

## Moralizing Boundaries

### *Staff-Prisoner Relationships and the Communication of Difference*

Edward, a “*mainstream*” prisoner who was serving a sentence for a violent assault, had been in Stafford since before it rerolled to become a specialist site. As someone who had been in the prison for so long, he had close relationships with prison officers. He told me that one day he had been having a cup of tea in the staff office with two of the most popular and professional officers on the wing when the conversation turned to the possibility of him being transferred to a different establishment. The officers suggested that doing so would be good for him as it would allow him to be around “normal people.” Surprised, Edward asked them to explain what they meant:

They just kept saying, “You are different to these.” I’m like, “I know.” I said, “Yes, but prisoners are prisoners. If I break the law, they break the law, you’ve just got to get on with it,” and they were like, “Just trust me, they are wrong-uns.”<sup>1</sup> That’s what they said.

Edward’s discomfort had two dimensions. He had developed some close friendships with other men in Stafford, describing them as “decent guys,” and he thought they deserved better than being disparaged as “wrong-uns.” He also didn’t understand how these officers’ judgmental backstage attitude could coexist with the friendly interactions he had seen them have with these specific men:

What scared me the most was the fact how I’ve seen them with these guys, their body language and everything frightened me because I just thought, fucking hell, how the fuck can you be, like, that cold about it when I’ve seen you have cups of coffee with them? That, to me, is very confusing, very confusing.

When he asked the officers to explain the apparent contradiction, they gave a straightforward answer. The backstage judgment was authentic, and the professional courtesy was not:

They kept saying, "Yes, but this is our job. When we come through here, we have to fucking work with these people if we like it or not because if I don't, I can't pay my mortgage." That's what one of them said. The other officer basically verified the same. That's what he said, he said, "When you come here you put on a mask, but you take it off as soon as you are through that gate because you don't want to think about any of these fuckers in here." That's what he said.

What had been invisible to Edward had been much more obvious to other men in Stafford. After the conversation had ended, he had gone to tell his best friend what he had heard, and his friend had laughed: "He sat me down and was like, 'That's the way it is in here.' He says, 'Because you try and get on with everyone, you don't see it.' But he says, 'We see it.' And that's when he said, 'The officers are a lot different with you than they are with people like me.'"

Officers in Stafford juggled two competing moral frameworks, both of which were evident in this story. The first was influenced by the punitive discourse about "sex offenders" which is prominent among members of the public and which was articulated by officers in backstage spaces like staff offices. This discourse imagines people convicted of sex offenses as permanently dangerous monsters, and suggests that it is necessary for public safety and public morality that they are condemned and isolated. Anyone who is too closely aligned with "sex offenders" is corrupted by association. According to this discourse, the offenses "sex offenders" have committed should shape the way everyone interacts with them. They have lost their claims to full humanity, and with them, their right to be treated the same as other prisoners and other citizens.<sup>2</sup> Prison officers in Stafford were influenced by this discourse. Despite claims to the contrary, officers did think about prisoners in Stafford as "sex offenders" and allowed their criminal convictions to play a role in their relationships with them. Officers described feeling psychologically, reputationally, and to some extent physically threatened by the population they worked with and by their staining convictions.<sup>3</sup> Many talked with distress about finding out what prisoners had been convicted of and about the frequent distaste and voyeurism, and occasional abuse, they had experienced when friends and family members found out where they worked. Their anxiety about working with people convicted of sex offenses was not narrowly targeted at issues related to sexuality. They also maintained that such prisoners behaved very differently from the "mainstream" prisoner group with whom they had been trained to work, and with whom most had worked prior to the reroll. Prisoners in Stafford were much older than a "mainstream" prison population would be, and much more compliant, but this threw officers off balance and combined with their concerns about the devious "sex offender" to make them deeply attuned to the real and imagined risks of manipulation and conditioning.

This condemnatory moral framework had to compete with officers' occupational morality. As the officers in the story made clear to Edward, most officers saw themselves as people doing a job, and while at work they tried to commit themselves to the norms of their profession. Prison officers' occupational morality asserts that while officers may have personal moral sentiments about the people they imprison, it is vital that these sentiments do not influence the way they do their job. They are to be understood as professionals working in a bureaucratic institution, whose job is to maintain security and order, provide care, and perhaps facilitate rehabilitation, but not to dispense or soften punishment. They are to behave impartially and use discretion fairly, and to avoid overt displays of emotion. This occupational morality was influenced by the growing rationalization of the prison in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and reflects the widespread squeamishness about punishment described by Elias ([1939] 1994) and Garland (1990). In our "civilized" society, we are uncomfortable with the uncontrollability and animality of the punitive impulse. We have therefore deliberately hidden it from view, punishing people behind prison walls, sanitizing our language, and upholding an ideal of professionalism among penal workers, "all of which tends to sublimate a rather distasteful activity and render it more tolerable to public and professional sensibilities" (Garland 1990, 235; see also Christie 1981).<sup>4</sup> The occupational morality created by these processes stresses that prison officers should focus on achieving the smooth running of the prison—policing the wings, responding to prisoners' queries, distributing food and clothes, and facilitating the regime—and should not see themselves as active participants in a morally communicative ritual. In a place like Stafford, this should lead them to quell any discomfort they feel about people convicted of sex offenses, or at least not to let it influence front-stage areas.

Edward's conversation in the wing office, and later with his friend, suggests that officers' attempts at frontstage impartiality had not successfully obscured their backstage judgment. The moment of explicitly verbalized moral judgment which Edward described was rare, as he was a "*mainstream*" prisoner who was trusted more than most prisoners were, but nevertheless most men in Stafford shared Edward's friend's insistence that officers morally condemned them: "we know what they think of us really," Jake summarized. In this chapter, I will describe how prisoners gained this knowledge, and how, despite officers' best efforts, their morally judgmental impulses pierced through their protective professional veils. It argues that officers in Stafford were torn between their competing moral frameworks, and were anxious about their dignity, their objectivity, and their authority. They were frightened that they might be judged for working too closely with these stained men, that their own moral instincts might lead them to behave unfairly, and that they might even be manipulated to use their power inappropriately. These risks threatened their sense of what it meant to be a prison officer, and as a result, they took refuge in an extremely distant form of professionalism (see also

Eriksson 2021). During periods of association, for instance, most officers came out of their wings to stand on the landings, willing to monitor prisoners and deal with any queries, but their physical presence on the prison landings was not matched by their willingness to engage.<sup>5</sup> With notable exceptions, officers rarely joined in with the games of pool and darts which prisoners played and nor did they engage in informal conversations. (Edward's experience of having a cup of tea in the office was unusual.) Avoiding informal conversations with prisoners meant that officers often knew very little about the details of prisoners' lives, making it harder for them to meet their needs or use their discretionary power wisely. Their fear of manipulation also discouraged them from softening their power in any way, encouraging them to police the wing more tightly than they would otherwise.<sup>6</sup> Prisoners, in turn, were highly aware that officers avoided and closely regulated them, and were sensitive to what this implied: that officers saw them as "sex offenders." Prison officers did not intend to be judgmental, then, but they put up moral and relational barriers to avoid doing so, and it was in the effects of these moral and relational barriers that prisoners perceived the judgment which so pained them. In officers' attempts to act as impartial automatons, they had become morally expressive agents, and what they expressed was condemnation.

#### ASPIRATIONS OF IMPARTIALITY

You've got to learn to have some sort of rapport with these sorts of people. (Officer)

Prison officer culture in Stafford was in many ways typical of English public-sector prison staff culture. Officers were proud of their uniforms and their roles, and distrustful of management. They said that they would do anything for their colleagues and the prison had historically had a strong union branch, although it had weakened in recent years. They showed very little sign of the brutality which had tarnished the Prison Service of the 1980s, but they certainly believed that they should be in charge and were somewhat heavy in their use of power (Crewe, Liebling, and Hulley 2014). They gave orders, summoned prisoners by yelling their surnames, and actively policed wings during association periods. They were less comfortable engaging in explicitly rehabilitative work or in talking to prisoners about their personal lives or their plans for the future. Many of these ways of working resulted from Stafford's particular history and had been carried forward after the reroll. The prison's previous function meant that it had tightly restricted internal movement to keep VPs and "mainstream" prisoners apart. They also were reflective of more widespread officer culture. Prison officers in England and Wales are socialized to prefer the security and order components of their role (Crawley 2004) and trained to have distant and distrustful relationships with prisoners (Arnold 2007). In the past couple of decades, rehabilitative and resettlement tasks have increasingly been taken away from prison officers and redistributed

to staff members working off the wings (Crewe 2011b). Many of Stafford's more experienced officers were resentful of this deskilling: "All we are now is discipline tools, as officers. We are here to keep the peace now," one officer told me.

Despite their heavy and somewhat distant orientation toward prisoners, most officers in Stafford avoided making pejorative remarks to the men or making explicit judgments about their offenses. They tended to believe that a central part of their role was the capacity to overlook prisoners' offenses—"to switch off what they're in for"—as doing so made their work easier: "if you're worrying about a multiple murderer or a multiple rapist all the time, you can't do the job" (officer). Ignoring offenses was a strategy of self-protection which mirrored that followed by prisoners (see chapter 7): prisoners had been convicted of disturbing and upsetting offenses, and officers did not want to be contaminated by these thoughts. One female officer, for example, reported that she often woke up in the night thinking about what prisoners had told her:

Some of the issues obviously can be mentally draining, because they stay in there [your mind]. If they have discussed some of the things that have happened to them and perhaps even why they do what they do, it stays there. You can't just make it all go away, because then if you care, you can't just switch that off and say, "Oh well, never mind, I'm at home now."

Another described the intrusive images which had followed her reading about the offenses of a man on her wing:

He was a cleaner, and just before we started serving the evening meal I was reading through [the man's record], and then I had to shout him to get the [food] trolley. And I was looking at him as I was calling the numbers [saying what meals prisoners should be served], and just seeing him—he's there now, he's on that wing—I couldn't get it out of my head then. [ . . . ] That was very strange, because you could imagine it. The offense was obviously, it was sort of like against this little boy. He sort of like, he made, he made him go in the shower with him and made him wash him and obviously and all that. [ . . . ] I suppose it was graphic because when I saw him, I could just picture it and I was like, "That's really not a good thing!" So when you're dealing with the food or whatever, looking at the names and looking at the food and looking at him, you don't really want to be thinking about that!

Officers who were parents and those who had personal experience of sexual violence found thinking about offenses particularly upsetting: "At times I can't stand the place, I detest it. I think things have changed since I've become a dad" (officer). One staff member described struggling in her job after someone attempted to abduct her young son.

In most cases, officers protected themselves by avoiding talking about prisoners' offenses or looking them up on the prison's computer system. If finding out what prisoners were in for was unavoidable—for instance, if they had to do a risk assessment before escorting a prisoner to hospital, or if their role as an Offender

Supervisor required them to engage more deeply with prisoners—they tried not to dwell on the knowledge:

It's just a moment of realization, "Oh, that's what he did," then you have to do your job. You just have to process it. If you thought about who they are and what they've done, you wouldn't be able to come in every day. (Officer)

Sometimes you can read something that upsets you. Sometimes you can read something and say, "That's bad." But if you let that upset you, then you can't do your job properly. (Offender Supervisor)

Officers sometimes said that their professional requirement to act with impartiality made them uncomfortable by making them accustomed to the morally unacceptable. As one officer put it, "you almost get desensitized to the word 'rapist,' to the words 'child sex offenses.'" There is emotional and moral security in acknowledging the wrongness of crimes, but officers felt like they were in a moral and emotional limbo, aware that prisoners were stained but unwilling to pay too much attention to it.<sup>7</sup>

Officers believed that their role was to provide care and custody fairly and equally—to deal with the men as "prisoners" and thus to try not to think about them as "sex offenders." It was explicitly not their job, they thought, to be morally communicative, and they thought that if they were, they would be punitive:

They've been convicted by a court of law and they're being punished, aren't they, so why should I make that worse? They've already been taken away from their families. They're serving their punishment, they shouldn't have to have any more. [ . . . ] You can perhaps look at the news and say, "Yeah, they deserve that," and I think the general public would do that, but in here, I'm not judgmental to them for what they've done. They're serving a sentence and, OK, I'm locking them up, but I'm paid to do that by the Prison Service, and that's what I'm here to do. (Officer)

I don't think of them as a sex offender, I don't think, "Oh, I'm unlocking a sex offender today." If a door needs locking, it needs locking. If they need something doing, they need something doing. And you can't think of them as sex offenders, because if you thought of them as sex offenders, you would treat them different. (Officer)

Their professional ideal was impartiality and detachment, and they avoided learning about prisoners' convictions because they thought that this knowledge might lead them to treat prisoners harshly, distantly, or differently from each other: "I think it can affect the way you are with people. I've seen it affect the way people are with people, and I wouldn't want that to be the case" (officer). They recognized that what they thought about prisoners mattered to them, and they were reluctant to hurt them through explicit expressions of moral judgment. One officer, for instance, who said that he did struggle with prisoners' crimes, recalled how difficult he found it after a man on his wing had died by suicide, before reflecting, "That's another reason why it's important not to judge them.

What if one of these think, ‘Mr. Bloggs is alright’ and then one day I say, ‘Fuck off nonce!’ and then he hangs himself?”

Prison officers did not just fear that allowing their private moral sentiments to infiltrate their role as officers would push them toward punitiveness. They sometimes admitted in private that it was likely that not all prisoners were guilty, and they didn’t want to let this knowledge affect their behavior. Like prisoners, they were particularly suspicious when the offense happened a long time ago or in cases where there was an adult victim, maintaining that it is easy for women to “cry rape” (Burt 1980). They also expressed some sympathy with those convicted of offenses against older children:

My son is sixteen and I’ve seen some of the girls that he’s friends with and I think to myself, “You look about twenty-one.” And again, I’m not putting myself in that situation of saying, “Well, it’s their own fault for dressing up,” but I think to myself, “I can understand where the confusion may have happened.” [ . . . ] So I’ve never yet met somebody who I’ve thought to myself, “Oh, he’s genuinely innocent,” but I have met lots of people where I think, if the shoe was on the other foot, it could have been me. (Offender Supervisor)

Nevertheless, they saw themselves as “an instrument of the court” (officer), whose primary requirement was to treat people equally and not to make their own decisions about what people deserved:

*To what extent does whether or not they maintain innocence affect how you think about prisoners?*

I don’t think it alters it. Again, it’s not for us staff to care—care’s the wrong word—but it’s not for staff to say if they shouldn’t be here. If they appeal it and they win, congratulations, you get to go home and you’re not our problem anymore. I don’t need to know. If they start the conversation, then I just say, “It’s not for me to know. You’re here and it’s my job to deal with you while you’re here.” (Officer)

They frequently echoed the famous dictum that people come to prison as a punishment, not for punishment, and they believed that it was for the courts to allocate punishment and for them to deliver it. Engaging with the details of prisoners’ offenses would make this task harder.

That officers avoided finding out about the details of prisoners’ offenses did not mean that they treated prisoners as their moral equals; rather, they treated all prisoners as equally different to them. Officers felt that prisoners had a lower moral status than they did, but it was defined by their status primarily as a prisoner and secondarily as a “sex offender,” rather than by the specifics of what they had done. In order to maintain this status differential and to prevent themselves from being corrupted by prisoners, officers maintained a strict symbolic boundary between themselves and those they incarcerated.<sup>8</sup> They never made cups of tea for prisoners, for instance, and only rarely allowed prisoners to do so for them. They took pride in their uniforms—items of clothing which made their distinction from

prisoners clear—and generally preferred to be called by their surnames with the honorific “Mr.” or “Miss,” while referring to prisoners either by just their surname or their first name.<sup>9</sup> They also made frequent jokes in the office about prisoners as a bloc being “groomers” and warned female officers (and me) to be careful around men they deemed to be predatory. They balanced their reluctance to acknowledge the specifics of prisoners’ crimes with the conscious acknowledgment of their stained identities. Doing so prevented them from getting too close to prisoners or from empathizing too strongly with their situation:

You get the older guys who come and to an extent don’t really know what’s going on, which is sad to an extent, but I always say to everybody, people don’t get sent to Stafford prison because they haven’t paid their fishing license. So you can feel empathy to an extent, but they are in jail for a reason, and particularly in Stafford, they’re in for a reason. (Offender Supervisor)

You must not forget the reasons why they’re here. They might seem like an OK bloke but they’re not. I act like I don’t care what they’re in for, but I do care. Sometimes I get a bit annoyed and a bit sarcastic and I remind them that I know why they’re here and that I’m the officer and they’re the inmate and although I might be nice, I haven’t forgotten the reason why they’re here. I’m not here to persecute them, I’m here to keep them away from the public and do a good job. (Officer)

Deep down, officers believed themselves to be categorically different from the men they imprisoned. They may have aspired to treat prisoners impartially, but they also sought to maintain a clear separation from them, and their interactions were functional but rarely personal. The claim of one Offender Supervisor that “you can have a laugh with them if you take them at face value” was double-edged: working relationships between staff and prisoners were possible because officers held prisoners at a distance, but this distance ensured that these relationships were shallow. Any attempts to breach this boundary, or disrupt the hierarchy which it implied, were seen by officers as a threat.

## DANGERS OF COMPLIANCE

This is a doddle [really easy].

*Why?*

Working with YOs [Young Offenders] in particular, it’s like a constant battle, it’s a war zone.<sup>10</sup> Coming here, when it was mains, it was like semiretirement. Now working with these more elderly, more intelligent gentlemen, it’s like full retirement.

*Are there any ways in which it’s harder here?*

Psychologically it’s different. They’re more intelligent in lots of ways. With mainstream prisoners, their crimes are based around aggression and taking what they want. These prisoners are in for being nice, for the grooming and petting, so they’re much more amenable. (Officer)



*Do you think that the fact that they're more compliant affects your work in any way?*

Me personally, no, but I think because they are so compliant, people can get complacent and take their foot off the pedal and forget that they are prisoners. These pose just as much risk as the mains.

*Can you give me an example?*

Just because they always do what you tell them to do, you get into the mindset, "Oh they're alright, these are." You've got to stay in that mindset that they're prisoners, they're here for a reason, you've got exactly the same risk and you need to be dealing with them exactly the same as any other prisoner. (Officer)

Stafford was striking for its calmness and quiet.<sup>11</sup> Whereas in most penal establishments, officers put a great deal of work into the maintenance of order (Sparks, Bottoms, and Hay 1996; Liebling, Price, and Shefer 2011), prisoners in Stafford, like others convicted of sex offenses, were so compliant that order was taken for granted. Prisoners tended to follow, and sometimes preempt, staff instructions: they started to queue to go to work up to fifteen minutes before route began, and they quickly and calmly walked to their cells at the end of association periods, often before they were told to. It was rare for staff to feel the need to challenge prisoners' behavior, and voices were normally raised only when officers shouted prisoners' surnames to summon them downstairs. That prisoners presented fewer control issues than might be expected in a prison of Stafford's size was in part due to the relatively high age of Stafford's population, but it was also a consequence of prisoners' long-standing relationships to authority.<sup>12</sup> Many men in Stafford had never been to prison before, and *repentant* and *resigned prisoners* in particular liked to think of themselves as law-abiding citizens. *Negotiators*, on the other hand, were unlikely to challenge staff because they considered compliance to be in their best interests, and *fatalists* were so vulnerable that they struggled to imagine what resistance would look like.

Despite this apparent calmness, officers frequently complained that prisoners convicted of sex offenses were harder to work with than "mainstream" prisoners had been and stressed that it was important neither to adapt nor to soften their working practices. Officers claimed that their charges posed the same risk to order that their "mainstream" antecedents had, and interpreted their apparent compliance as a mask obscuring inherent dangerousness: "They're very manipulative. These lot are trying to be your friend all the time, they're trying to help you, but really, they're trying to rip your head off" (officer). At the same time, officers thought that there were risks within prisoners' compliance itself, which they felt challenged their professional identities, their ability to hold and exert power effectively, and the bounded relationships they sought to develop with prisoners. Officers felt that prisoners wanted closer, more intimate relationships with them than they were comfortable with and than "mainstream" prisoners had sought. They described prisoners as "clingy," "needy," and "devious," and complained that

“they get in your head” and create a form of “psychological pressure.” Officers in all prisons worry that they might be conditioned or manipulated by prisoners (Arnold 2016), but officers in Stafford were intensely sensitive to these risks, largely because of their preconceptions about “sex offenders.” All prisoners in Stafford—particularly, but not exclusively, those who had offended against children—were believed to be inherent “groomers”: “It’s in their nature, it’s in their being to be that way inclined” (officer); “the pedophiles and child abusers have been able to condition parents” (nonuniformed staff member). Officers assumed that prisoners would carry these skills and predilections into the prison, and although exaggerated, these risks were not to be discounted. A few female officers described prisoners getting sexual gratification by telling them about their offenses, forming attachments to them and asking them to stay in touch after their release, or trying to persuade them to enter their cells unaccompanied. A couple of prisoners spoke about their desire for “friendship and closeness” with female officers, in ways which clearly threatened professional boundaries. I had one conversation with a young prisoner who complained about the difficulty of maintaining a respectful distance from female officers while repeatedly trying to push his leg against mine.<sup>13</sup>

These risks came from a small minority of men in Stafford, and the majority behaved respectfully and appropriately. However, officers did not use the language of manipulation solely to describe sexual risks. Their belief that prisoners were “groomers” stained staff-prisoner relationships more generally and impacted how officers interpreted prisoners’ wider behavior. Officers used the terms “grooming,” “conditioning,” and “manipulation” interchangeably and defined them nebulously as “small things like we’re doing what they want and not the other way around,” or behaviors aimed at “testing boundaries” or giving “power to them.” These behaviors were united by the fact that they challenged officers’ sense of themselves, their expectations of prisoners, and their preferred style of staff-prisoner relationship. Officers favored hierarchical relationships: they wanted to tell prisoners what to do and have prisoners either obey or fight back in ways which were visible and easily definable. Prisoners in Stafford, on the other hand, wanted to engage in and influence the terms of their incarceration, whether through complaints, censoriousness (Mathiesen 1965), or the development of friendly relationships with staff. They thus did not follow the expected script of prisoner behavior and challenged the power of officers in ways which were insidious and difficult to identify, but easy to discount as conditioning, grooming, or manipulation.<sup>14</sup>

Asked to give an example of conditioning, one officer replied:

So prisoners are having a banter with you. They might be taking the mickey [teasing] and you might be taking the mickey back. But when it gets to the point where they’re swearing at you in front of other prisoners and in front of staff, you need to draw a line under it because they’re going too far.

Another described calling officers and managers by their first names as “a form of grooming”:

I am not their pal, I am never going to be their pal, I am the person responsible for making sure they comply with the rules and regulations and are behind the door safely at night when they should be, and that's how I see it.

Self-harming was often considered a calculated act: “They’re more manipulative, they might not argue to your face, but they’ll go to their cell and cut up” (Offender Supervisor). Other officers classed prisoners’ apparent willingness to engage with the institution by becoming prisoner representatives or joining the Prisoner Council as symptomatic of their manipulation:

With sex offenders, they are more manipulative and underhanded in the way they work. They will follow due process to go through the personal officer system, do apps and complaints and stuff, whereas mainstream prisoners, if they don’t get their own way, they will sometimes kick off.<sup>15</sup>

It is striking that compliance, following “due process,” was seen as devious, and that the violence officers could face from “mainstream” prisoners was considered to be almost preferable.<sup>16</sup>

Officers disproportionately accused older, more middle-class, and more engaged prisoners of manipulation. They believed that these people were particularly unhappy being supervised by “lowly prison officers”: “They’ve got a different level of manipulation, they are the ones who’ve got a lot outside and they look for positions of responsibility” (officer). Many officers alluded to anxious feelings about working with prisoners they feared were more intelligent than them—“They’re ex-teachers, policemen, they’re fire officers, and they’re bright and influential”—and whose ways of talking and interacting they considered insidious and strategic. Buried within these critiques were negative evaluations of prisoners’ masculinity. Several officers compared prisoners to women in terms of their neediness, and they were frustrated that, rather than actively confronting officers, like “mainstream” prisoners or real men, Stafford’s more middle-class inhabitants undermined them.<sup>17</sup>

It was certainly the case that prisoners in Stafford had very different relationships with state power and large institutions than is common among “mainstream” prisoners. In their professional lives, a great many had run their own legitimate businesses, and others had worked in large, bureaucratic organizations. Significant numbers of prisoners—more than half of those interviewed—had never been to prison before, and prior to their incarceration they had had little experience of being subjected to the hard edges of state power. They thought of large bureaucracies as institutions which helped you, and which you worked for and with. In many cases, prisoners’ prior experiences of work made it harder for them to accept authority, particularly in its heaviest form: “It’s unpleasant because the authority

as it's exercised is mainly unjust, and I suppose it's the opposite of what I'm used to. I've been the boss and I've exercised authority, but not in an authoritarian way" (Michael). In some cases, this resentment morphed into explicit contempt for staff, as a man I chatted to while walking from one wing to another told me:

We know exactly where we're going, we know exactly what we're doing. Some of the staff are not so fortunate. That's one of the problems here, the complete lack of organization. The left hand is not only not talking to the right hand, they're not even attached. I've run a few firms and there's very few I'd actually employ.

On first arriving in prison, many prisoners had held unrealistic expectations of what officers could and would do for them. They had imagined officers as service personnel rather than holders of authority, and struggled to adapt to this new way of interacting with workers, as a story told by Kevin about an evening early in his sentence made clear:

On Fridays there [in my previous prison], I'd always have a salad, not for any reason like I was actually going anywhere, but just so I could eat at a leisurely time. One day I was chopping the salad up and then I went to pull the key back on the pilchards and the key [to the tin] broke. I couldn't get the wretched thing open. So I was sharing a cell then with a guy, a thoroughly nice guy, so I pressed the button for the officer and it was probably about quarter past eight and I waited about ten minutes before he came and he opened the door, big guy, and he said, "What's the matter?"<sup>18</sup> I said, "You couldn't get me a tin opener, could you, to open the pilchards?" And he looked at me and he said . . . I can't repeat what he said. But he said, "Are you taking the piss?" And I said, "No, I've laid all my salad out and I can't get into the pilchards, the key's broke." He said, "I don't believe you. You know what that bell's for, for an emergency." I said, "Well I'm sorry, I'm not going to be able to have my tea!" He just shut the door. [ . . . ] The next evening the guy was on slightly earlier and he came up to me and he said, "I'm not going to tell you off, but I am going to tell you this. That took an awful lot of bloody nerve, what you did. You're either barking or a bloody fool." I said, "I'm sorry, I do realize, I've had eight hours to digest it. I'm as nervous as hell that I'm going to get into trouble." He said, "No, you're not going to be in trouble, but can I just remind you that this is a prison and not a hotel and we're not bellboys."

While most prisoners had since learned what to expect from officers, some still compared the prison to an "office environment," the atmosphere of which would be improved by chatting with colleagues (in this case, officers) about the weather or what was on television.

Some prisoners actively tried to use their professional expertise to help the prison, in ways which were not always welcomed. One man, for instance, had been rebuffed by management when he volunteered to help with the prison's accounts. Others had frustrated their teachers in Education:

I don't know how true this is, this is a rumor, [but] our tutor left about six or seven weeks ago, she just didn't show up again, and the rumor going round is that we gave her a breakdown! We weren't aggressive or anything, but a lot of us were older blokes, quite a few of us had been in business before, so we just challenged her on some things. She was a business expert but some of the things she said didn't sound right and we just challenged her about it and that caused a lot of problems. (Phil)

At times, prisoners made use of their soft power to attempt to influence the terms of their incarceration. In so doing, they often used social skills they had developed in their professional careers or their lives as consumers. Tony and Steven, both of whom had had professional jobs before their imprisonment, were frequently accused of manipulation:

If you went on the mentor course, for instance, all of the skills that you can learn if you haven't already got them, by going on that course, you could easily say, "That's manipulation, innit. That's manipulative. That's manipulation," if you were inclined to say that. But when it turns out that might just be a good man management skill or a good way of engaging with someone or a good way of earning someone's trust, I think it's a little bit dangerous when people say, "Oh it's manipulation." That might just be something that you do. (Tony)

I don't let things go. When people say no, I don't listen to them [ . . . ]. But the officers, they'll say, "Oh no, I'm busy," but I'll push it, I'll push it. It's easier for them to dismiss you so you need to get past that barrier, you need for them to see you as a person and not just a blur, and the whole notion as a blur. [ . . . ] It's the same as going to the shops, sometimes you need more attention, you need sometimes to present yourself as actually person to person, and that's something I do definitely. I fight for that. (Steven)

Prisoners saw these forms of engagement with officers as expressive of their humanity and a result of a desire to have themselves, their ideas, and their needs taken seriously by holders of authority. They resented attempts by staff to label these as acts of manipulation. None of these forms of behavior explicitly or directly challenged order or safety, and they were not actively noncompliant. Nevertheless, they complicated officers' position as powerholders, muddying relationships which officers would have preferred to be deferential and hierarchical.

Officers missed the ontological security (Giddens 1991) of working with "mainstream" prisoners, even if those relationships had been more openly hostile: "That sort of atmosphere is easier to deal with because at least you know where you stand" (officer). Prisoners in Stafford, on the other hand, were able to use soft power, working within the structures of the bureaucratic late-modern prison to challenge the authority of officers. Officers believed that prisoners took advantage of their experience with bureaucracies to "use the system against you" (officer) by

regularly and strategically submitting complaints forms. Most officers claimed that prisoners submitted such forms more frequently and more effectively than “mainstream” prisoners had:<sup>19</sup>

These people are very clever, whereas the people we were locking up before, the burglars and the robbers, they were generally less clever. We’ve got some very intelligent people that we lock up now. That brings different challenges to the staff. Whereas before you could say no to them and just fob them off with an excuse, with these you really have to know your job. They can read and write and they are intelligent so you can’t fob them off with bullshit. [ . . . ] With the mains you’d be more likely to get a mouthful and they’d take a pop at you, where with these, you’ll get a “Well I think you’re wrong there sir!” [ . . . ] The complaints now have got more substance and are better constructed. Before, it would be “Mr. Wilson is a prick,” now they say why I’m a prick. (Officer)

In some cases, these acts of censoriousness could push officers into more legitimate behavior. In others, the perception that prisoners were more likely to complain made officers uneasy and contributed to a greater distance between staff and prisoners. Astute prisoners like Ahmed recognized that officers were “cautious” around him because “as much as they [officers] have paper power, I have paper power too, because I can write things.”

Officers’ discomfort with prisoners’ apparent tendency to complain was linked to their general feelings of anxiety concerning managerial power, another force which operated behind officers’ backs and left them feeling insecure about their positions:

*Why do you prefer to deal face-to-face than [with] complaints?*

It’s easier to deal with because you know what you’re dealing with. It’s that person with a complaint and it’s a valid complaint sometimes. But the other way it’s behind your back and the first time you hear of it is when a CM [Custodial Manager] comes and speaks to you. (Officer)<sup>20</sup>

Manipulation, you’ve just got to nip it in the bud, simple as that. [ . . . ]

*If they’re good at it, how can you tell that it’s happening?*

Because they don’t tend to come to officers, they tend to go above us, because the officers know how they work, how the landing works, what’s put in the obs [observation] book, we know who’s who and what’s what.<sup>21</sup> [ . . . ] They tend to ask for the same Senior Officers or the same CMs or the same governor, because they tend to give them what they want, and again that’s where the undermining of staff comes from, and then they wonder why staff get annoyed and the job satisfaction’s out the window. (Officer)

Prison sociologist Ben Crewe (2011b) has argued that prisoners in late-modern English and Welsh prisons often complain that power has been decentered from the wings and is instead found in psychologists’ offices and management corridors. He suggests that prisoners are frustrated by these changes, which result in a form of power which prisoners describe as both intrusive and opaque. Officers in Stafford shared these annoyances, resenting their loss of control over their territory

but often attributing it not just to changes in the way prisons operate but also to the manipulative skill of prisoners. The anxiety which officers felt about their roles had numerous sources, including shifts in how their job was designed, but as I shall argue, it was expressed as moral judgment.

### CONTROL AS CONDEMNATION

He shows his power by the way he stares at you and the way he talks to you, and the way he raises his voice and the way he slams your door. Because he does slam it. He doesn't shut it. He pulls it. "That's my authority to you. That's me telling you that you're a dirty inmate, a scumbag, and I'll slam the door in your face because that's my power. I'm up here. You're down there." (Jake)

I think a lot of staff are scared. [ . . . ] Scared of relationships. So they'll always be, "Smith, behind your door!" instead of going, "Go on Michael," put your hand on his back, "Go on, in your door, you daft bugger." They'll always have a very strict barrier, and I think that's a lack of confidence in them to have relationships with prisoners. Positive relationships, I don't mean being their best mate, but having a relationship with them where they have confidence in you and they feel comfortable with you and you're feeling comfortable about how they're behaving around you. I think a lot of staff don't like to get too close to prisoners, so they will always have their hand up, saying, "That's as far as you're coming Smith." (Officer)

Officers saw prisoners convicted of sex offenses as a threat to their professional identity and to their impartial control. They feared that moral and psychological stain might prompt them to act judgmentally and that manipulation might lead them to behave too liberally, and that either way their authority would be weakened. Prisoners, on the other hand, believed that officers *overused* their power in Stafford, and they believed that this resulted from moral condemnation. They recurrently insisted that their compliance and reluctance to challenge regime decisions meant that they were more tightly regulated than "mainstream" prisoners would be. As Phil said, "that's a big saying in here, 'they wouldn't do that to the mains'".<sup>22</sup> In particular, they complained about the frequency with which periods of association were unexpectedly canceled or shortened:

Half of the stuff the officers do here, they wouldn't do in a mains jail. We're supposed to get banged up at 6:15 every night and sometimes they go, "We can't be arsed, we'll bang them up at 6:00 tonight." That wouldn't happen in a mains jail, because the prisoners would go, "I'm going behind my door at 6:15." "You're not." You've got five officers trying to get 155 lads on the wing behind the door. It's not going to happen, is it? People [here] will go, "Yes, I'll do it," because they don't want to get into trouble. (Owen)<sup>23</sup>

The frequency with which prisoners complained about differential treatment speaks to the frustration they felt at the perceived injustice. But they also found the control which was exerted on them—which Tony described as "being treated like a dickhead by a dickhead"—demeaning and contemptuous. What

mattered was not just the nature of the treatment, but what it implied about what you deserved.

Officers did not necessarily intend to treat prisoners contemptuously, but prisoners nevertheless read contempt into their tone and their behavior. Officers spoke to prisoners loudly, abruptly, often bawdily—a communicative style which can feel degrading, and which felt particularly alien and unnecessary to the older men who now inhabited Stafford. Michael, for instance, a *resigned prisoner* in his eighties, complained that he and his friends were spoken to disrespectfully:

My friend was walking back to his cell to be locked up and Mr. Williams thought he was going too slowly, and he shouted, "Move your arse!," and to his credit he turned around and said, "Show me some respect! I'm old enough to be your grandfather!" He's horrible. Very cruel to us older people.

In a very small number of cases, prison officers' dismissive manner seemed to grow directly out of the stained soil of prisoners' convictions. Nigel—a *redeemed prisoner* who had spent many years in the system—recounted an argument he had had with a member of staff, who had attempted to placate him by alluding to the type of prison Stafford was, and thus the type of prisoner he assumed Nigel to be:

He said something along the lines of "This is a sex offenders' prison." I think because of my attitude, I'd just had an underachieve [a warning for poor behavior] or something. He went, "You do realize this is a sex offen—." I went, "Before you even finish, what are you making a big point of that for? We all know that, what are you mentioning that for?" I went, "No, let's just change the conversation, because I don't even know why you said that." So I became very forceful in the way I was talking. He got up off his chair and I got up off my chair, and I was kind of like, "Why are you trying to stand over me? Let's stay at the same eye level!"

Other prisoners, though, did not seem to believe that they were treated worse or more dismissively than "mainstream" prisoners would have been. Rather, they thought that their compliance had earned them the right to better treatment, a looser regime, and less authoritarian interactions than "mainstream" prisoners would receive: "They don't need to be as strong with us as they did with the mains. We don't need as much looking after, we're domesticated," one man told me. These men invested their compliance with moral significance, and criticized the regime for failing to live up to it:

It's not the worst prison in the world but I think the type of people in here, the way we behave—and I put emphasis on the word "behave," because we do—then I think we should be given a bit more time out, time on the yard. You know. Obviously if we were kicking off every five minutes then no, but we deserve it, you know. (Keith)

*Repentant* and *resigned prisoners*, who thought of themselves as different from "criminals," were most likely to argue that they deserved better treatment than "mainstream" prisoners, but most prisoners shared the belief that they were spoken to and managed in a demeaning way.



On the whole, then, prisoners' perceptions of judgment did not seem to be driven either by what officers said or by their attitudes, and instead lay in the way in which officers used their power and formed relationships with prisoners. The flow of power was the main medium of vertical moral communication in Stafford, and how officers disciplined, policed, provided care for, and formed relationships with prisoners said something to these prisoners about their moral identities. One mechanism by which this happened was that officers' anxieties about manipulation and sexual risk led them to retreat from relationships with prisoners.<sup>24</sup> Anxious officers saw the signs of sexual grooming in even the most innocuous communications: "It starts with 'Have a nice weekend,' and then it's 'Have a nice Christmas,' and then it's 'Have a nice new year,' and then it's 'Have a nice Valentine's Day,' and you're like, 'You what?' They're always seeking some gratification. Weirdos" (officer). Bland social interactions such as these can help to lubricate staff-prisoner relationships (Liebling, Price, and Shefer 2011) and communicate to prisoners that officers see them as human. Concerns about potential sexual manipulation in Stafford meant that interactions such as these came to be seen by some officers as sources of risk rather than potential sources of legitimacy. Some officers avoided these sorts of interactions and policed their colleagues who were friendlier. Female officers were particularly subjected to their lateral surveillance (Ievins 2020a), and they therefore tried not "to come across too friendly" (officer) to protect themselves both from prisoners and from accusations of inappropriate intimacy:

There's some staff that don't wanna talk at all. I think I'm one of those that's in-between. I'm not one that's, "Oh come in and sit down" and call each other by their first names like some staff do, but I'm also not one that's like, "Oh go away," basically. [ . . . ] But I also think that because I'm a female though, because you've got to be more careful anyway, I can't just say, "Come in and sit down" because then you've got staff thinking, "Oh is there something going on there?" (Officer)

Women were not the only subjects of this surveillance. The most suspicious officers frequently submitted Serious Information Reports to the Security Department on prisoners they believed were manipulative as well as on colleagues whose more relational working practices were thought to leave them open to conditioning. One highly experienced but quite maverick officer went out of his way to shake hands with prisoners, in an effort to reduce the social distance his role created. I once witnessed him doing this while I was stood next to an equally experienced but more cynical officer, who looked at me, shook his head, and said, "I give up."

Officers' retreat from relationships meant that they did not know their prisoners well, and as a result they struggled to address the issues that mattered to them and to police the risks that did exist.<sup>25</sup> Officers avoided talking to prisoners about anything personal, sexual, or offense-related in order to protect themselves from psychological corruption; as one Offender Supervisor summarized, "you can't get in their head too much or they'll fry yours." Restricting topics of conversation in

this way meant that officers rarely had safe conversations with prisoners about the issues that mattered to them, whether their broken relationships with their families, their feelings of guilt and shame, their fears about the future, or their restricted contact with their children. Oliver, for instance, was a vulnerable *fatalist* whose conviction had had severe impacts on his family and had led to his children being taken into care. He self-harmed often, but was unwilling to seek help from staff:

I try to deal with things myself. Maybe that's the wrong attitude, but I don't really trust staff to open up to, because I'd feel vulnerable.

*In what way?*

I don't know how many staff know about my offenses, for example. Say it was about feeling guilty about what I did, or whatever, and I opened up and told one of the officers about it, he might feel the need to look up my OASys [online record] and see what the hell it's about.<sup>26</sup> I don't want that. [ . . . ] I don't want them to know. Because he might change his attitude. He might turn around and say what he thinks of me.

While officers did see it as their job to manage and care for prisoners in distress, they were reactive rather than proactive. If prisoners did not approach them with their problems, they were likely to remain “under the radar” (Offender Supervisor). The fact that many of the sources of distress experienced by prisoners concerned issues which they and officers found difficult to talk about made this more likely.

Officers' anxieties about being conditioned by manipulative “sex offenders” also pushed them away from exercising discretion and toward acting “by the book” (officer). The exercise of good discretion—judgment about when to enforce rules and when to overlook them in the interest of keeping the peace, of decency, or of care—is often considered one of the most important tasks of the prison officer (Gilbert 1997; Liebling 2000). The confident use of discretion comes with trust in one's own professional skills, and officers' worries about manipulation showed that this trust had been wounded. As a result, they took refuge in the rules and prioritized consistency over discretion:

*How can you tell when someone's manipulative, and how do you deal with it?*

I think you have to be aware of it, and that's why you have to have that barrier in terms of not being yourself. I don't know if you would be aware of it. I think you just have to be careful with what you're doing and then make sure you can defend your decision and you would do the same if anyone else had asked you to do it. If you had one decision for one, you have to know in your head that it would be the same for all. (Officer)

Prisoners who had been in the prison before the reroll, or who had spent time on “mainstream” wings in other prisons, insisted that officers in Stafford now leaped more willingly to formal mechanisms of control, choosing to discipline prisoners by adjudicating them rather than talking to them.<sup>27</sup> They offered multiple explanations for this, ranging from the increasing number of young and inexperienced

officers to the fact that the prison's relative calm meant that officers were rarely pushed to demonstrate discretion by the requirements of daily peacekeeping: "It's like Mr. Taylor. Gets bored stupid so he'll nick someone. It's like that small guy in the gray, he's always getting nicked. No one talks to him, no one says, 'That's disrespectful,' they just nick him" (Steven). The most professional officers worried that new members of staff might not develop the requisite skills for working with more difficult prisoners and bemoaned their inability to adapt their practice to the specifics of the situation. One experienced, if cynical, officer pointed out a junior colleague to me one day on the wing and told me, "She tried to lock up an eighty-eight-year-old last week. I mean, what's the fucking point? What would it have been like when we had real prisoners?"

Officers' use of power also became morally communicative because the behavioral territory over which they felt able to exert influence had expanded (Ievins 2022). In part, this had happened because officers' reluctance to exercise discretion, combined with the fact that order was taken for granted, allowed them to enforce rules in areas they had previously policed less tightly—or as Peter summarized, "because everyone's under control they can nitpick." Oliver had been in the prison since before the reroll, and complained that officers now monitored the quantity, type, and arrangement of furniture in cells:

They're more likely to nick you, and more likely to put you down to basic or if you're enhanced, put you down to standard.

*Do you think they're stricter than they used to be?*

Damn sight stricter. I mean, all these things up on the doors now that say how your furniture should be, that wasn't there. They'd never do that with the mains, never.

They used to shout all the time with the officers, they didn't care.

Prisoners complained that many staff members spent their days disciplining prisoners for having too many pillows in their cells or very strictly controlling the numbers of prisoners in cells during association periods (across the estate, officially only three prisoners are allowed in a cell, although this rule is often not enforced), or even disciplining prisoners for putting photographs up on the walls of their cells rather than on the designated pinboards.

The prison also sought to expand its zone of control by governing prisoners' sexuality and sexual expression. On the one hand, officers were aware that prisoners posed different risks to security and safety than "mainstream" prisoners had, and realized that they had to pay attention to (for example) the forms of contact they were having with women and children outside the prison, or the media they were consuming and sexual relationships they were engaging in inside it. However, officers' instinctive distaste about sexual offenses, and their self-protective desire not to talk about them, meant they struggled to do so meaningfully or consistently. Many prisoners in Stafford were engaged in various forms of sexual behavior with each other, some of which seemed to be consensual, but some of

which seemed more troubling. Prisoners spoke to me relatively frequently about the establishment's sexual economy. Young and often debt-ridden men were paid half an ounce of tobacco, equivalent to £5 (around \$6.50), for oral sex, or a quarter of an ounce or even a chocolate bar if the person being paid was particularly vulnerable or desperate. Officers, however, never discussed the sexual marketplace in their prison in my presence, although they did discuss the (moribund) drug trade and their (more accurate) belief that some prisoners were bullying older men for their medication. Most officers reacted with unease whenever anyone raised the topic of sexual relationships between prisoners, and showed no interest in finding out more about the dynamics between the participants.

Officers may have underpoliced certain dimensions of prisoners' sexuality, but they tightly policed others, although they still struggled to do so with purpose or clarity.<sup>28</sup> Prisoners who were deemed to pose a risk to children were not allowed to have photographs of anyone under the age of eighteen, but officers did not understand how risk judgments were made and so struggled to explain them to the prisoners whose family photos they confiscated. Officers also monitored the media prisoners consumed, but it was not clear what they were trying to achieve in doing so. John, a life-sentenced prisoner in his sixties who was in bad health, complained that the officers managing the Senior Support Group censored the films they watched:

If they're [the prisoners] watching a film and there's a woman in her knickers and bra, they [the officers] turn it off. And on the news, they were talking about that Lord Sewell, and as soon as it mentioned prostitution, they turned the news off.<sup>29</sup> If they see two people kissing, the video is ripped out. They make them watch cartoons, kids' films, *Star Wars* and that.

Gay prisoners complained that it was difficult to get access to magazines which depicted images of topless men, but that heteronormative images were more readily available. Other prisoners were able to cut revealing images of women out of magazines and newspapers and stick them on their walls.<sup>30</sup> Officers' inconsistent regulation of prisoners' sexual expression meant that prisoners were not well protected from inappropriate or dangerous sexual behavior, but they still felt stigmatized as "sex offenders."

#### CONCLUSION: THE INEVITABILITY OF INAUTHENTICITY

Furthermore, if punishment is to have the character which it ought to have, much will be demanded not only of the criminals who are punished, but of those who administer the punishments, and indeed of every member of the community. For those who administer punishments must be motivated by a genuine concern for the values which the law embodies, and for the criminal as a moral agent; they must exhibit moral qualities of sensitivity, compassion and understanding; how likely is it that we will be able to staff a penal system with people such as this? (Duff 1986, 293–94)

Reformers and academics often question whether the problems of penal institutions come from bad people or bad structures. Penal theorist Antony Duff implied the former. He believed that the goal of a legitimate penal system would be to communicate to prisoners the censure they deserved for their crimes, in the hope that this would help them repent, reform themselves, and be reconciled with the community (Duff 2001). He imagined that this process would be deeply active and inclusionary, and that it would involve penal administrators—probation officers, perhaps, but also prison officers—keeping prisoners’ minds focused both on what they had done and on their processes of moral change. In some of his writing, though, he displayed some pessimism about the capacity of penal administrators to engage in the right sort of inclusionary and reintegrative moral communication, a pessimism which this chapter indicates was well-founded. However, less well-founded was Duff’s implication that the fault would lie in the selection of people chosen to work as penal administrators. As we have seen, prison officers did not intend to be judgmental or condemnatory. The fact that they communicated stigmatizing shame, and that they rarely discussed personal issues with prisoners, did not result from their own moral failings, but from the structure of the institution in which they worked.

The professional standards of behavior to which officers in Stafford were committed—impartiality, order, and consistency—discouraged them from acting as morally communicative agents. But one of the ironies undergirding staff-prisoner relationships in Stafford was that it was these very standards of behavior which encouraged them to use power and form relationships in the morally condemnatory ways which I have described. Officers were frightened that they might inadvertently express judgment and contempt toward prisoners and that they might be manipulated by them. Their response to both fears was to keep their relationships with prisoners shallow and distant. That way, they could avoid knowledge which could push them away from acting “by the book” and toward acting either too punitively or too laxly. However, the relational reluctance and heavy forms of control which resulted said something to prisoners about their moral status. Officers had fallen into the trap of becoming agents of moral condemnation.

These processes were not preordained, however, and a handful of officers managed to resist them. These officers were generally experienced enough to be confident in their authority, without having so much experience that they had become tired or cynical. They held tightly on to their belief in the value of care and respect, and often had a special area of responsibility (perhaps a wing, or a particular group of vulnerable prisoners) over which they felt empowered to exercise these beliefs. They thought it was important that concerns about manipulation did not prevent them from speaking to prisoners and recognized that relationships were valuable sources of legitimacy. They saw the value of chatting with prisoners about their lives outside, although they generally avoided talking about details: “It shows that you’re a normal person, and if you put yourself on a pedestal, it makes it difficult to talk to people” (Offender Supervisor). Others were sensitive about the ways in

which prisoners can feel physically stained by imprisonment, and a few male officers made a conscious effort to touch them:

I think the most important thing for normal life for a prisoner is touch. Very rarely do prisoners get touched because no one wants to touch them, whether they're mains or they're VPs, so they never get that. But a big part of being human is touch, which is why I do a lot of handshaking. I'll shake prisoners' hands, I'll touch them, I'll put my arms round them, not because of anything other than I think it really does form good strong bonds between people. It forms trust between people. (Officer)

These officers were aware of the genuine risks of inappropriate or inconsistent relationships with prisoners, but they thought that they could manage these risks without retreating from relationships:

They will try and groom me all the time, and it's about not letting them groom you but being able to help them. The balance between allowing them to have an opinion, to express concerns, to express desires, without that turning into them controlling everything, and it's a fine balance and sometimes you fail and sometimes you don't. Sometimes you get it right. [ . . . ] For me, that comes with experience. That prisoner over there [pointing] is somebody who likes to control everything. I've learned how to manage his control by talking to him, allowing him to say things, but not allowing him to dictate what goes on. (Officer)

To act in this way required sensitive balancing acts—between giving prisoners a say and retaining authority, between displaying care and humanity and avoiding becoming too intimate—and these officers did not always get them right. What distinguished them, though, was that they saw manipulation and inappropriate relationships as things to be responded to when they happened, rather than risks which should prevent the formation of relationships. One particularly care-oriented female officer, for instance, said that on a couple of occasions in the past six months, prisoners had formed an “attachment” to her, on one occasion suggesting that they stay in touch after release, and on another telling her she was “special.” On both occasions, she reported her concerns to her superiors and then spoke to and withdrew from the men—“I wouldn’t want them to build on that”—but was reluctant to stop talking to or trying to help prisoners: “when it happens, deal with it then.”

Such officers were rare, though, and while prisoners often stated that these officers were the best at their job, they tended to believe that even these officers were judgmental, at least on one level. (It was one of these officers who was the subject of Edward’s story, and that was part of what shocked him so much.) Indeed, a second irony shaping staff-prisoner relationships was that both parties complained that the other was inauthentic. Officers felt that prisoners’ politeness and compliance masked their manipulative intentions, while prisoners believed that officers’ professionalism obscured their true feelings of judgment and hatred. These complaints did not exist because they were correct, although there was, sometimes, a

grain of truth in them: a few prisoners were deceptive or sexually inappropriate, and, as Edward's story revealed, officers did sometimes imply that they morally disliked prisoners. However, these mutual complaints of inauthenticity were primarily a result of the difficulty of forming human relationships in an institution which reproduced categorical moral difference. Officers' professional identities may have relied on their ability to treat prisoners equally, but they also needed to maintain a boundary between them and prisoners—after all, they were supposed to hold power, and prisoners were supposed to be subject to it. This boundary was justified by the fact that all prisoners had criminal convictions and reinforced by the fact that their convictions were for sex offenses. The very structure of staff-prisoner relationships in Stafford, then, was built on a foundation of moral difference. It is this which made it difficult for prison officers to work as the sensitive, compassionate, and understanding agents whom Duff wanted to run his morally communicative institutions. It was also this which made the establishment of real, authentic, human relationships between staff and prisoners extremely difficult. In the next chapter, we move on to consider the sorts of relationships which existed between people whose categorization implied that they were morally identical: prisoners.