Becoming a Prison Officer: An Analysis of the Early Development of Prison Officer Cultures

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Abstract: *Despite the fact that over recent years, imprisonment in Scotland has adopted a bold and aspirational policy direction including proposed reforms to the role of the prison officer, there has been little research into prison officers in Scotland, and by extension, the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) as an organisation. This article offers a unique empirical insight into prison officer recruits and evolving prison officer cultures, by longitudinally tracking 31 prison officer recruits over training and early working experience. The article provides an in-depth perspective on prison officer recruits' views and experiences, and it also makes a contribution to the emerging area of research of the SPS through a focus on organisational change and reform. Finally, it incorporates, and further develops, a body of literature on penality and the penal state by interrogating the tensions between policy and practice within the context of the Scottish penal system.*

This article presents the findings of a research project which investigated prison officer recruits over their first year of work in order to understand prison officer working cultures and their evolution within the service. It examines why people chose to work for the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) through an exploration of their motivations and values; it further explores how prison officer recruits become socialised into role by their training, by the organisation, and by their work. This research extends the research from England and Wales into prison officer socialisation (see, for example, Arnold 2016; Crawley 2004), by examining prison officers in the context of organisational change and the professionalisation of the service.

It is remarkable that so little research has been published about the SPS as an organisation and the staff who work within it (with the notable exception of Brangan (2019) and Coyle (1991)). Despite higher levels of imprisonment in Scotland (148 per 100,000) than in England and Wales

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(141 per 100,000)[1] alongside similar reoffending rates in these jurisdictions (Ministry of Justice 2019; Scottish Government 2019), there continues to be a widely held self-perception within the SPS that Scottish prisons are 'better' than those in England and Wales.[2] Furthermore, the academic research based on prisons in Scotland to date has tended to focus primarily on certain prisoner populations and on a limited number of Scottish prisons (Maycock, Pratt and Morisson 2018). Ultimately, the focus of research on the SPS as an organisation, and those who work within it, has been largely absent from the academic literature.

The Scottish Penal Context

The Scottish prison system is composed of 15 prisons located across Scotland, two of which are privately run, meaning that around 15% of the Scottish prison population is in privatised prisons. Scotland, therefore, has an internationally high proportion of its prison population in privately-run prisons, although recently the Scottish Government has pledged to take these prisons back into public ownership (Yousaf 2019). Despite being a small country, the prisons are relatively large by European standards: prior to the Spring 2020 Covid crises, there were, on average, 530 people in custody per prison. The corresponding number for France is 375, for Germany is 357, and the average across the Scandinavian countries is 93 (World Prison Brief 2020). Gender is shaping the Scottish penal context, as illustrated by a reframing of the women's estate to create smaller community custody units of around 20 capacity, in contrast to plans to open HMP Glasgow for men in 2025 with a capacity of 1,200.

In 2018, the SPS had 4,549 staff in post (Scottish Prison Service 2018), and recently, concerns have been raised about high levels of sickness absence, which has increased by 60% over the last three years to an average of 17 days per staff member in 2019; the equivalent figure for England and Wales is 9.3 days (Audit Scotland 2019). The largest cause of sickness absence within the SPS is stress (Audit Scotland 2019) in the context of low staff morale (Rowley 2019). Despite this, annual prison inspectorate reports highlight the consistent 'generally good' relationships between prison staff and people in custody, based upon 'mutual respect' (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland 2019).

This research took place in the context of a period of organisational change within prisons in Scotland, at the heart of which lay reform to the role of the prison officer (see Morrison 2018; Morrison and Sparks 2016; Scottish Prison Service 2013, 2016). These changes spring from the 2013 *Organisational Review: Unlocking Potential, Transforming Lives* (Scottish Prison Service 2013) which heralded a notable change in direction for penal policy in Scotland. *Unlocking Potential* articulated a significant change to organisational vision and strategy in Scotland, embracing an 'aspirational, rehabilitation focused vision' (Armstrong 2018a), rooted in a strengths-based approach in desistance theory. It is within the SPS that desistance theories have had particular impact in Scotland (McNeill 2016) with the key areas of desistance theory reflected in organisational vision and values and key

policy documents (Scottish Prison Service 2013, 2016), and in staff training (Morrison 2018). However, McNeill (2016) has criticised SPS's adoption of desistance as being overly individualised and responsibilising, pointing to the challenges of operationalising desistance theory into meaningful rehabilitation within penal systems. Within the Scottish context, 'desistance', rather than 'rehabilitation' has been referred to as the aspiration of key parts of the justice system (Sapouna *et al*. 2015).

Since the Organisational Review, the SPS has proposed a range of reforms which seek to change the Service 'from a good organisation into a great one', in what it describes as 'mission critical reform' (Scottish Prison Service 2016, p.23). The SPS itself recognised that a range of challenges remained in relation to its staff, including that staff work within 'rigid' and 'hierarchical' job structures which prevent them from working to their 'full potential'. Additionally, the SPS itself noted that staff continue to lack the 'relational skills, leadership behaviours and motivational "agents of change" toolkit' (Scottish Prison Service 2016, p.22) aspired to in the Organisational Review. The corporate responses to these problems included a range of measures which sought to evolve 'prison officers' into 'justice professionals' who would be regarded as a 'socially valuable' and 'high status' career choice (Scottish Prison Service 2016, p.25). However, these aspirations have been curtailed by recent organisational challenges. This relates primarily to the Prison Officer Association Scotland rejection of a 'professionalisation' package,[3] together with increasing population levels with prison overcrowding for the first time in the last decade, the increasing complexity of the needs of those in custody (Scottish Prison Service 2019), and increasing staff absence rates (Audit Scotland 2019).

The aspiration to 'professionalise' prison officers is by no means new to prisons in Scotland, nor indeed, England and Wales (House of Commons Justice Committee 2009). In 1991, Coyle (1991) discussed the challenges around creating a professionalised prison officer in Scotland, noting that in a context in which the primary role of the prison officer remained the maintenance of security in times of 'fiscal stringency', while increasing the professionalism of prison officers 'would be highly desirable', it was often too easy to argue that it was not 'essential' (p.157). For Coyle, any aspirations to change within the SPS could only occur with the 'participation, or at the least the non-opposition' of its staff (p.161). However, this had been hampered by the fact that the socialisation processes which occurred in training were facilitated by recruitment of people who 'already hold particular attitudes', which are further internalised and enforced through social sanction (p.159). At the time of this research (2017/18), the ambitions around professionalisation outlined in recent SPS publications (Scottish Prison Service 2016) remained aspirations of the Service which were yet to be fully implemented and realised. Prison officers were recruited in much the same ways as in previous decades, and following recruitment, new prison officers received an induction of seven weeks' training.

In many ways, the tensions within the professionalisation agenda within the SPS, can be seen as a reflection of wider tensions within Scottish penality, and this research proposes that an interrogation of Scottish

prison officer cultures forms another route into understanding this wider aperture. The Scottish context has both shared and divergent features of other comparable jurisdictions such as Ireland, New Zealand, and some Scandinavian countries (Brangan 2020; Hamilton 2011, 2016; Lacey 2012; Spencer 2015), yet it is beset with contradiction: it is a small nation with welfarist penal practices embedded into key parts of its justice system (McAra 2005; McVie 2017), and, when compared with England and Wales, as it usually is, it is often regarded as comparatively progressive (Brangan 2020). However, within this context, persistent and undeniable punitiveness remains, most notably in its extraordinary (by Western European standards) use of both imprisonment (Armstrong 2018b; Brangan 2019, 2020; van Zyl Smit and Morrison 2020) and community penalties (McNeill 2018). Although human rights approaches have been adopted within the context of Scottish imprisonment, this merely allowed for an expansion of the penal apparatus (Armstrong 2018a). Although Scottish imprisonment may appear more 'civilised' than imprisonment in its immediate neighbours, and its penal politics certainly more moderate, this narrative of 'exceptionalism' allows, and indeed permits, penal excess (Brangan 2019, 2020; see also Armstrong 2018a, 2018b).

It is within this distinctive devolved context of organisational change that this article is situated. This allows for not only an analysis of the multiple influences that create contemporary prison officer identities in Scotland, but also a broader understanding of prison officer professionalisation and reform. This research, therefore, has implications for other jurisdictions also seeking to reform the role of prison officers, or to effect wider organisational change.

Literature

Prison Officer Recruits

As Arnold (2016) argues, it is no longer true that prison officers are a neglected area of enquiry within criminology, with a growth in research focusing on prison officers and their work over recent years (see, inter alia, Arnold 2005; Arnold, Liebling and Tait 2007; Bennett, Crewe and Wahidin 2008; Crawley 2004; Crewe 2011b; Crewe and Liebling 2017; Crewe *et al*. 2011; Farkas 2000; Jefferson 2007; Lerman and Page 2012; Liebling 2000, 2011; Liebling, Price and Shefer 2011; Scott 2006, 2012; Tait 2011). However, none of these has been explicitly focused on a jurisdiction seeking to effect prison officer cultural change, and none has been based in Scotland. Understanding the prison officer role begins with an examination of who chooses to work in this role, as both their personal attributes and their professional socialisation will shape the officers they eventually become (Arnold 2016, p.269). It has been argued that people 'drift' into the job because of job security and the familiarity of working in the uniformed services; for few people it is the realisation of a vocation held since childhood (Crawley 2004). The two key factors that are cited as reasons for applying to join the prison service, are 'economic pragmatism' (salary, working conditions, location, promotion), and 'self-other

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actualisation' (the desire to improve themselves and others), though many do so following the recommendations by friends or family who already work in the service (Arnold 2016). The majority of this valuable knowledge base, discussed here only very briefly, comes from one jurisdiction (England and Wales), which highlights the lack of diversity in this literature. This raises questions as to whether these insights resonate more widely in other contexts with different systems and organisations, enabling this study to make an important contribution to the field.

Prison Officer Work and Cultures

The provision of security is undoubtedly a 'foundation' of prison officer work (Arnold 2016), however the claim that this is all that prison officers do oversimplifies what is a complex role which balances competing, and often contradictory, requirements (Arnold, Liebling and Tait 2007). While the role does undoubtedly require responsibility for operational and practical tasks (Scott 2006), it is widely recognised that it is the relationships between prisoners and staff which lie at the heart of a prison (Crewe 2011b; Liebling 2011; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1996). These relationships must balance humanity, compassion, personal authority, assertiveness, and the willingness to impose boundaries.

Prison officers' work is also profoundly influenced by their occupational culture, which shapes 'the way we do things round here', determining the construction of what is, and what is not, considered suitable prison work (Scott 2012, p.18). Arnold (2016) argues that this culture forms from early training onwards when loyalty and solidarity (towards their fellow officers), and cynicism (distrust of prisoners), become framed as central principles in the job, although these coexist with the aspiration to help. As officers begin to realise the difficulties of supporting rehabilitation (or at least, preventing returns to custody), they often reframe 'success' to more tangible metrics such as improvements in literacy etc. (Arnold 2016). The ability to manage the 'emotional labour' of the job (Barry 2019), depends on their resilience, and their ability to 'leave the job at the door' (Crawley 2004). However, prison officer work is widely regarded as stressful (Steiner and Wooldredge 2015), with factors such as role ambiguity, the possibility of danger, and the prison environment, all contributing to stress and dissatisfaction with prison work (Mahfood, Pollock and Longmire 2013).

A direct or simple link between officers' views of their work with the experience of being imprisoned in their custody, should not be assumed, however. Crewe, Liebling and Hulley (2011, 2015) demonstrate that the most important factor which positively affects prisoners' experience of imprisonment was officers' 'professionalism' (their knowledge, experience, confidence in exercising authority and asserting boundaries, and their ability to make decisions without deferring to management). Counter-intuitively, negative *views* held by officers about imprisonment and their work, and a punitive orientation to their work, were less important in prisoners' experiences of being imprisoned than staff's level of *experience* and *competence* (Crewe, Liebling and Hulley 2011). As Liebling (2011) states: 'niceness and

blind faith in social harmony or the avoidance of conflicts, and naivety, can lead to chaos' (p.491). On the other hand, 'true care' in prison work balances real empathy and warmth with confidence and security in their own authority (Tait 2011).

The existing literature, therefore, suggests that recruits often 'drift' into this work, even more notable given the considerable skill it entails. Working as an officer centres on the ability to form the 'right' relationships with people in custody, their 'professionalism', and to work under the competing demands of both coercion and care. Prison officer work is shaped by their occupational culture and by the considerable emotional labour of the role. However, none of this literature is based in Scotland. This matters because of the distinctive organisational context in which prisons were to be remoulded into a 'citizen recovery service' and prison officers into 'justice professionals' (Scottish Prison Service 2016), and Scotland's distinctive wider national context of both laudatory welfarist based practices (McAra 2005, 2008; McVie 2017), and excessive punitiveness (Armstrong 2018b; Brangan 2019, 2020; van Zyl Smit and Morrison 2020). Much of the literature cited above is based in England and Wales, yet it is assumed to be applicable to the whole of the United Kingdom or perhaps Western Europe. Furthermore, highlighting cases in other jurisdictions allows for a greater understanding of the preconditions which shape *any* system (Nelken 2011), and this research contends that there is much to be learned from a small nation with both similarities and discontinuities with other countries (Brangan 2020; Hamilton 2013; Lacey 2012). Furthermore, focusing on prison officer reform in the context of ongoing organisational change, at the heart of which lies the professionalisation of the role of the prison officer, allows a greater understanding of prison officer cultures and professional and organisational change.

Methods

This project used a mixed-methods approach of focus groups and surveys to track one cohort of recruits (totalling 31) from their first day in the Scottish Prison Service College at the outset of their seven weeks' induction training, the Officer Foundation Programme (OFP)[4] through to several months[5] of operational experience in the Operations Officer role.[6] Focus groups, after a period of operational experience, took place in four prisons. This methodology facilitated a longitudinal tracking of one cohort of officers' development in role in order to explore the various influences which shape their views in the very initial stages of their career. This analysis was enabled through prompting critical self-reflection during focus groups about officers' own development and changed views over time.

Data for this research were generated in 2017 and 2018. Research methods included:

- Surveys completed by one cohort (total of 31) of recruits at the outset of the OFP. These surveys gathered data on demographics, completed levels of education, existing connections to the service, and motivations

for joining the service. Surveys were designed without a template in order to quantitatively capture themes also discussed qualitatively in focus groups.

- Four focus groups of between seven and eight recruits from the same cohort (total of 31 participants) at the outset of the OFP. These focus groups further explored motivations for joining the service, their experiences of their first orientation week in custody, and their expectations of training and work in role.
- Four focus groups of between six and eight recruits from the same cohort (total of 30 participants) at the conclusion of the OFP. These focus groups examined their experiences of their training and their expectations of work.
- Seven focus groups varying in size from two to twelve drawing primarily from the same cohort, though expanded to other officers with two years' experience or less, in two prisons, in order to capture reasons for high staff turnover. These focus groups explored officers' early experiences in role and their developing professional identities.

While focus groups can be criticised for evoking an 'attitudinal consensus' when heterogeneous views, in fact, exist within the group, they are effective at revealing how views emerge within a group (Sim 1998) and how collective meanings are created (Liamputtong 2011). Quantitative analysis using Excel was conducted on data from 31 surveys, and focus groups were transcribed and analysed with NVivo. Throughout the sections that follow we combine data from the survey and focus groups, highlighting ways in which mixed methods can provide illuminating insights into prison officer culture (Maruna 2010).

At the time of this research, the authors worked both as researchers for the SPS as well as academics at universities. This 'insider outsider' position had the advantages of access and support from within the organisation as well as beginning the research with a deeper understanding of the research contexts (Heslop 2012), but it also carried with it a number of ethical challenges in relation to participants' free consent (Skinns, Wooff and Sprawson 2015). Although every effort was made to emphasise the independence of this research from the SPS and that non-participation would have no negative consequences, the nearly 100% participation rate may indicate that officer recruits did feel a degree of institutional pressure to participate, despite the best efforts of the researchers.

Findings: Becoming a Prison Officer at the Scottish Prison Service

Joining the Service

This cohort of officer recruits were recruited according to the usual methods at the time (2017), and there is therefore no reason to assume that they were in any way atypical of officers attracted to the service. This cohort[7] was comprised of more men (18) than women (12), and they self-identified primarily as 'white, Scottish' with only one black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) participant. The recruits were primarily young,

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with twelve out of 30 in the 20–24 years age bracket, though a notable group were between 35 and 39 years, having worked in other sectors previously (six out of 30). Out of 29 who answered this question, eight had a university degree as their highest completed qualification, five had college qualifications, 16 had school examinations.

Our research confirmed the importance of structural and social factors in the decision to join the service, with nearly two-thirds (20 out of 31) of the cohort having either close friends or family already working in the service. The most frequent reasons cited in the survey for wanting to become a prison officer were 'job security' and 'opportunities for promotion' (30 out of 31), though 'supporting positive change' (29 out of 31) was of secondary importance. The importance of having a prison close by was cited by some recruits as a motivation for applying to become an officer (16 out of 30),[8] thus vocation and convenience draw people to the service. A further question asked the recruits which career they would have chosen were it not the prison service, and the largest number of responses related to another 'uniformed service' such as 'police, military or security professions' (twelve out of 30, the next most frequent (three) were 'fitness/personal trainer, dietitian'), suggesting that the role of a prison officer continues to be cast in the uniformed professions, rather than, for example, social or caring professions.

For some officers, the decision on whether to apply for the job or not seemed more intentional than for others. In more affluent parts of Scotland (where, we might assume, there were wider job opportunities), this decision seemed more intentional, with several officers in each location discussing the decision to apply for these jobs based on a calculation of salary after future anticipated promotions, or for better work-life balance. For others working in prisons in different parts of Scotland, the choice seemed to be more serendipitous ('it's a job, it pays, I'll take it'), or motivated by job security ('as long as there are bad people, I'll have a job', 'I know where I'll be in a year's time'). The desire 'to make a difference' was not absent from these discussions, though was articulated less frequently (in three out of seven focus groups) than those related to job security discussed above.

This research, therefore, supports conclusions from the research in England and Wales that while some people do indeed 'drift' into the job (Crawley 2004), for most others, it was a job that was taken for reasons of 'economic pragmatism', although 'self-other actualisation' (Arnold 2016) was not completely absent.

Expectations of Prison Work

Discussions with recruits at the outset of the OFP revealed how, prior to starting training, they had perceived the job to be one which was 'dangerous' and 'violent', with acrimony between prisoners and the staff dominating the work of prison officers. Following their initial orientation week, some recruits were surprised to find that the opposite was in fact true:

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It was eye opening. Just how it's ran, how it goes, it wasn't – you get a sort of idea in your head, just from television shows and stuff like that, it's really rough but it's, it's not. It's open, it's calm, it's very calm.

Officers were surprised by the compliance of people in custody even without the physical 'threat' of force or violence from officers (Liebling 2011):

I was surprised at the relationship the Officers and the prisoners had, that was the main thing that I – well, I couldn't really believe it, that it was that informal and, sort of, not friendly but not antagonistic, which is what I thought it would be.

Prior to beginning the OFP, many recruits had framed the work of prison officers around preoccupations with security and with the anticipation that their work would primarily involve the use of physical power, suggesting an outmoded or simplistic view of prison officer work, depictions often informed by media representations of imprisonment (Marsh 2009).

Views on Criminal Justice and Punishment During Training

The understanding of issues related to imprisonment may be important for the ways in which officers exercise discretion (Liebling 2000), or how they demonstrate care in their work (Tait 2011). Understanding officers' knowledge and opinions of issues related to imprisonment may also illuminate the motivation of recruits in joining the service.

Surveys at the start of the OFP revealed the recruits to not hold overly strong views on the issue of imprisonment and of criminal justice more broadly. For example, 15 out of 30[9] neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements: 'there are too many people in prison'. Overall, they tended towards views which value and support the institution of imprisonment, for example, the majority of them believed that prisons act as effective deterrence against crime (19 out of 30, 63%, either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with this statement). Their views were relatively punitive, for example almost twice as many recruits (13 out of 30, 43%) either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that prisoners should have the right to vote, while only seven out of 30 (23%) agreed with this statement. Additionally, 16 out of 30 (53%) either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that the age of criminal responsibility should be raised from eight to twelve years. These findings illustrate the distance left to travel before these recruits held views allied with the spirit of a 'justice professional' (Scottish Prison Service 2016). However, at this stage they had not yet begun their induction training nor their work, suggesting wider questions around who is attracted to the role, the recruitment processes and the way the work is perceived.

It is argued that extended higher education programmes of study for prison officers can be a central means of challenging existing organisational culture within prisons for the better (Bruhn, Nylander and Johnsen 2016), though short induction courses which are orientated primarily around proficiency in security concerns are unlikely to effect such changes (Arnold 2016; Coyle 1991; Morrison 2018). Nonetheless, in this research, discussions with recruits at the end of their training did suggest that for some,

the OFP had supported a different view on people in custody, and imprisonment, then they had prior to starting:

I do see [prisoners] as being different now … like, when I first walked into the prison for our first week, I was kind of like, 'whoa, like, what are these guys capable of', but now it's like, they are just people.

Some recruits felt as if the OFP had opened their eyes to a vision of working in the SPS in which *all* officers could support rehabilitation and 'unlock potential'. After discussing how they had learned so much about the importance of desistance and of working through relationships in training, one recruit commented:

I think it makes [you feel better about the job] because I think it gives you more of a purpose for being there, rather than just, you know being watching over the security of prison, it gives you more of a purpose and more of an opportunity to actually help some of the people that are in the prison.

However, other discussions suggested that some recruits continued to hold views which they themselves were aware did not fit with the corporate values[10] expected by the service. In one focus group for example, recruits felt that it was '*unfair*' that they had to listen to the views of those in custody which they might not agree with, but that they were themselves not allowed to express their own views which others might disagree with, or that it did not matter what they '*thought*' as long as they could '*act*' in a professional way. For these recruits, having to extol 'politically correct' views was 'just the way the world's went', suggesting a cynicism for views, and corporate values, which might be considered 'progressive'.

   The qualitative analysis of focus groups suggested two groups emerging in relation to views of criminal justice and punishment. In the first group, officers felt that OFP training had changed the way in which they viewed both prisoners and their work as prison officers, in the context of views which were not strongly held on criminal justice issues prior to starting. Initial feelings of trepidation over safety and security in the operational environment which dominated what they anticipated from their work (see above), gave way to a wider appreciation for the social contexts of offending and the importance of relationships, rather than force, for practising their authority. However, for another (smaller) group of officers at the end of their training, the feeling existed that they were being pulled in a corporate direction too far from their own, which chimed with a general view they held of a politically correct world which had to be navigated with caution. The potential for the organisation to shape the views of officers at this early career stage was therefore mixed, not least given the relatively short training period, much of which was focused on the security aspects of the job (Morrison 2018).

How Views of Work Were Shaped by Training

At the end of their seven weeks' induction training there was continued surprise (for the majority of officers) at the ongoing importance of relationships in the role and interaction and engagement with people in custody;

officers reflected on how they had learned that one of the biggest aspects of the job were the relationships with people in custody. *This* is what secured order within prisons, not coercion:

That was definitely the biggest change in expectation for me was the fact that you spend so much more time building relationships, I thought it was all just about watching them all the time and staying vigilant and keeping an eye on everything constantly. Seeing that, you know, the more experienced Officers, they're in building relationships with some of the guys.

This new insight into the role of the prison officer was significantly supported by learning about desistance for the first time and the realisation that Operations Officers too, can support change:

Things on the course, kind of like the desistance, it never even occurred to me that … as an Operations Officer you have that role to play.

Overall, at the end of the OFP, most recruits' views of their work had changed considerably: they were inspired by the possibility of 'unlocking potential', they understood the importance of working through relationships and they felt that Operations Officers also had a role in supporting rehabilitation.

However, at the end of the OFP many recruits also felt that too little attention had been given to the security aspects of working in the prison environment. Interestingly, these views came from those who felt inspired by the desire to 'unlock potential' *as well as* those who railed against this 'politically correct' agenda, outlined above. In many of the focus groups, officers felt that the only time that risk and security were adequately addressed was in Control and Restraint (CandR) training; although many of them had enjoyed learning about what they termed the 'non-operational' parts of the job, they felt that the training had not attended to the *key* element of working in prisons, which was dealing with risk and potential violence:

The same with … if you're applying for a job in the Fire Service, if you're going in and they're saying 'you might take cats out trees and do this' but they don't actually talk about the real fires you're going to have to go into and you need to be aware of the worst-case scenario.

The dominant concern remained safety and security in what they continued to fear was an unsafe environment, reflecting the underpinning of security as the core purpose of their role (Arnold 2016). While the maintenance of security continues to form the cornerstone of prison officer work, induction training courses aspire to be a central means of socialising new officers into a role which emphasises a diversity of skills and attributes, in line with those proposed by the SPS corporate vision (Morrison 2018). Although changes in views of prisoners, imprisonment and the role of a prison officer had occurred for many officers during their training, the prominence of security and concerns over safety continued to dominate for a majority of officers at this stage.

Working with Prisoners: The 'Normal' Prison Environment and Views of Imprisonment

By the time that the officers had some operational experience,[11] they had come to realise that the role was not as violent and dangerous as they had anticipated prior to starting, and that the prison environment more closely resembled 'normal' social contexts with which they were familiar. The realisation that the role was not orientated around violence, which had begun at the outset of their training, continued into their early operational experience in the job, views which were expressed in all focus groups. After several months of operational experience, they remarked how the job did not involve 'rolling about with prisoners every day, like, using my control & restraint' in contrast to their prior expectations. Similarly, officers had come to realise that people in custody are 'just people', with whom they could engage in a very normal way:

They're like, 'aw, you alright, and I'm like 'you alright lads?' it's like – it's weird, I sometimes think we're in a hostel, not a jail ... I forget that.

Officers' views on people in custody were varied depending on establishment and also on the population; there tended to be more sympathy for women in custody, for example. However, these feelings were by no means universal, with a minority of officers speaking about people in custody with considerably less compassion:

I don't know, just you kind of think, like, these people, they'll all have a tragic back story and you know you're going to help them, save the world, you know, and then I think, obviously that's not the case, some people are just, they are just arseholes.

The majority of the recruits in this project thought that the organisation of prison life was 'too lax' in relation to the 'privileges' which prisoners can have. For example, the idea that prison will not act as a deterrence or as a punishment because prisoners are entitled to 'three meals a day, healthcare on tap, free meds, free dental treatment, free gym, not paying a TV licence' was discussed in one focus group, with similar conversations across several other groups too.

   In relation to what people in custody should be entitled to, and the way that the prison should be run, many of the recruits articulated somewhat conservative views which promoted individual responsibility:

[the prisoners] could've gone out and got a job and look after yourself, like the rest of us do ... even without any qualifications, back when I was 15, 16, I still could go out and get work.

Some officers did not see custody as an environment which deprives prisoners, as identified in sociology of prisons literature (for example, Crewe 2011a; Sykes and Western 2007), and it is all the more notable as these views existed after their training:

They go back to their cells and just chill out for the rest of the night while the missus is at home, you don't have to worry about your life, you don't have to worry.

Connected to the desire for punishment which addresses individual responsibility rather than structural factors, some officers (particularly in one prison in which complaints about a lack of discipline were strongest) called for prisons to run more like 'bootcamps' where people in custody *have* to engage in physical activity, or *have* to go to work. For these officers, imprisonment needed more structure, underpinned by the preference held by some for a 'regimented' organisation of prison life:

Normal life has got some sort of structure to it, in here they're doing what they want.

These views were articulated more strongly in some prisons than in others, suggesting that staff cultures may not be uniform across the prison system (see also Crewe, Liebling and Hulley 2011, 2015). However, they were, nonetheless, widely articulated, reflecting the fact that for many officers the cause of offending lay with the individual, and that the structure of prison life was 'too lax', indicating a conservative view of punishment sceptical of rehabilitation and the social and structural contexts of offending (Loader 2020). Crucially, these views were articulated more frequently, freely and forcefully in focus after a period of operational experience, than they had been at the beginning or end of their induction training. The immersion into existing staff cultures, together with their own experience of work, had emboldened the articulation of these views.

Desistance, Security and 'Unlocking Potential'

Officers spoke at length about rehabilitation and desistance, and what was required to support these aims. Some officers had sympathy for those attempting to desist, and of the limited role that prison can play, particularly for those serving short sentences:

We're going to put you right back to ... where his dealer is or his drug taking friends are and three weeks later, we wonder why he's back in here, hooked on heroin.

As outlined above, however, another group of officers demonstrated limited sympathy and believed that prison itself was complicit in failing to stop reoffending through its lack of structure and discipline. In part, these views could be understood as the inevitable frustration at how difficult supporting desistance within prisons can be (Arnold 2016). Thus, the frustration of trying to support people to change in difficult circumstances was felt by many officers:

I had a lady that libbed [liberated] – she had been in for quite a while, she had done really well, she was off drugs, got the tag, so excited to get out, she's got a really nice mum and dad and then about five weeks later she came into custody, she was in a bad way, I was like, 'I think I'm more upset than you are' and she was like, 'these things happen'.

The difficulties of supporting rehabilitation and reintegration seemed to influence the development of very cynical views towards both prisoners and imprisonment for some officers (see also Arnold 2016), illustrating the

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limits of a short induction training course to have an enduring positive effect for officers after a period of work:

Yeah, some people are just a lost cause I think which is a horrible thing to say but, before I came in here, I was all nice and optimistic.

Despite this, some officers enjoyed supporting people in custody through praise and warmth, and felt that they could directly support positive changes:

[I give] encouragement and then say, 'aw, that really looks good, that's awesome' and he was just like, you could tell he was sitting there like – [big smile].

However, other officers were much more cynical about their ability to support those in their care and contribute positively to their desistance journey:

We're not like babysitters or kindergarten teachers, where we need to teach these people, 'don't do it again' type thing, 'don't come back'. I don't think we can help them, we're just safeguarding them shall we say.

Views on whether officers could themselves support change in prisoners were therefore mixed, and for some officers, the corporate values that all SPS employees should 'believe that people can change' (Scottish Prison Service 2020a), taught to them in training, had clearly not been assimilated. In some prisons, it was possible to identify distinct groupings, for example, the desire for 'bootcamps' was, perhaps unsurprisingly, expressed in a focus group with several ex-military personnel (though see Moran, Turner and Arnold 2019), while the most compassionate responses tended to be articulated by those working with women in custody. Overall, working in a challenging working context, and one in which they did not see those who have successfully reintegrated back into the community, many exhibited negative and cynical views about people in custody and their ability to support them. Furthermore, these views were articulated more forcefully after a period of work than they had been at the end of their training.

Becoming a Prison Officer: Personal and Emotional Development

After their short period of operational work, the new recruits reflected on the fact that they had grown in assertiveness. Officers reflected on how their work had given them 'a boost of confidence', and reported an increasing assertiveness which had grown outside the job, too, reflecting the 'spillover' of personal change that occurs in the role (see also Crawley 2004):

[I can] handle a situation now whereas, kind of, before … .

Assertiveness is required for the job, it forms a key tenant of the emotional intelligence that 'good' officers possess (Arnold 2016). While this, in part, reflected personalities which they may already have had prior to starting ('you can't be soft coming into this job'), officers felt as though working in a prison had further emphasised these traits. In several focus groups,

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officers said that the job had made them more aware of risk and attuned to security, both in relatively mundane and practical ways ('never walking in front of people'), but also in a deeper and more profound ways:

I've got three young children and sometimes I struggle to let them go out the house to play ... [I'm] just aware of what people out there are actually like and there is currently people out on the outside that are doing all these bad, bad things.

While some officers found the growing realisation of the crimes which people could commit a difficult thing to bear, others adapted to this by disengaging from the emotional contexts of their work, by, for example, choosing not to find out what crimes people had been convicted of. It could be that the job attracts those who are able to distance themselves from the emotional strains of the role (as one recruit stated: 'I've always been an analytical person ... when I come in my personal feelings and opinions switch off'). Alternatively, it could also be that the job changes people, so they become detached in order to cope. Conversations around dealing with attempted suicides on nightshifts, in particular, revealed this possibility:

'Cause there was one time I came in and I was on a patrol shift and this one guy for the entire patrol just basically said to me he was going to kill himself every time I came to check on him he was trying to do something else, something different to kill himself and I was just like, oh well, like, he was still alive when I left, I was, like, 'I've done my job'.

Although comments like these may appear in some sense callous or perhaps heartless, this can also be a response to having to deal, and be seen to deal, with difficult situations. The vicarious trauma induced by working in these contexts, with little formal training or support to deal with them produces detachment and compassion fatigue (Huggard 2003). Balancing the ability to continue to care for those in custody, alongside the ability to protect yourself, is in part due to resilience, another aspect of what Arnold (2016) identified as crucial for the 'emotional intelligence' required for the job. However, without support to manage the emotional impacts of these situations, officers can also become 'damaged' leading to low standards of care for prisoners (Tait 2011). These conversations with recruits speak not only to the resilience required for the role, but also to the difficulty in supporting and maintaining this in prison officers.

Cynicism

The recruits recounted a professional environment in which many of the (particularly the longer serving) members of staff were deeply cynical about their work. In their very first week of training in which they spent an 'orientation week' in the working prison environment, recruits later recounted the openly negative views held by many of the 'old guard':

The term 'the job's fucked', from the older – that's everyone, all the old guys [say] 'the job's fucked', all the young boys really positive, really enthusiastic, all the old boys that was their exact words.

<div align="center">15</div>

These negative articulations of the job to new recruits in their very first week, illustrate how normalised these views are within the existing working cultures and how little they were challenged. However, in the later stages of the research, some officers in this research began to echo these sentiments themselves. For example, an officer (with less than two years' experience) commenting: 'it's gone on for too long, the lack of change to try and better the Service or better this [prison]'. Cynicism was underpinned by various factors including officers' frustration over the 'revolving door' and the difficulties that some people have of desisting or responding positively to officers' attempts to help them: 'why do I even bother, that is a waste of my time'.

Despite this, cynicism and negativity was more frequently ascribed to *existing*, usually longer-serving staff, rather than themselves. Reported cynical attitudes held by longer-serving colleagues towards their work was pervasive in focus groups across all prisons in this research. Officers described having to '*fight against*' the existing negative staff culture and low levels of morale, which existed particularly among the longer serving members of staff, which they found '*exhausting*'. However, they also felt the pull towards these cultures, it was as if in the future they could see that they, too, would think like this: 'we're at a stage where we still quite like our jobs, but the frustrations are there'. These conversations suggested that it was difficult to take a stand against and resist the tide of this negative culture, and that assimilating to it was a possibility. Overall, after a period of work, many (though not all) officers began to express views out of step with the values of the organisation, and cynicism about their work.

Conclusion: Understanding the Early Development of Prison Officer Cultures

Through longitudinally tracking the same cohort of officers, this article has sought to explore and understand prison officer recruits, their motivations for becoming an officer, and how they evolve and are socialised into role through their early training and operational experiences. In so doing, it has cast light not only on the working cultures of prison officers, but also on how new staff begin to assimilate to an often challenging and cynical existing professional culture. The article offers a new understanding by providing, for the first time, an understanding of Scottish prison officer culture, and by extension, the SPS, which has been sorely neglected in the existing literature (Brangan (2019) and Coyle (1991) notwithstanding), despite being a different system with different governance, aspirations, and corporate values. Furthermore, this research illustrates the challenges around remoulding the role of a prison officer into a 'professional' which has relevance for other jurisdictions seeking to reform. This is in a social context in which many people 'drift' into the role without necessarily strong beliefs or progressive moral views around crime and punishment, with outmoded views of the prison environment, sometimes rooted in disorder and violence, and in a professional cultural context which can often be challenging and cynical.

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This article suggests that officers' views were positively influenced during training, but that after a period of operational experience, their views of people in custody and imprisonment, were frequently (though not by any means universally) evolving out of synchronicity with the 'corporate' organisational mission and values. Officers themselves recognised this change: 'before I started, I was nice and optimistic'. These changes can be understood through a combination of the emotional labour of the role, combined with the negative working culture in which the recruits worked, and which some were already assimilating.

At the centre of the recruits' reflections about their work were ongoing questions about the purposes and nature of imprisonment. Many officers in this research felt as though the structure of prison life was 'too soft' and that this itself promoted reoffending. Though the discussions in focus groups may not directly reflect the social working environment in prison, it was notable how rarely the negative views articulated in focus groups after a period of work, were challenged by fellow participants. This highlights the importance of both the working environment, as well as recruitment and training, for organisational change, implications which have clear resonance for other jurisdictions also seeking to reform the role of the prison officer.

This research sheds light on the possibilities and obstacles for occupational cultural change within prisons and helps to unpick and illuminate the challenge around transforming the 'prison officer' into a 'justice professional' (Scottish Prison Service 2016). More widely, the research allows a greater understanding of penality within a small nation with both shared and divergent practices with other comparable nations (see Brangan 2020; Hamilton 2013; Lacey 2012; McAra 2008). Furthermore, the research allows an examination of the penal *practices*, as opposed to only penal *rhetoric* and *policy*, of one such small and 'progressive' nation (see also McAra 2017), illustrated through the disjuncture between the aspirations contained in SPS corporate documents (Scottish Prison Service 2013, 2016), and the views of some of their prison officers as discussed in this article. The ease in which some, though not all, views were expressed in focus groups, suggested that the corporate lexicon of the organisation was just that: a background language, not reflective of officers' penal habitus.

McAra, (2017) has recently argued for greater attention to an 'appreciation of the ways in which discretionary spaces inhabited by practitioners are used and reproduced' as one of the ways by which we can understand this 'gap'. This article suggests that occupational cultures are one means of understanding the disconnect between policy and practice, and it provides the means of viewing this at a granular level.

Notes

1 Both figures taken from the end of March 2020, prior to the Covid pandemic (see Ministry of Justice 2020; Scottish Prison Service 2020b).
2 See, for example, a comment from a member of the Public Audit and Post Legislative Scrutiny Committee to the SPS Chief Executive: 'you say the system is not broken. I absolutely accept that that is the case compared with what is happening down south

and given the work that you and your staff are doing to manage a very difficult situation' (Scottish Parliament Audit and Post Legislative Scrutiny Committee 2019, col. 26). Additionally, an interview with the then SPS Chief Executive stated: 'McConnell says his impression, based on reports from prison bodies south of the border, is of "excessive budget pressures", inconsistent policy and a lack of a sense of direction. In contrast, he is full of praise for the Scottish Government's handling of prisons' (Davidson 2017).

3 This included changes to the education and role structure and responsibilities of operational prison officers and sought to fulfil many of the aspirations contained in the Organisational Review and subsequent policy documents (Scottish Prison Service 2013, 2016).

4 The Officer Foundation Programme (OFP) is a seven weeks' induction training programme for all new prison officer recruits employed by the SPS as Operations Officers. It takes place primarily in a classroom environment, though there are shorter periods of work-based learning within the prisons. The training is orientated around the development of operational proficiency rather than the 'affective' elements of values and attitudes (Morrison 2018).

5 Between four and seven months in the main, though the officer pool was expanded in two prisons to include officers with two years' experience or less, in order to better understand the contexts around staff retention in these prisons.

6 Prison officers at the SPS are employed first as Operations Officers and can then be promoted to the Residential Officer role. Operations Officers (often referred to as 'Ops Officers' in the field) have the primary responsibility for parts of the work which involve less interaction with prisoners, for example, manning the security gates, supervising visits, and working on nightshifts. The promoted Residential Officer works in the halls and has a greater degree of prisoner interaction.

7 One respondent chose not to answer all of the demographic questions, hence the total sample size is 30 for this paragraph unless stated otherwise.

8 One respondent chose not to answer this question.

9 One participant chose not to complete the questions in this part of the survey, hence the total respondent numbers are 30.

10 The values of the SPS are: Belief, Respect, Integrity, Openness, Courage, Humility (Scottish Prison Service 2020a).

11 Between four and eight months in the main, though a minority with up to two years' experience.

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