

Authority and its Enemies: Negotiating Order in Canada's First Private Adult Prison

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In all groups observed, the facilitators demonstrated behaviours consistent with the effective use of authority...[these include] focusing their message on the behaviour exhibited rather than the person, staff are direct and specific regarding their demands, they use their normal speaking voices, they specify choices with attendant consequences rather than ultimatums, they give encouragement, they support their words with action, they are 'firm but fair', they provide meaningful guidance toward compliance, they do not just monitor for non-compliance and they give ample reward/praise for compliance.
(Miller et al, 2005: 33-34)

Introduction

This excerpt from a government evaluation of the privately run "superjail" in Penetanguishene, Ontario, provides a very practical definition of what "authority" is supposed to mean in a modern prison setting. While this passage actually refers to the work of program staff, rather than correctional officers (COs), expectations of the latter are very similar. Phrases like "firm but fair" are also common in CO descriptions of their own work.

Authority, whether considered in its macro or micro forms, is a means of exercising control that aims at minimizing the actual use of force. Its prevalence is an important marker distinguishing liberal democracies from other, more odious, forms of rule. One of the things this means in practice is that encounters between state agents and citizens are supposed to be characterized by minimal use of force, and by the "rule of law" - even inside overtly coercive branches like prisons.

Like power, authority is always a relationship, and people obey because they are more or less convinced that they should. If control based on authority is really distinct from other more coercive varieties, then those who obey need some space to consider their options, and make meaningful choices. Authority, then, is an inherently political form of control. It may be buttressed by the threat of coercion in the last instance, or by rituals and symbolism, but ultimately it is reasoned deliberation, and scope for choice, that is supposed to set authority apart.

In the quotation above, the notion of what constitutes effective authority will be familiar to anyone who has ever read parenting manuals (or dog training guides, which tend to follow similar lines). Disobedience should be met with rationally predictable consequences, rather than ultimatums. Clarity and civility are praised, while shouting is to be avoided. Obedience must be possible, the straight route must be clear, and success must be rewarded. These instructions mirror a common-sense understanding of leadership in a democratic context: the emphasis is on rational persuasion, rather than threats and fear. Rule takes the form of a dialogue – or at least an apparent dialogue – between leaders and led. But is this sort of control possible inside a modern prison?

This article contends that expectations like these are fundamentally misguided in the context of today's prisons, and that the greatest threats to "effective use of authority" come from modern technology and leading-edge management practices. Both of the latter are fundamentally undemocratic, and hence can do little but undermine the prospects for minimally coercive rule in prison – or elsewhere.

The voices of COs themselves provide poignant testimony in this regard. Asked to describe the conditions under which they can do their jobs safely and effectively, they echo the emphasis on dialogue noted above. Although ultimately they can call on backup, and even armed support, COs spend most of their days watching and talking to prisoners from a relatively exposed vantage point. Sadly, if the experience at a "cutting-edge" privately run jail is any indication, the major effect of new prison technologies and management practices is to curtail space for dialogue – primarily by overworking COs, overcrowding inmates, placing more barriers between them, and allowing managers to ratchet up a climate of fear that suppresses dialogue rather than encouraging it. In the pages below, COs comment on the skills needed to do their jobs well, and on the obstacles they faced in Canada's first privately run adult prison – the Central North Corrections Centre in Penetanguishene, Ontario. This paper relies heavily on key informant interviews from that institution, and is part of a larger ongoing research project.

Authority as a Frontline Strategy

Despite its apparent centrality to democratic forms of rule, authority based on popular consent has never been an obvious strategic choice for those who manage prisons. As "total institutions," prisons are designed to separate their inhabitants from the rest of society, and from some or all of their citizenship rights. The extent and intensity of this division has always been controversial – struggles have raged over inmates' rights to safety, to family contact, and to vote, for example. But confinement itself is an abrogation of "normal" rights, and those confined are, at the very least, diminished citizens.

This status has often allowed their captors to employ control strategies that would not be tolerated elsewhere. In this they are aided by prisoners' social invisibility, and by the prevailing assumption that managers do not need to secure the consent of those they govern. The arbitrary power of prison wardens has been reined in over the years (by riots, scandals, court orders, and changing social mores), but in the minds of many reformers, the dangers of tyranny and abuse seem ever-present.

Thus Gresham Sykes patiently explained in 1958 that "power based on authority has two essential elements: a rightful or legitimate effort to exercise control on the one hand and an inner, moral compulsion to obey, by those who are to be controlled, on the other" (1958: 46). Sykes felt that the latter tended to absent among prisoners, who might accept the right of officials to rule without embracing their own corresponding obligation to obey (47-8). To Sykes this was a boundary problem, as legitimacy and "easily won obedience" extended down to guards, but faltered when crossing "the gap which separates the captors from the captives"(47). Like a populace conquered by force of arms, prisoners might accept the principles of legitimacy, consent and obligation, but feel themselves part of a different community than those of their captors (47).

Complicating this disjuncture is the argument made by prison historians that total institutions were invented in the 19th century not to complement a democratically constructed legitimacy, but rather to instill guilt and obedience among anyone who fell within their reach. Creating a growing sub-population excluded from full citizenship, this network of prisons, asylums, workhouses and almshouses tried to implant a "moral compulsion to obey" that did not depend on the consent of their inhabitants. And because these institutions (as well as public schools, factories, etc.) helped to mold the citizenry at large, they may well have acted to restrain a democracy that many Americans felt had gone too far (Rothman, 1971/2002).

As Ignatieff points out, this ambivalent embrace of democracy was not uncommon: Jeremy Bentham advocated both an expanded franchise, and, via his panopticon designs, an intensification of social control (1978, 212). In 1835, de Tocqueville remarked on the disparity between the "most extended liberty" of American society and the "most complete despotism" recently created inside its prisons (cited in

Ignatieff, 1978, 212). Foucault, of course, regarded these same institutions as central to training, discipline, and domination – not democracy (1975/1995).

Working in this context it is not surprising that administrators often lose sight of the "rightful or legitimate" side of Sykes' authority relationship. At a broader political level, modern democracies ultimately derive legitimacy from popular choice and consent. Citizens are obliged to obey because the government seems to be the product of voters' choices. Clearly those choices are framed by legal and cultural guarantees, and buttressed by the state's coercive power. But if the obligation to obey is not eventually linked to choice and consent, it is hard to conceive of the regime as democratic.

Modern democracies seem to tolerate the exemption of many institutions from such requirements, and the exclusion of many people from the full rights of citizenship. Those who work in exempt institutions, with excluded people, must nevertheless deal with expectations drawn from the wider community, where equality is supposed to reign among empowered citizens. They must administer coercion in a way that seems justifiable in a democratic context – for the sake of their own conscience, if nothing else. In prisons, of course, officials may feel that they are enforcing the laws of a democratic society, or keeping that society safe. Frontline officers may believe that their warden's instructions express the will of elected officials. But they can hardly believe that prisoners have consented in any meaningful way to their own captivity. In fact, institutionalization separates inmates from the broader community, suppresses their right to consent, and helps to create alternative communities ("subcultures"). Hence the legitimization gap that Sykes identifies is in large measure a product of incarceration itself.

Studies of prison guard work tend to regard authority primarily as a strategy guards use to induce compliance (Kauffman, 1988; Owen, 1988). Authority is seen as a healthier alternative than outright coercion, but its link to consent is lost at this level. So Kauffman (like many political scientists) emphasizes its efficiency:

Unlike coercion and force, the power offered by authority is continuous and long-term. It does not require a high ratio of controllers to subjects because authority is a manpower-efficient [sic] form of control. It overcomes deficiencies in knowledge because obedience to authority is internalized and automatic and thus does not require constant surveillance of those who are to obey (1988: 80).

Yet some guards think of coercion and authority not as alternatives, but as complementary tactics:

What makes the jail run ... is the staff that are working there and the basic communication skills and potential physical skills. It's like a set of handcuffs. If you put handcuffs on to me in the front and I still want to fight

you, you have a horrible, horrible problem. But it's the symbolism of the handcuffs. If you're putting them on someone it's for their safety and your safety ... This is a surrendered thing, this is a point where, you know, you just put them on someone who's still angry and wants to fight. They still have the capacity to do that, but ... you can mentally restrain them before you physically restrain them and say "listen I'm going to put these handcuffs on you now, we're going to be doing this, the situation's over you know." And ... tell them exactly what you're going to do: "I'm going to be coming and I'm going to place these restraints on you now, are you going to comply?" (N1, 2007)

The advice from this Corrections Officer (which reflects use-of-force training) contains several elements that seem to help build legitimacy. Yet these elements - symbolism, mental restraint, and talking - are not deployed *instead* of coercion. Rather they support coercion by making its application more palatable, and its objects more manageable. Legitimacy in this instance justifies coercion, which is what delivers obedience – or at least coercion and legitimacy are so intertwined that their effects are inseparable.

One could argue (as our respondents did) that use of physical force is actually quite rare among guards, and that talking and other tools are normally used alone, without coercion. But negotiating order in a prison inevitably means achieving at least nominal compliance with a regime of reduced rights. This in itself is coercive by social standards, and the use of force simply increases the degree of coercion involved. As one CO explained:

I mean, not only are you allegedly ... paying your debt to society, but, I mean, to take you away from your friends, your family ... You're being told to do something that you don't want to do, or, you know, you're being told when to get up, when to make your bed. You're being told when you're eating, what you're eating. There's no such thing as a prison that's not tough (N1, 2007).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that when guards negotiate compliance (effectively, the terms of exclusion), they are engaging in a political process that produces a kind of consent – or at least the closest thing to consent available in prison.

This perspective casts doubt on the rigid authority/coercion distinction that seem to characterize much academic writing on prisons, and also many official discussions of authority – such as the one that began this article. If authority and coercion tend to be joined in frontline practice, and management tends to expect otherwise, then this will be a source of tension within the prison staff. These possibilities are better captured in an article by Michael Gilbert (1997), which draws from the literature on police discretion to illuminate the dilemmas inherent in frontline prison work.

Discretion, Consent, and Order

Gilbert follows Max Weber in describing all public officials, even those on the front line, as "practitioners of a political vocation with inherent and irrevocable discretionary power" (1997: 52). Yet prisons, like many other bureaucracies, tend to be organized along paramilitary lines, and "almost every aspect of paramilitary organization is used in an attempt to reduce or eliminate individual discretion held by employees" (57). As I have argued elsewhere, such efforts are not confined to paramilitary organizations, since any organization touched by the ethos of scientific management (and this covers a very broad spectrum) will be driven toward continual attacks on the relative autonomy of strategically placed workers (McElligott, 2001). But the consequences of this conflict are somewhat more serious in prisons.

As Gilbert recognizes, attempts to suppress discretionary power from above generally do not succeed, but only make its open use more dangerous to frontline careers (57). COs, like police and other frontline workers, deal with too many people in too many places for any set of regulations to fully guide their actions. Yet:

... managers in these organizations insist that officers 'go by the book.' This exhortation is problematic because line officers are greatly outnumbered by the inmates at all times. If inmates decide en masse not to obey these rules, there is little that officers can do about it. The quandary faced by line officers is that rigid enforcement of the rules drives up the incentives for inmates to act out in disruptive ways and decreases both officer safety and the security of the institution (57).

Thus the unavoidably selective nature of rule enforcement is officially unrecognized, and discretion is driven underground. The effect, as Gilbert points out, is to leave "the discretionary behaviour of corrections officers almost totally unguided under the paramilitary guise of rigid control" (58). Frontline staff can then find themselves exposed to official retribution for violating formal rules that have little purchase on reality. Of course this situation may be convenient from the perspective of management, since it allows them to punish practically any CO at *their* discretion. This dilemma was vividly captured by one of the staff we interviewed:

... the training isn't really up to what it should be so you're never 100% sure you're making the right judgement call ... sometimes it seems like you're ... kind of boxed in. It doesn't matter what call you make, management could view it as a good call or they could view it as a bad call ... To me their standards aren't clear, there's no direction as far as how you deal with a given situation. Every situation is almost like the first time (B1, 2006).

In a high-stress workplace that demanded very long hours (16 hours daily, up to ten days in a row), "you're eventually going to make a bad judgement call if you're tired, if you're not alert" (B1, 2006). At that point, management seemed too quick to side with inmates (a complaint frequently made elsewhere), and frontline staff were left exposed:

I mean, that's a terrible environment to be in. You know, you think you're supposed to be in a job that has a little bit of, you're in a little bit of a position of authority. You're pulling dangerous situations on a regular basis and your employer won't even give you the benefit of the doubt, or do a proper investigation and then act on the findings of that investigation (B1, 2006).

Another officer attributed similar complaints to mixed signals from management about when to document inmate misbehaviour:

In this facility it's a guess every day as to what's going to happen: what the rules, are the regulations are ... Here you'd write a report and you never knew how it was going to go, whether or not you were going to be called in on it, whether or not they wanted it. There was no real instruction for most of the individuals ... So, so much energy is being expended on not knowing or trying to find out if they wanted a report. ... The report on the riot, what led up to it? There's no report leading up to it to say what was going on, but as soon as the situation was over, well, it was "the officers ... didn't keep us informed" ... But then again you don't have time to sit and write the reports (D1, 2006).

Uncertainty and mixed signals proved dangerous, according to another officer, because lack of resolve in tense situations can make violence more likely:

... it started to get to the point where in a use-of-force situation the staff's actions were more heavily scrutinized than the offenders' actions. It did become that way, and you knew as soon as you used force on someone there would be an internal investigation. There's no problem with an investigation when you're acting appropriately, but to have that fear in the back of your mind always... People sometimes would make the wrong choice, they would choose to not use force, and get injured to save their job, meanwhile potentially putting their life in jeopardy (N1, 2007)

In an earlier study, Hepburn (1985) found that guards relied heavily on positional authority (power of uniform) and certain kinds of interpersonal expertise to establish credibility and influence with prisoners. Most of the kinds of power he discussed were filtered through the perceptions of prisoners, but they were all based on real attributes and strategies. So what kind of positional power do guards have in Ontario, and what sort of skills does their job require?

Formal Duties

Official descriptions of CO duties are broadly similar to what COs say about their jobs. In a website aimed at potential employees, Ontario's Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services defines COs as "peace officers responsible for the care, custody and control of offenders." Their duties are "varied" but involve supervision of inmate activities and control of their "movement throughout the institution" (Government of Ontario, 2006).

The personality traits and skills sought by the Ministry also reflect the varied demands placed upon COs. Applicants should be "alert" so that they are prepared for "the unexpected," and "a variety of difficult situations" involving inmates. The ability to communicate with "a variety of people" is prized, as is the capacity to balance security and rehabilitation on the job. Variety also takes a temporal form: applicants are repeatedly warned that they will have to work rotating shifts (Government of Ontario, 2006).

Applicants will later learn (in training for which they pay) that the "peace officer" designation has important legal ramifications. Canada's *Criminal Code* makes resisting or assaulting a peace officer a more serious offence than ordinary assault, thus offering some additional protection to those who enforce the law. And of course peace officers can use force (in a "reasonable" way) to defend life and limb, or to prevent escapes. On the other hand, COs are vulnerable to criminal charges or civil lawsuits arising out of their interactions with inmates. And the code imposes additional duties on peace officers. For example, where a riot is in a progress and the riot act has been read, any peace officer in the vicinity is bound to help disperse or arrest the crowd. If they do not, a special section of the code singles peace officers out for punishment - which can include up to two years in prison (R.S.C. 1985, c. C-46, s. 25, 33, 66-69, 129, 270).

Similarly, COs are one of the few groups of Canadian workers who do not have the right to refuse unsafe work under provincial occupational health and safety laws. In Ontario, they are legally obliged to put themselves in danger so long as this involves a "normal part of the job" and/or is necessary to prevent harm to someone else (Government of Ontario, 2002: 36-37). The first qualification, along with employer obligations to provide safe equipment and adequate training, has provided some wiggle room on this issue for unionized COs (11, 2006). Work refusals have in fact occurred in Ontario jails, and the union has successfully defended them – much to the annoyance of corrections officials. In one recent case, unprotected COs refused to forcibly extract an armed inmate from his cell, and asked management to call in a unit specially trained for this purpose (OPSEU, 2007).

These examples illustrate the somewhat obvious point that corrections work is intimately linked to the state's role in maintaining social order, and that those who

do it are both instruments and objects of social control. But the skills and attitudes favored in one role may cause complications in the other. Asked to account for CO militancy in Ontario (which has included two legal and three illegal strikes), one member said:

we like to joke that we deal with confrontation for a living, it's what we do... Not being happy with what's happening around you and working to correct it, is what we do for a living. So if you're doing that already with the inmates ... if you have a manager that says 'well you're not allowed to do this, this and this,' immediately it's like 'oh, why not?' ... So the job itself actually breeds activists (A1, 2005).

Negotiating from a Position of Strength

The emphasis so far on coercion, force and confrontation reflects, perhaps, an outsider's perspective on CO work. In most countries, prison represents the state's ultimate sanction, so those who work on the inside seem to be intimately entwined with the fear that their workplaces are supposed to instill. This impression tends to be solidified by media portrayals of prison life. But when asked to describe what they do, COs rarely highlight the coercive aspects of their role. Those we interviewed had been trained to engage angry inmates first with their voices – using "tactical communication," or "verbal judo," in the words of one CO (N1, 2007).

But even this level of aggression was unusual. One CO gave a more typical response when describing the skills needed to work on the corrections front line:

The primary one is communication skills, being able to ... understand what they're asking, how they're asking, with no prejudices in there whatsoever, ... and be able to respond in an appropriate fashion. And that's not something that just comes overnight. It's something that has to be worked on for several years (D1, 2006).

Another, a self-described "talker" who used "my mouth and my brain way more than I use my brawn," suggested that:

the threat of physical violence is ... by and large more a Hollywood thing nowadays. I'm not going to say in the ... far past it wasn't a real ... aspect of corrections. It was. But ... since '98 [when the subject became a CO] ... it's never been a huge factor in the way we interact with inmates. It's by and large just your ability to talk to them (G1, 2006).

While inmates may have a different view of the tactics used to control them, it is clear from our interviews that most COs are not quick to employ overt force, and are not willing to describe it as central to their work. Their disavowal of violence is consistent with official policy, social expectations, and perhaps their sense of what the interviewers would find acceptable. But does this mean that "authority" is being used effectively on the front line?

As was indicated above, authority involves more than the absence of regular violence. It also implies that the *threat* of violence has been subdued to the extent that meaningful choices are possible on the part of the subject – thus marking the difference between coercion, and consent-based authority. The role of COs is murkier when seen in this light.

Like other public employees (and, legally, anyone helping to enforce the law), COs wield the real and implied power of the state itself. In practice that power can be difficult to mobilize, as it is fragmented by many factors, including the need to

control the state's own personnel (McElligott, forthcoming). Yet for centuries people have been overawed by the spectacle as well the actuality of state power (Foucault, 1975/1995). In this performance, prisons are now (at least formally) the ultimate coercive sanction.

The jobs of those who work in such institutions may be described in terms like "custody" and "security," which emphasize their role in containing "threats to society." But ultimately prisons themselves must threaten society – by demonstrating and enforcing norms of obedience, and intimidating those who might stray (McElligott, 2007). And even if COs have limited access to state power, this potential may loom large in the minds of inmates – as might any image derived from the CO's physical presence. At a public jail, one CO explained the significance of the latter:

although you have to be physically ... in shape and ... able to be physical, I don't find in my line that the physical aspect ... is as much a part, *other than its always there and its very important that the inmates know that* ... I mean it's inevitable that [direct use of force] has to happen at times. But ... the numbers of staff that are on accomplishes that to some degree (I1, 2006, emphasis added).

COs are trained to use force as a last resort, and all acknowledged that this option had to be available. But some saw strength in this area as crucial to their whole tactical repertoire. At the privately run jail, one CO voiced this latter view:

...how I gained respect from inmates initially was how I carried myself and how I deal with them verbally. But to put a stamp on the ... envelope was when they saw me ... go in and actually physically restrain inmates ... They know I won't back down from anybody ... and they appreciate that, I guess. They respect that, you know (E1, 2006).

Many of the staff had some family connection to the military, or to other branches of the law enforcement system. And while paramilitary traditions are supposed to be on the wane in corrections, the importance of the uniform and a "professional image" was stressed in training as well. Some felt that:

... image is huge ... If you come in and your boots are, you know, highly polished and your shirt is, you know, creased and you look the part, that point to me basically avoids the other problems. ... Walk into a spot, if you look like law enforcement, you look like you're a no-nonsense person, and you look like you're serious, and you're there to do your job professionally, that normally deals with [most?] of the possible situations you could have. As well it puts you into the right frame of mind. ... A guy that looks sharp, you know, or a female that looks the part, right - I mean hair's all tucked up in a bun or whatever it is - you look at that person and say that person means business and ... that's a huge component of what makes a good

corrections officer: how you look and how serious you take your job (N1, 2007).

It should be noted that the military model does not provide unambiguous guidelines in the Canadian case. While the literature tends to assume a certain consistency in what "military" or "paramilitary" means, the Canadian Forces have until recently enjoyed fame primarily as peacekeepers, rather than warriors. Keeping peace among hostile combatants may lend itself to prison work in a way that is not too distinct from the authority-based approaches that are officially encouraged.

There are, as well, technological factors that control the unauthorized use of physical force (and thereby reduce the legal liability that may arise from it):

I mean you just can't [use brawn] in today's ... corrections ... I mean (a) it wouldn't work because there's just not enough of us; and (b) ... you're on camera, your ... every move is closely ... pulled apart on ... slow motion-type thing right? ... And the inmates know this, they know very well ... (G1, 2006).

COs are always outnumbered by prisoners, and understaffing may accentuate this problem. But even on a one-to-one basis, inmates themselves are clearly capable of making persuasive threats:

So sometimes ...I kind of developed a rapport with offenders that I've worked with.... And then I've had offenders who threatened to kill me, right? So ... I've been scared sometimes, and sometimes they've been scared of me (L1, 2007).

Clearly there are structural constraints that limit the extent to which anyone can sensibly talk about reducing coercion inside a prison. However, within these limits, there are degrees of enforcement and consistency, and variations in the extent to which outright fear is employed. Beyond the threats and symbolic intimidation, COs do rely on talking and bargaining to smooth over some of the tensions of life within a "society of captives" (Sykes 1956/1999). Negotiating "consent" in this way requires "people skills" and a great deal of personal interaction with inmates, as our respondents attest.

People Skills and "Consent"

The COs we spoke with invariably cited talking and people skills as important to their jobs. One said:

I think [interaction]'s the biggest part of it. If you cannot interact with inmates you've got problems. And you're on your way to ... disaster (E1, 2006).

After stressing the importance of honesty and assertiveness, another reached very similar conclusions about the skills COs need:

... for lack of a better term, charisma. I mean you have to be able to interact with people. If you're a shy person that doesn't interact well with others, ... doesn't interact well with large groups of other people, you're probably not going to make that good of a correctional officer just because of the nature of the job. ... You work with people, so the biggest single asset is you have to be OK with people. I mean that's the be all and end all of it, right? You can't interact with people, you can't be a CO (G1, 2006).

Interacting with people inside a jail or prison means getting inmates to move from place to place at appropriate times, keeping track of them, meeting needs that they take very seriously, and anticipating, preventing or suppressing conflict. For inmates, being compelled to live with strangers in a harsh and sterile environment is stressful enough. But those awaiting trial (on remand) must also deal with uncertain futures, delays, and (at the time of our interviews) a total lack of programming. Remanded prisoners with addiction or mental health problems thus had to get by unaided, and cutbacks in other social services led more such "high maintenance" individuals to jail (OPSEU, 2001). Sentenced prisoners (serving up to 2 years in this institution) had access to some programming, but also had to cope with longer absences from their families – families that were more likely to be "at risk" due to a wide variety of personal and social problems (H1, 2006).

Distance from friends and relatives was an issue for all inmates, because the new "superjail" drew from a much larger catchment area than the local jails it had replaced, and thus severed community ties more completely. The superjail itself was both brand new, and experimental in several ways. Much larger than other jails, it used "supermax" technology new to Canada, under the supervision of a private company eager to prove itself in a five-year pilot project.

In this environment it is not surprising that COs stressed the need to make good judgements, and to make them quickly:

You have to have very, very, quick decision-making skills. You have to be able to think on your feet. You have to be able to deal with the unexpected at a moment's notice. You have to have a good deal of diplomacy, dealing

with the job, because you're not armed in there. You have nothing on you except for a radio, your hands, and the ability to talk in a lot of situations where saying the right thing at the right time can make a difference between a riot starting, or you getting hurt, or someone else getting hurt (A1, 2005).

Another CO linked skills of perception and command:

... a lot of times ... you have to kind of make a split-second judgement as to what type of inmate this is, where he's coming from, what he's capable of doing and how you're going to diffuse or end the situation ... You have to be perceptive ... But a lot of that comes with experience . . . You don't want to excite the situation. You need to be able to stay calm when ... chaos is around you. You need to be assertive. You need to be able to walk into the middle of a room and yell an order out that you expect them to follow, even though there's 30 of them and there's one of you. You need to be firm when you give them direction. You need to stand firm that that's the direction they need to do (G1, 2006).

Police officers use quick scans of the street to determine who or what is "out of place," and what needs to be done about it. Similarly, experienced COs often use holistic or intuitive approaches to look for signs of trouble brewing in the more restrictive confines of the prison. A key marker seems to be noise levels:

... here if you observe and you try to stay on the ball all the time, you know when things are a mess, right, just by the noise level, by watching how the inmates start to group up with each other. You have to observe all these things at all times instead of running around making sure they get out on time to get to a program (E1, 2006).

.... a lot of times if you walk into a wing and something's not right ... You don't know why, necessarily. I mean there's nothing that you necessarily put your finger on that's out of place or out of whack. And a lot of times you go back later, you think oh yes it was a lot quieter than normal, oh yes you know they should have been doing this but they're not. Just these little things you don't even really register. All of a sudden you just get your back up a little bit. You know something's going on, so you're tense, something's not right ... (G1, 2006).

A staff member at a facility for young offenders used a very similar approach:

I can say from my experience ... when I walk into a unit, and I see my kids lying around, and they're very quiet, and they're just probably looking around and seeing what's happening in the unit, I know something's up. I know they're hiding something, I know that it's going to happen. Some of the kids who are ADHD, hyperactive ... seem more needier and know something's happening. ... They'll give you clues like they'll say 'hey you

want to go for a walk?' 'Yes I think I'm just going to go for a walk right now.' So just kind of saying I need to tell you something, something's going to happen. And that is all about the relationship ... the kids trust you enough to tell you something's going to happen (F1, 2006).

Building up that "firm but fair" relationship with inmates requires personal characteristics of the sort just described, but it also required access to certain basic resources that seemed to be in shorter supply at the private jail:

I mean if you're an inmate you really have nothing better to do than make sure you get fed, you get clothes, you get your medication and you know maybe the odd visit and some mail, right? And those are your big things in life, and if you don't get one of them that's a major issue. And just one guy not being able to get a clothing change can consume an hour or two of my time ... So just by having additional clothing there ... I can just say 'ok here you go,' as opposed to arguing with him for an hour, and possibly having to get into a scuffle with him, or lay a misconduct on him, or have him removed from the area and put in another area... I mean just right then ... for a 2-minute grab an extra shirt and give it to him ... I've wasted ... 2 hours of my time and probably some other officer's time just dealing with that one situation (G1, 2006).

Knowing what was needed in any given situation – in terms of tactics or resources – was very much a product of experience, according to our respondents. While all of them received basic training in such matters as inmates' rights and discipline procedures, and some were trained in "tactical communication," amassing a knowledge base and developing a suitable strategic repertoire could only be done over time.

... interpersonal skills, I mean that's where the seniority, that's where the experienced staff come in. That's when knowing how to diffuse a situation, or if you know it needs to be escalated to stop it from getting there, that's where the experience comes in. Interpersonal is just a common sense approach, right, ... and the more experienced you are, the better you know the offender population, the different classifications of the offender population. You know, somebody who's in segregation, and maybe has mental health issues, you wouldn't deal with in the same way as a general population offender (J1, 2006).

The skill set described in this section has evolved to deal with the specific demands of a tense, enclosed and excluded population. It stresses attributes like people skills, charisma, decisiveness, assertiveness, and an intuitive, experienced-based knowledge of that population. And there is room, it seems, for well-timed material concessions. The striking thing about this list, then, is how much it corresponds to the profile of a good political leader. But is there room for leadership on the state's front line?

"Asocial" Management?

Gilbert, it will be recalled, warned against the paramilitary model of management in prisons, suggesting that it suppressed only the appearance of frontline discretion, and left COs vulnerable to dispiriting attacks from their own managers. Gilbert portrays the paramilitary style (the "classical organization") as archaic and obsolete, but Alison Lieblich (2000) rightly notes that its key features have been revived as privatization spreads through the justice system:

A new 'asocial' set of strategies is employed in the late 1990s for governing prisons. The difficulty is ... that there is a major gap between current managerialist practices, which emphasize process, compliance, audit, and future performance, and the sociological realities of prison life and work which are characterized by tradition, experience, accommodation, short-time horizons and daily survival...(349).

The evidence presented above has already hinted at similar tensions in Ontario jails, and elsewhere I have shown that privatization led to massive staff turnover, persistent problems with understaffing, and a pervasive cheapness (in food, laundry, etc.) that provoked inmates to riot (McElligott, forthcoming). This final section will briefly discuss the effects on COs of two related management trends: centralization and automation. Both of these were advanced in corrections (and other fields) by the Conservative government of Mike Harris (1995-2003). Centralization and automation produced facilities that looked more like those of the private prison industry – an industry the government hoped to bring into Ontario in order to reduce costs and expand its coercive capacity.

Centralization closed dozens of local jails in favor of a few much larger superjails. For COs, this meant dislocation, and, for many, a change of careers. Those who remained commented on the shifts required to work in these much larger institutions:

Getting to know your inmates on your unit is important but its tough when there's 190. When you do work on the same unit day after day after day, you do get to know the inmates but don't forget, they change. I mean some are released almost daily and new ones come in almost daily (B1, 2006).

... in the small jails you may only have 15 inmates ... and with the bar system you can hear everything. So you know if there's a possible [threat] you can see it. ... You get to know the inmates a little bit better whereas with the large numbers you don't have time (M1, 2007).

With a capacity of over 1200 inmates, the first two superjails were about six times larger than those they replaced. For COs it was harder to understand inmates' histories, backgrounds and needs:

When you have 192 guys per unit, 1242 or whatever it is per institution you lose that you lose that ability and ... it's more herding cattle ... You know, how can you have a one-to-one conversation when you have 192 guys? (N1, 2007).

This CO also noted the alienating effect of such large institutions on inmates:

I think this particular situation in the Super Jail [is] more difficult because ... now, not only is everything taken away from [you], but you've become completely anonymous. You know basically there's so many other people you could go for days ... wanting to speak to someone or ... wanting to have your opinion or your voice heard ... I mean, you're just another number (N1, 2007).

Inmate alienation was (deliberately) compounded by the extensive use of electronic monitoring and automatic doors – the "static security" systems on which supermax-type jails depend to reduce labour costs. I have discussed the flaws of these systems elsewhere (McElligott 2007; forthcoming), but for COs a crucial one was the continued presence of blind spots. Every unit had places that could not be seen from its control booth. "And believe me," said one CO, "the inmates find those fast. They know when they're out of camera" (B1, 2006). Another CO was discomfited to know that the person charged with repairing the often-troublesome new computer system (which controlled static security) was himself "just learning" as the superjail went through its first hectic months (E1, 2006).

The overall effect of these technologies was to distance COs further from those in their charge. It became increasingly difficult to talk with, or even see prisoners. Trusting relationships – the key to preventing violence and the foundation of CO "consent-building" – were shattered, and a technological fix installed in their place. Interestingly, some of the prisoner voices now emerging from the supermax experience highlight similar problems. An inmate in an American supermax depicts a guard inside a plastic "bubble" screaming without effect at inmates who refuse to move when a riot begins (Carceral, 2006: 136). In more peaceful times the inmates trudge through one locked corridor to another, like cattle in a pen.

Such treatment leaves little space for discussion and negotiation – inmates are dehumanized to the point that only varieties of force are used to "persuade" them. In this light, the recent spate of Taser-related deaths outside prisons is entirely consistent with developments inside. People skills have been devalued and abandoned on the front line, because a handy technological substitute seems to be available, and growing private security industries are eager to provide it. As one of our respondents noted, prisoners suffer in any prison because they are not free, but in a private prison "some make money, others suffer, and COs are hurt" (H1, 2006).

Conclusion

This paper began with the official line on authority in prisons, and noted its similarity to more popularized discussions of ruling strategies in a democratic context. Dialogue and rational persuasion rated highly here, and the rest of the paper traced the progress of these concepts as they moved ever closer to actual implementation in a modern superjail.

Authority, it turns out, has a complex relationship with popular consent in the realm of prisons. The latter were created in some respects to make democratic authority "safe," and so when authority is discussed in prisons, its vital link to popular consent is often jettisoned in favor of purely instrumental considerations. In fact, as we discovered when discussing discretion, the only thing close to consent-building in prisons can be found in the daily activities of COs.

COs are in a contradictory position with respect to authority. They must operate within a fundamentally coercive context, and always hold more coercion in reserve. But they seem to prefer to talk, negotiate, and interact with inmates. Their impulses in this regard, however, have been stifled by the latest developments in prison technology and management. If authority really is a more stable way to govern than more coercive means, then this is a very dangerous development. Here and elsewhere on the state's frontline, we need to rethink the trend to "asocial management" and increasing inhumanity.

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