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Prison officer training and practice in Nigeria

Contention, contradiction and re-imagining reform strategies

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Abstract
Prisons and prison guards in Africa remain understudied and ill understood and are most often represented in the literature as objects/subjects of critique or targets of reform. To begin to redress this balance, drawing on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted among prison officers in Nigeria, this article examines prison officer training and the penal philosophy and practice of the Nigerian Prisons Service. Documentation of the contradictions of prison training practice reveals how pretensions to discipline, order and hierarchy are challenged both from below and above at the level of everyday practice. What look like hegemonic practices are, not surprisingly, contested and contradictory. Via a partial ethnography of prison training school practice the article presents a challenge to reform agencies seeking to transform penal institutions via methods that assume the homogeneity of the targeted institutions. A suggestion is made that perhaps the contested nature of penal practices in the South may encourage reform agencies to reconfigure their own identities by tapping in to internal contradictions rather than trying to impose change from without. A space for re-imagining reform strategies is framed that takes the potential but inevitable contradictions and ambiguities of prison practice as its reference point.

Key Words
ethnography • Nigeria • prison officers • reform • training

INTRODUCTION
In 1999, two-and-a-half years before I began fieldwork, Nigeria experienced a transition from military to civilian government accompanied by a clamour of voices calling for penal reform. Newly elected President Obasanjo, himself a former prisoner, was a significant voice in the throng. Such transitions, whether they follow war or changes in
forms of governance, offer peculiar windows of opportunity for penal reformers (and prison researchers). During transitions, prisons formerly utilized by authoritarian regimes as part of a repressive state apparatus often become subject to scrutiny as newly elected governments, anxious to establish their democratic credentials both at home and abroad, engage in expansive rhetoric about penal reform. Notwithstanding this rhetoric as well as the input of western ‘expertise’ and the gaze of the international community, progress towards reform is often painfully slow and radical change largely absent. Partly this is due to the fact that penal institutions in transitional contexts in the South are approached from without as though they are uniform entities wrapped in their own walls, and conceptualized by default as monolithic, unwieldy and resistant to change. They are then confronted head on with standardized reform interventions such as training in human rights for prison personnel. This article documents the training practices of the Nigerian Prisons Service (NPS) and by so doing supplements a slowly growing body of literature on penal practices in the South (e.g. Tibatemwa-Ekirikubinza, 1995; Reed, 2004; Steinberg, 2004). The article’s analysis of the ambiguity – contra homogeneity – of prison service dynamics, as revealed in a training school for newly recruited prison officers points to the need for reform agencies to reconsider their own identities and practices.

STUDYING PRISON PRACTICE

Despite the fact that prison studies have exerted tremendous influence on the social sciences (e.g. Michel Foucault’s Discipline and punish, 1979 and Erving Goffman’s Asylums, 1961a), it remains true that the field is surprisingly under-researched especially when it comes to studies of prisons outside of industrialized countries. The majority of prisons research is dominated by sociological studies of prison life in industrialized countries. Despite calls for more comparative studies the dominant axis of comparison remains the Anglo-American. Developing countries are arguably systematically excluded from comparative studies (see King and Maguire, 1994; Weiss and South, 1998). While practitioners have been active in the field of penal reform in non-industrialized countries their reports remain limited to description and denunciation with little by way of explanation or analysis. The standard voice emanating from prisons in Africa notes that prisons are overcrowded, conditions are appalling, health is threatened, justice is slow, two-thirds of prisoners are awaiting trial/not convicted, violence is the norm, human rights are routinely violated. This diagnostic package – description wrapped in approbation and denunciation – fails of course to tell us much about causes, dynamics or processes. My work takes as its starting point the need to account for prison practice and not only keep accounts of (bad) prison practices. It is now widely acknowledged that prison staff have been neglected by theorists seeking to understand prisons despite repeated statements of their importance (see Hawkins, 1976: 85; Thomas, 1978: 58–62; Liebling and Price, 2001: 4). As Kauffman observes ‘most researchers have proved indifferent to prison officers’ which ‘has inevitably undermined efforts to reform prisons and has contributed to the everyday misery of those who live and work behind the walls’ (1988: 3–4). If it is also true, as Bottoms and Rose suggest, that ‘staff actually embody, in prisoners’ eyes the regime of a prison and its fairness’ (1998: 227) then it is clear why officers deserve attention. Recent work by Liebling and Price (2001) and Crawley (2004a, 2004b) has gone some way to putting the person of
the prison officer back on the agenda. In this article I seek to supplement this work though in a quite different context.

Studying prison officers and their training is important given the typical recommendation of reformers and policy makers that better recruitment strategies and better training courses are the key to reform (Kauffman, 1988: 166). For me, the training schools were also a strategic choice; they provided a pertinent point of entry to prison staff and to penal dynamics in Nigeria. Rather interestingly, as well as being more accessible in the first instance than the prisons, further analysis revealed a structural homology between the training schools and prisons themselves, showing both to be institutions of confinement with more or less total institutionesque characteristics.

The material presented here is based on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2002. Such studies in the context of transitional societies are, as I have pointed out, rather rare though Laura Piacentini’s study Surviving Russian prisons (2004) is exemplary. Through innovative participant observation and interviews conducted in penal colonies in Smolensk and Omsk (Siberia) regions, Piacentini reveals the successive ‘penal identifications’ that have characterized Russian prisons. In contrast to Piacentini, this article focuses not on historical, political or societal transformations but on the everyday dynamics of training school life. This bias towards a perspective from within betrays my own disciplinary rooting in critical psychology, a form of psychology that strives to get to grips with the complexities of social practice as lived and granted significance by implicated actors. This focus on the people caught up in contentious practices rather than on say policy or history is an attempt to redress a balance in theorizing, recognizing as Holland and Lave succinctly put it, that although many have tried,

we cannot understand enduring struggles as crucibles of identities unless our accounts encompass the working creativity of historically produced agents and the interconnected differences among their interests, points of view, and ways of participating in the production of ongoing struggles. (2001: 3)

This is not to deny the ‘imperative of the state’ (Steffen Jensen, personal communication; see also Bourdieu, 1999) but rather to attempt to redress the balance of analyses in the direction of participants in practice. This privileging of persons at the possible expense of the State is critical psychology’s entry point to social practice. This approach recognizes what Bosworth and Carrabine have referred to as ‘the importance of going beyond binary oppositions into the messy detail of social interaction’ and the need ‘to excavate the diverse ways in which action is made possible’ (2000: 509). It also parallels Liebling’s focus on ‘the interior’ as opposed to the ‘exterior’ (in contrast to Sparks (1994, referred to by Liebling, 2004: xix) and Garland (Liebling, 2004: 49)), the importance of which is exemplified in her work on the moral performance of prisons. As she argues, it is not enough to only focus on the political, structural or social properties of prisons. We need also to examine them in their own terms, in terms of their own peculiar logics, what Liebling calls their ‘internal moral configuration’ (2004: 340) and from the perspective of ‘what matters’ to the people occupying them (2004: ch. 3). In this study I was not afforded the opportunity to interview prisoners so my focus is on prison staff and the dynamics they are caught up in. Unlike Liebling I am not in search of values or key dimensions with which to evaluate the quality of prisons. I seek rather to characterize
prison practice in terms reflective of the ways in which prison officers' practice is framed and the way they talk about practice. In this my approach resembles more Kelsey Kauffman's (1988). To my surprise there is a remarkable similarity between comments on prison work made by Massachusetts prison officers in the 1970s and Nigerian prison officers 30 years later. The question of what it is about prison work that makes perspectives on it so similar in such different contexts is worthy of further study, as is the question of how true this is across different contexts. There exists vast scope for comparative studies of penal interiors. To date, the surface has barely been scratched.

My purpose is to document and contextualize particular aspects of NPS practice. My point is not that contradiction, contention and ambiguity are indicators of counter-hegemonic movements that challenge the power of the prison system. Disciplined subjects are still produced despite the ambiguities and contradictions of practice. The tracing of ambiguities reveals not counter-hegemonic movements but cracks, even crevasses, in the apparently smooth surface of things, cracks which might be exploited by more radically minded reform interventions than human rights training. Human rights training of prison guards in the South, while surely useful as one point of entry, is an overrated and overused strategy that rests on acontextual assumptions about the nature of prison practice as well as the merits of training as a strategy for bringing about change. I have elaborated on this contention elsewhere with reference to a training of trainers’ workshop on the standard minimum rules for the treatment of offenders (Jefferson, 2005). While organizations like Penal Reform International and the International Centre for Prisons Studies do commendable work bringing to light injustices and documenting poor prison practice their work is predominantly at the level of advocacy and policy development. It does not rest on in-depth understandings of the local conditions and dynamics of prison practice in the South, which I contend, are necessary if we – researchers and practitioners together – are to have any chance of transforming troubling penal practices in such contexts.

SITUATING THE NIGERIAN PRISONS SERVICE

Before addressing training school life it is necessary to situate the NPS historically. As Melossi has put it ‘punishment is deeply embedded in the national/cultural specificity of the environment which produces it’ (in Aguirre, 2005: 11). The specificity out of which the NPS developed had as its backdrop the gradual colonization of the country by the British. Dr T.O. Elias, former Attorney General of Nigeria, has described how modern Nigeria was ‘acquired by the British almost in a fit of absent mindedness’ (Elias, 1967: 4). Rather than a conscious administrative policy, Elias describes Britain’s inroads of control over the territory as ‘piecemeal, hesitant and planless’ (1967: 4). The colonial era in Nigeria tends to be designated as being from 1861–1960, 1861 being the year when Lagos was seceded to the British Crown. However, already in 1852 a treaty had been signed by the British Consul (present since 1849) and the rulers of Lagos that addressed three core issues that can be characterized as humanitarian, capitalist and security-conscious. According to Elias the motives of the British were to abolish the slave trade, facilitate trading and protect Christian missionaries. The facilitation of trade was perhaps in the end the ultimate factor that cemented Britain’s commitment to the territory and its gradual expansion both geographically and administratively. The
current Nigerian justice system had its birth during this period of colonial expansion, functioning ostensibly as a tool for maintaining order and furthering the drive towards ‘British ascendancy’, which according to Elias was first achieved in 1904 (Elias, 1967: 6). With the gradual development of the legal system inaugurated in 1863 came a system of punishments including imprisonment. An organized prison system was established in 1872, arguably to protect British business interests (Arthur, 1991) and in stark contrast to traditional reparative sanctions (Elias, 1996). Prisons modelled on the one first established in Lagos in 1872 spread across the country in line with the gradual expansion of the colonial jurisdiction and in 1876 the prison ordinances came into force (PTS Kaduna, 1991).

The most important phase of development followed the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914. In 1916–17 a dual system of federal prisons and provincial prisons was established, the federal prisons holding those convicted in British established courts and the provincial prisons those convicted by native courts. The Director of Prisons offered supervisory control of both systems. In 1920 a Commission was set up to report on prison conditions and in 1932 a Borstal was established in Enugu (Egu, 1990; PTS Kaduna, 1991: 14).

The first training school for staff was established in Enugu in 1947. The period 1946–54 came to be known as the ‘golden age’ of prison administration in Nigeria (Egu, 1990: 4). Until the late 1950s the majority of senior staff were British nationals and training of staff was modelled on British methods. The standing orders (rules still governing prison practice) published in 1961 (NPS, 1961) are quite clearly inspired by British models of prison management. In 1955 when Nigeria was granted self-government in a lead up to independence, there began a gradual period of ‘Nigerianization’ of the prison service. The development of Nigerian prisons since independence in 1960 is a product of the colonial legacy, changing yet continuing state-society relations and to a much lesser degree the impact of global flows of penal norms and regulation, beginning with the impact of British experts called in to oversee a reorganization between 1968 and 1972 which resulted in decree no. 9, the so-called prisons decree, the law governing prisons. The Nigerian Prisons Service as an entity was established in 1968 when federal and local authority systems were merged following a federal military government decision.

The above history, though clearly partial, is important to consider as: ‘(T)he correspondence between the ideal models of state institutions and their actual operation is complicated by the very process through which they come into being’ (Aguirre, 2005: 11). We should not forget however that state institutions do not come into being once and for all. They are always in a process of coming into being. It is this fact that makes it imperative to focus analysis on ‘their actual operation’, their practices as well as their purported values or penal philosophies.

CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN PRISONS

The NPS rests on a statute originally from 1972 called the Prisons Act reviewed in 1990 and currently under review. The Act known as CAP 366, Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1990 defines itself as ‘an act to make comprehensive provisions for the administration of prisons in Nigeria and other matters ancillary thereto’ (Nigerian
Prisons Service, 1990: 1). It is an Act about the administration of the prisons and not their purpose. In contrast to prison service publications no mention is made of prisoner rehabilitation and reform. Indeed the purpose of prison is ill defined, even taken for granted by the Act.

The four official functions of the NPS, determined not by law but internally, are the custody of legally detained persons, treatment and reform, preparation for discharge and the generation of funds for government (PRAWA, 1999; NPS Annual report, 2000). To carry out these functions there are 147 conventional prisons and 83 satellite prisons colloquially known as lock-ups, which function as places of detention in rural areas where there are courts but no conventional prisons. Included in the 147 conventional prisons are a women’s prison, a Borstal and an open prison camp. In addition there are a number of farm centres and market gardens. To cater for prison officer education the NPS operates three prison training schools and one staff college. A relatively hefty bureaucratic apparatus explains in part why there is almost one officer for every two prisoners. Nigeria is divided into six zones each of which has a prison service headquarters (the zonal office) and each of the 36 states plus the Federal Capital Territory has a state HQ. The federal HQ in Garki, Abuja houses the Controller General and his six deputies and their subordinates.

PRISON GUARD TRAINING

Having considered some of the historical and contemporary factors that have contributed to and frame prison practices in Nigeria I turn now to prison guard training. First, I present prison training practice showing how pretensions to discipline, order and hierarchy are challenged both from below and above at the level of everyday practice. My focus is on the structure and organization of the training and how it produces subjects caught up in particular relations and positions, by virtue of mainly extra-curricula activities or at least activities outside of the classroom. After an introduction to the training regime, I utilize a description of the trainees’ final parade and a discussion of the role of the Chief Discipline Officer to illustrate key aspects of training school practice. Second, I examine how the aims of the Service are mediated via trainees’ agency.

A member of the training school staff told me:

the course programme, the course outline mostly is geared towards discipline, disciplining the officer, conditioning him to face the tasks that will meet him in prison without complaining. Most of the things that we do at training are just conditioning the staff to face their responsibilities, to face their tasks. (Torhile, middle-ranking prison guard)

For staff working at the training school, as this quotation indicates, discipline is the key aspect of training. Training, according to the Service, is first and foremost about producing disciplined officers to be part of a disciplined service. Discipline is distributed and reproduced in trainees through the practices and experience of training. But discipline is played out not in a neutral vacuum but against the agendas and interests of live actors – both teaching staff and trainees in ongoing but changing institutional practices. Conduct and activities at the training school are strictly regimented. Modes of sleep, work and play are dictated and the social organization is (more or less) strictly maintained suggesting a degree of total institutionalization (Goffman, 1961b: 314).
Activities follow a strict time schedule. Woken at 5.00 a.m. they wash themselves, and then clean the compound. At 6.50 a roll call is taken, absentees recorded and those present organized into lines, divided into six squads by squad leaders and under the supervision and command of an instructor taken through an intense 30-minute work-out. Daily inspections of trainees' quarters demonstrate a routine, ritualized, procedural, repetitive, administrative surveillance. Dorms are overfull. Shoes are polished and lie at the foot of beds, uniforms folded and displayed, an explicit, compulsory symbol of identification. Rules and procedures control not only the structuring of the day but also the movement of trainees. Should they wish to go out of the school, on an errand they must apply for permission from the chief discipline officer (CDO), even to carry out such simple tasks as collecting medical or exam certificates. Such external controls point to one element of an apparent total institutionalization of the training schools that interviews to a degree support and to a degree reject. One female officer told me 'in school (you) behave like a military person the whole time from when you wake up till when you are asleep'. For some the military ethos even pervades their sleep. At night they are heard shouting 'left, right, left, right'!

THE PASSING OUT PARADE

The architecture of the schools, featuring the parade ground as central, gives a clue to the significance of parade and drill, as vital instantiations of discipline and primary ingredients of the moulding of characters during the six-month training programme. The corporeal nature of marching is significant, both in the sense of participants’ own embodied performance but also in the sense of the generation of a uniform body or unit of trainees. As if to emphasize this fact the basic recruit course culminates in the passing out parade (POP). One cannot avoid being impressed by the pride taken in parade. Nervous trainees with pursed lips and taut bodies, struggle to keep time and synchronization with the screeches of the marching band. The marchers alternate between slow and quick marches accompanied by fierce drum beats as clouds of dust blow across the parade ground. The parade commander and CDO take turns to give running commentary on the proceedings. They describe how trainees arrived as novices and are now departing as well-disciplined, highly trained officers. It is almost as though if they repeat this often enough it will come to pass. Awards are presented for academic achievement, leadership and cleanliness. The parade complete, the dignitaries leave and euphoric graduates occupy the parade ground busy packing mini-buses with their Ghana-must-go bags. The POP is as expected and as rehearsed yet there are cracks in the appearance of order. For example, not all trainees take part in the parade. In fact, actually less than half of them are chosen. Among those excluded are the unskilled marchers but numbers are also limited by the numbers of ceremonial outfits available. Some trainees have already chosen to leave, not even bothering to wait to get their certificates. In spite of a deeply formalized structure to prison officer training and its presentation to the outside world, certain potentially significant symbolic activities are granted little significance. Certificates of attendance and completion, for example, were not distributed during the POP but unceremoniously handed out in the CDO’s office in a mad crammed rush between the parade finishing and the trainees (no longer trainees) departing for their respective homes.
THE CHIEF DISCIPLINE OFFICER’S ROLE
The CDO occupies a central function in the life of the school and the everyday lives of trainees. As the chief warder oversees the day-to-day running of the prison, so the CDO oversees the day-to-day running of the training school, particularly with regard to aspects relating to the trainees’ daily needs, requests and ways of relating to the rules of the institution. Ensuring both control and care this function is illustrative of the nuances of the workings of the paramilitary machinery. As his title implies, disciplining trainees is a key aspect of his function. I witnessed the CDO midway through adjudicating on the cases of some trainees who returned late from a midterm break. Sitting behind his desk, in his rather cramped office, shared with two assistants, he calls the name of the next trainee (they are waiting outside the open door) who is escorted in by two female prison officers, and made to stand before his desk, the female officers remaining in attendance. A radio sends off noisy static and staff members sharing the office come in and out, contributing to a sense of interruption and disturbance. The trainees typically excuse their misdemeanours by reference to illness or the death of a relative. The CDO is combative as he listens to the undocumented accounts of absence: ‘How can I know your brother is dead . . .? He died Monday, you buried him Friday, mourned for a week . . . and rested another week?’ Postural subservience is inculcated in trainees at every available opportunity. Trainees are instructed to salute, and then reprimanded for saluting while not wearing their caps. What they should do is adopt a braced position, shoulders back, back upright. The style of adjudications is harsh and inquisitorial. Punishment seems almost inevitable.

Despite the inquisitorial style the CDO expressed ambivalence about his role. Following a subsequent adjudication he told me he did not always like punishment and that he had it in mind to forgive the offenders. This softer line should perhaps be understood in the light of his frustration about being bypassed in a disciplinary matter by the armed squad member responsible for weapons training. The CDO felt his jurisdiction had been trespassed on. In his frustration he remarked that the fact that the armed squad have guns and tear gas makes them feel they have power beyond themselves. As well as contextualizing the CDO’s own wish to forgive, this incident also indicates some of the rivalries that exist between groups of staff, as well as the plasticity of the procedures, that despite appearing on paper quite clear and formal are circumvented rather often in practice.

Set against a backdrop of attempts to instil discipline via a total institutionesque regime I have presented examples of the ways in which the totalizing effects of the prison service regime are circumscribed. I have considered the ambivalent and tension-filled role of the CDO and the way this results in a rather fluid enforcement of discipline that stands in contrast to its public display. However, it is not merely the limitations of the state apparatus and its employees that determine the trajectory of prisons training. Trainees themselves play an active part in circumventing rules, negotiating positions and acting non-compliantly.

TRAINEE AGENCY
Prison guards often find themselves in tensions not only with prisoners but also with prison administrators (Kauffman, 1988). Prison officers on the landings or in the blocks
often have so much discretion (see Liebling, 2000) that they can effectively subvert the best laid plans of administrators at the same time as they feel misunderstood by them. What Kauffman’s work demonstrates is that prison officer practice is so constrained by historical, structural and ongoing relational dynamics that their expressions of agency are rarely positive but are rather articulated in an often violent struggle to survive or at least to come safely home at the end of a shift (see officer citations in Kauffman, 1988: 16, 88; echoed by Liebling, 2004: 382). Conflict and tensions thrive in the Nigerian prison training school despite emphasis on discipline and order. Discipline does not do away with conflict, though as discipline is formally performed, tensions are disguised. The uniform body of men and women marching and displaying their stuff is performance. It is an attempt to instil and display unity and discipline, yet at the same time a hint of that unity’s inevitable absence. There are elements of training school practice and routine that suggest that trainees’ and training staffs’ lives are regulated, organized and arranged according to rather strict procedures and rules for conduct. But there are also elements that suggest that these codes of conduct are resisted and co-opted in subtle ways. One example is the disorderliness of classroom teaching. Another example of forces running counter to the disciplinary ethos are the controversies that swirled around the training school as the training came to an end. The closing ritual of the POP cannot be understood in isolation from the events of the final week or so of the training course. While the POP does represent the public display of completion and actualization, the outward sign of the conversion of the men and women from civilians to paramilitaries, much more was going on behind the scenes that undoubtedly left the newly trained officers with a rather different taste in their mouths than the flavour suggested by the parade. During this period, the trainees organized a party that featured a splitting of the trainee body. This party tried but struggled to mirror formalized practice as epitomized by the POP. Few trainees attended because of a disagreement between the head student and his deputy. The deputy wanted ‘the course’ to leave a legacy and decided that all students should be compelled to pay 100 naira. The head and other students disagreed but those perceived as blocking the process were involuntarily named as committee members for the arrangement. Tensions within the school were also expressed by staff representatives attending the party. They expressed recrimination and complaint. The course officer lambasted the gathered students in relation to the absence of some of them and the deputy commandant criticized them for not handing in all assignments. After the formal speeches there was rather half-hearted music and dancing. The fragmentation of the student body is claimed to reflect what some students described as a crisis in the school since the training officer had been transferred following earlier intrigues and scandals.

Yet another example of the actual workings of prison service discipline is provided by the relative non-compliance with punishment demonstrated by trainees. Punishments given following adjudication are rather standard: sweeping, gardening, cleaning. Some male trainees are made to dig a hole to dump refuse in. There is only one spade so the six men take turns, those not digging, watching. Another six or so sit with picks, apparently taking a break from unblocking a drainage stream. The women do less strenuous work, cutting grass, tidying rubbish and sweeping. The men’s punishment can be characterized in terms of them performing a kind of organized non-compliance. They do not actually work. They say the work is hard, excusing their lack of labour.
Neither do the supervising staff supervise, choosing instead to laugh and joke with the trainees. Three other staff members wander over and set the trainees back to work, adopting a confrontational style – almost parodic – that also ends in laughter. We see here how penal authority is limited even between senior officers and trainees, a point not missed by Sykes in his classic study (see Sykes, 1958: 28–9 on resistance to work and limits to coercion, cited by Liebling, 2004: 355). Despite intentions to create a disciplined ‘body of men’ through disciplinary practices governed by a punitive logic, prison guard training ultimately fails in this task as evidenced by rivalries and divisions in both the staff and student body. This is not to say that the creation of an indisciplined ‘body of men’ is insufficient to maintain the status quo. But it is to suggest that a sceptical attitude should be maintained to the claim that training produces disciplined subjects where discipline is seen to mean well-behaved, conformist, moral, alert, etc. I turn now to consider the way in which contradictions are also evident in relation to the penal philosophy of the NPS.

**NIGERIAN PENAL PHILOSOPHY IN ACTION**

On a practical level, it warrants recognition that the specific practices of any prison system stem from prison ideology, and for as long as the underlying assumptions and supporting ideology of the penal system remain unexamined and unchallenged, then that system will successfully resist all but the most superficial of changes. (McHugh, 1978: 3, cited by Liebling, 2004: 454)

The rationale and penal philosophy of the NPS rest on the ideals of rehabilitation, reform and reintegration – the so-called three r’s – remnants of the transition from colonial to post-colonial Nigeria. Trainees speak proudly of these ideals, often echoing one another as they declare the importance of the reform, rehabilitation and reintegration of the prisoner. The sociological literature on prisons has paid some attention to the importance of staff ascriptions and attributions regarding prisoners (see Crawley, 2004a: 96–105 on prison officers’ perception of prisoners across six prisons in the UK and Kauffman, 1988: 221 on inmates perceived as occupying a ‘separate moral realm’). In general my informants spoke of prisoners in one of two ways, either as victims of society in need of support and moral education or as the ‘bad ones from society’, likewise in need of moral education. Gideon characterizes the relationship with the help of a parenting metaphor:

> Some of them will insult you, some even touch you, what you don't like . . . It's not for you to exchange bad ways with them . . . You know that this group are here for reformation, to reform them, to come back to mama. They are just like children. You are the parent.

The parenting image presented here ties in with particular ideas about upbringing and correction. Prisoners are to be cared for but also moulded. Okonkwo echoed Goffman’s description of people in total institutions conceived of as ‘material upon which to work’:

> ‘The prison is like a manufacturing company whereby they bring the raw materials and the prison officers process you and manufacture you into finished goods and send you back to society for better use’ (Goffman, 1961b: 329). Here we have alternative images of the prison officer: the parent and the shop floor worker. These everyday self-ascriptions are a marked contrast to the prison service’s high-sounding ideals and goals.
whose relevance in practice is, according to officers who have made the move from school to prison, rather doubtful. A similar tension is raised in the literature. King and Morgan (1980), for example argued in favour of ‘the potentially achievable “humane containment” goal for the Prison Service over the hopelessly unrealistic, aspirational, “good and useful life” statutory formulation of the Prison Service’s aims’ (Liebling, 2004: 9). Notwithstanding such concerns, the three r’s are the dominant penal discourse in the service. They fall within a broader, unspoken and unwritten correctional ideology. The Nigerian prison is a site of moral education, a site where the confines and conditions, almost in and of themselves, but with a little help from officers engaging in mundane practices of ordering and othering, exert their effects on the identities of the prisoners. The correctional ideology or moral education aspect of prisoner reform is closely linked with a punitive logic and with disciplinary practices that are an integral part of NPS practice.

How well does this fit with the human rights approach of reform agencies? One middle-ranking officer put it bluntly, ‘Human rights get in the way of corrections.’ This is because correctional practice involves mundane acts of taken-for-granted violence. Subjectivities in the NPS are moulded via everyday practices of submission, subordination and humiliation. For example, prisoners are ordered, organized and prepared for court appearances through a routine process of cuffing and pushing and shoving. Similarly, prisoners are admitted to the prison via a ritualized procedure that includes the removal of hats and shoes, the adoption of a particular stance, the physical correction of that stance by an officer literally breathing down the neck of the new prisoner, an interrogation about the alleged offence and an instruction to behave well in the prison. This procedure is accompanied when it is considered necessary by verbal remonstrations and acts of ‘mundane violence’. One episode I witnessed involved the repeated slapping of the prisoner around both ears from behind, an action carried out routinely and unashamedly. The relative strength of the hierarchical structure guiding officer behaviour contra human rights positions was demonstrated by another officer’s explanation that the perpetrating officer would likely be more concerned with what his superiors might say if he failed to slap the prisoner than what I might think as he did. In a similar vein, Kauffman argues that for officers in Walpole prison ‘violence, at least in some forms, needs no justification: it is natural, a way of life’ (1988: 157). She explores the idea that violence or assault is not defined by prison officer perpetrators as such if they believe it is deserved, justified or reasonable under the circumstances (see ch. 6: 130, 145, 147, 160). This points again to the need for analyses of internal logics. As she puts it, ‘(L)argely obscured by the debate over whether officers were engaging in violence was reasoned consideration of why they might be doing so’ (1988: 141).

In Nigeria, whatever the penal philosophy, whatever the degree to which human rights have been incorporated into the training curriculum (and they have) the rituals of penal practice remain fundamentally humiliating and are characterized by the shoring up, even creation of officers’ identity at the expense of the subordinate prisoners’. This ‘othering’ is not taught in the classrooms of the training school. It is not on the programme. But it is what is learned by the trainees as they experience their own humiliation and the imperative of their own subordinate position. What is learned is never equivalent to what is taught, as critical psychological studies of learning teach us (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Lave, 1993; Dreier in Nielsen and Kvale, 1999; Dreier, 2001). We
must look beyond the formal classroom setting to establish what is learned. It is for this reason that I have not focused on the content of classroom teaching and rote learning. Outside the classroom’s focus on the three r’s, human rights, prison techniques and procedures like the calculation of sentence length are the day-to-day strategies by which trainees are taught their place in the service hierarchy: cleaning the compound, inspection of quarters, drill, marching and the disciplinary procedures that come into play when rules and regulations are inevitably broken. It is here the foundations of penal practice are revealed. And it is the practices habituated into trainees in these contexts that form the backbone and framework for their participation in prison practice when they make the transition from school to prison. As trainees make the shift to ‘disciplined officers’, or ‘from civilian to paramilitary’, a shift repeatedly emphasized at the passing out parades, they move one small step up the hierarchy. As they move from school to prison a new subordinate is introduced, someone to whom they are superior. And trainees bear the marks on their own bodies of how to instil morality, how to bring about reform. Kauffmann’s longitudinal study of 40 officers traces a similar transition (1988: chs 7–9). She observes how on-the-job training, following four weeks in the academy, features the systematic disabusing of values inculcated during training combined with an overwhelming silence on the part of senior officers. Newly educated Nigerian officers make similar observations, questioning the relevance of schooling in the light of how they are left to find their own way in the prison primarily via imitation of ongoing practice. There is little room for innovation.

**CONTENTION AND CONTRADICTION: CHALLENGES TO REFORM AGENCIES**

The intractable problems posed by prisons are not rooted in the identities and characters of officers or inmates. (Kauffman, 1988: 265)

It is tempting to think of prison systems as monolithic examples of hegemonic state power. It is likewise tempting to conceive of the NPS in terms of the hegemony of discipline. However, a closer examination of NPS dynamics, enabled by a partial ethnography of prison training school practice, reveals them, as I have documented, to be ambiguous, complex, even ambivalent, featuring conflict, contention and controversy against a backdrop and aspiration towards discipline, order and hierarchy. Discipline, particularly corporeal discipline, has a fundamental role in training practices; this cannot be denied. Yet, the analysis of standard practices of drill and adjudication alongside examples of contradictions and controversies illustrates that while training school life is organized around a concept of discipline, actual practice shows a discipline that is far from dominant. The State does not succeed in hegemonically instilling itself on un/suspecting recipients, not even those who are its own. State employees, in this case prison officer trainees, are in a variety of ways always involved in contentious practices of appropriating, making significant and negotiating their own position in relation to the practices imposed on them.

Delineating the ambiguities of prison service practice presents a challenge to reform agencies, especially western agencies whose intervention strategies may be characterized as rather non-subtle, standardized attempts to rehabilitate deviant states (Jefferson,
At the level of everyday training school practice the image of the monolithic prison service is disrupted and distorted. The disruptions and distortions of training school practice are not however indications of a counter-hegemonic movement that might disrupt the workings of the prison apparatus in any fundamental way. Nevertheless, internal inconsistencies and contradictions of whatever kind ought to give external agencies concerned with penal reform something to think about. Rather than confronting the mirage of a monolithic prison juggernaut head on with a universal call to respect human rights and international conventions and a training package, the small signs of disturbance among everyday prison officer life may indicate alternative entry points through which to engage prison officers in terms of their own contested practices. I say 'may' because I am not certain. I do not and cannot supply a list of contradictions that could function as hooks that reform agencies could hang their ready-made solutions on. Indeed I am troubled by the widespread application of ready-made solutions. I am troubled by the easy export of penal norms, which close down the space for debate about what should be normal in terms of penalty, especially in states emerging from conflict or undergoing a period of transition. As Liebling points out following Garland, 'penality is a deeply social issue not a technical task' (2004: 43). Is it plausible that being told about a convention that forbids torture and a set of rules governing practice and spelling out minimum rules is likely to make any impression on invisible routines? How can one tackle and transform such taken-for-granted practices as ordering and othering and mundane violence? The way in which reform agencies might engage in alternative approaches must be subject to ongoing debate. I envisage an entry point to prison practice defined from within not without, concerned with specifics rather than universals, human lives rather than human rights. This is not to say that human rights perspectives do not have a place. Such perspectives can even contribute to the creation of sites of contestation. The insight about the mundanely violent nature of corrections in Nigerian prisons would not have emerged without the counterpoint of human rights discourse. But penal reform via human rights training of prison officers rests on the dubious assumption that structural reform can be brought about by targeting individuals. While a human rights approach to prison administration is undoubtedly a useful tactic, not least for bringing to light approaches to prison management that blatantly violate basic rights and for pressuring prison regimes to act differently I suggest that an engagement with the everyday practices of officers’ training and officers’ lives may be more fruitful in the long run. Institutions of confinement and the practices, processes and relations endemic to them need to be theorized in their complexity. From the perspective I am advocating it is most important to give prison officers alternative action possibilities. This demands that the focus of externally sponsored interventions shifts from knowledge to action, from individual minds and attitudes to persons in practice.

Can prisons be altered from the inside out? Can a penal institution be altered 'by those very individuals who are subject to its control'? These are intriguing questions raised by Bosworth and Carrabine (2000: 513) in an article that shares many of my own concerns with showing how hegemony implies 'a contested terrain' (2000: 508) and offering nuanced accounts of everyday prison practice that foreground the agency of persons-in-practice while not neglecting the identitary, structural and historical inequalities within which practice and relations of power are framed. Bosworth and
Carrabine situate their argument about ‘how small-scale, “everyday” activities contribute to the maintenance or disruption of the status quo’ (2000: 513) within a useful review of criminological literature on resistance. The suggestion that prisons might be transformed from the inside out resonates with my own sense that the contradictions of practice within the NPS offer small but potentially significant anchoring points for transformative initiatives. Yet those of us concerned with the transformation of penal establishments cannot afford to be naïve. Change from within is unlikely to come about divorced from changes without.

The fact that penal institutions are sites of contestation and ambiguity as well as ‘calibrated mechanisms of punishment inflicting state-legitimated pain’ (Carlen, 1994: 136), confronts reform agencies with a challenge to their standardized intervention practices. It also reframes the space in which they operate in potentially liberating ways. Recognizing penal institutions as sites of contestation invites reform agencies to construct a new self-perception, to see themselves as participating in an already contested space (rather than a space where contestation is defined and introduced by them from without), a space where there may well be possibilities for innovation and creative alliances. It is time for a second wave of reformist thinking in relation to penal and justice sector reform in transitional contexts. This author is privileged to work in an organization concerned with the prevention of torture and organized violence by the documentation, analysis and explanation of among other things ‘perpetrative institutions’,10 which allows for ongoing conversations between researchers and practitioners. It is our hope that through these discussions as well as through wider debates in scientific and activist communities we can contribute to the joint development of ways in which to reduce unnecessary and illegitimate violence in penal institutions in the South. It is my hope that this article sheds light on the practices of the penal apparatus in Nigeria at the same time as it disturbs the discourse and practices of intervening agencies.

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Notes
1 This work included sharing the quarters of a prison officer and his family in the staff barracks, as well as spending time participating in training activities, and tracking prison guards as they conducted their everyday lives. Sixty interviews were conducted in prisons and the training schools and countless informal conversations had with prison guards in a variety of locations. Eight prisons were visited, some of them repeatedly.
2 For an introduction to critical psychology see Tolman (1991).
3 In 2000 the prison population stood at 43,312 and the prison service employed 19,696 officers (NPS Annual report, 2000).
4 Staff group differences, for example between newcomers and old-timers, have been
explored by Kauffman (1988: ch. 8) and raised by Crawley in relation to the emotional demands of working in prisons (2004b: 414).

5 Here I think particularly of the material limits on the state apparatus in Nigeria: the lack of uniforms, the fact that certificates have to be purchased by trainees. While Nigeria may conceive of itself as the giant of Africa one scholar has argued that the Nigerian state can be better conceived as a ‘weak reed’ (Watts, 2000).

6 The humour and dramaturgical significance of these incidents should not be missed. Positions are being adopted and identities formed through these performances that gain their significance only in relation to the way pre-given (almost but not quite) roles are constantly being negotiated in practice. In addition as Crawley (2004b) has pointed out ‘emotion work’ is likely being done in such an instance.

7 There are women in the NPS but they are explicitly ‘degendered’. A senior officer instructing new recruits, both male and female, told them, ‘There are no women in the Nigerian Prisons Service. You are all men.’

8 All names are changed to protect identities.

9 Kauffman states: ‘Officers are both agents and victims of a dehumanizing system, but they are not its architects’ (1988: 3, emphasis in original). Her book details the extent to which officers are caught up and trapped in prison practices not always of their own making. Her argument is that officer aggression is a ‘product of the job’ itself (1988: 156, emphasis in original).

10 I use this term as a way of attributing agency to penal establishments – to say they do stuff to people – in a similar though more normatively negative way to which Liebling (2004) writes of the moral performance of prisons.

References


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