times their interests were identical to that of the researcher and at times the interests of the researcher piggybacked on other departmental purposes. However, the research has benefited from the insights of many staff within the department and from the opportunity to observe the dynamics of prison administration.

Research in prisons can be difficult to negotiate and even with the established partnerships and ongoing dialogue about the issues under consideration, the process of designing a research process that would receive departmental approval and also be acceptable within the prisons was complex. Ultimately the acceptability of the research and the welcome to the researcher within a prison depended upon broader departmental political factors rather than the particular research design and approach to interviewees.

The structure of the thesis

This thesis addresses the identified research questions in the following six chapters. Chapter 2 articulates the theoretical basis for the thesis, elaborating both the epistemological basis for the research, the theoretical perspective and the research method. As suggested above, this approach is informed both by studies of prisons and organisational theory.

Chapter 3 reviews the body of literature about prison officers' work and highlights the conceptualisations of the role of the prison officer in the academic literature. The chapter argues that the broad categorisation of the role as custodial or human services fails to acknowledge the complexity of the prison officers' work and is limited by the construction of these roles as mutually incompatible. The chapter identifies eight more precise conceptualisations of the role of the officer that can be discerned in the literature and policy documents and identifies the use of prison purpose and prison process discourse to construct these conceptualisations.

Chapter 4 explores how the role of the prison officer has been conceptualised by the South Australian Department for Correctional Services over time. It does this through an analysis of the discourse in Departmental annual reports, tracing the use of prison purpose and prison process discourse and the emergence of conceptualisations of the role of the prison officer. The chapter describes the development of the role from the *Paramilitary* conceptualisation of the role early in the twentieth century to the most recent conceptualisations of the role as *Manager of Prisoners*, *Case Manager* and *Therapeutic Agent*.

Chapter 5 explores how the role of the prison officer is currently conceptualised by personnel working within South Australian prisons and what influences the way the role is conceptualised. In so doing it reports qualitative research with staff working in three South Australian prisons. The research identified that the work of the prison officer is seen as complex and unique, that the relationship between the custodial role and the human services role is not satisfactorily conceptualised as mutual incompatibility and that the *Manager of Prisoners* was the most popular of the conceptualisations of the prison officers' role. It examines the use of specific conceptualisations to garner respect for the role of the officer and to minimise the vulnerability of the officer.

In Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 the patterns of conceptualisations of prison officers' work that were reported in the previous chapter are explored. Chapter 6 explores some individual characteristics of the interviewees and finds that although there were some patterns of conceptualisation of the work of the prison officer associated with gender and previous work experiences, these factors do not explain the observed patterns of conceptualisation. Chapter 7 explores factors relating to the prison work context, role within the prison organisation, length of time employed in corrections and the prison within which the interviewee worked. It argues that the length of time that individual has worked in corrections and the specific prison in which they are working are most influential in shaping how an individual conceptualises the work of the prison officer.

Chapter 8 addresses the final research question analysing to what extent the new conceptualisations of the role of the prison officer, articulated by the Department for

Correctional Services in the last ten years, are reflected in conceptualisations of the role within the prison and what determines the influence of these new conceptualisations. This analysis identifies that recent Departmental discourses, have influenced the construction of the prison officers' role within the prison. It found that staff who had worked in corrections for less than ten years were the most likely to utilise these discourses and in particular staff at the Mt Gambier, privately managed prison, which had been open for less than ten years, overwhelmingly constructed the role of the officer using these discourses. It explores how departmental discourse competes for influence with other discourses and the powerful influence of audiences for the performance of prison officers' work – in particular prisoners, officers and prison staff and prison management.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by summarising the answers to the three research questions and briefly identifying the implications of these findings.