



*Distinctions and Distinctiveness in  
the Work of Prison Officers:  
Legitimacy and Authority Revisited*

Professor Alison Liebling

Institute of Criminology's 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Nigel Walker Lecture

Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2010, **6.00pm**  
Seminar Room, Institute of Criminology

The purpose of this lecture is to provide a framework for thinking about the work of prison officers, and in particular, their relationships with prisoners. Drawing on important recent theoretical contributions to the policing literature, several empirical research projects on the work of prison officers and staff-prisoner relationships conducted by the author and colleagues, and various analyses of the quality of prison life as evaluated by prisoners, this lecture explores the 'flow of power' in prison through staff-prisoner relationships. It is a well-known maxim that relationships are 'at the heart' of prison life (Home Office 1984). In this lecture, I develop and illustrate this proposition, arguing that the moral quality of prison life is enacted by the attitudes and conduct of prison officers. There are important distinctions to be made in their work: between 'good' and 'right' relationships; 'tragic' and 'cynical' perspectives; 'reassurance' and 'relational' safety; 'good' and 'bad' confidence; and between 'positive peer relations' and 'oppositional peer loyalty'. These cultural and philosophical distinctions are largely 'unseen' but decisive in shaping the prison's moral and social climate. Failure to find the "ethical space" necessary for reflection on officers' conceptual understandings, attitudes and practices, brings about serious organisational and operational risks, and threats to justice. The best prison officer work can be described using these kinds of distinctions.

Alison Liebling is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, and Director of the Prisons Research Centre, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge.

**BOOKING ESSENTIAL**

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