

Exceptional Prison Conditions and the Quality of Prison Life: Prison size and prison culture in Norwegian closed prisons

Abstract

This paper discusses the quality of prison life and prison size in relation to the notion of 'Scandinavian exceptionalism'. Using the questionnaires 'Measuring the Quality of Prison Life' (MQPL) for prisoners and 'Staff Measuring the Quality of Prison Life' (SQL) for staff, data were collected from all 32 closed prisons in Norway. Based on the assumption that prison officers' working lives, their perspectives and values influence prisoners' quality of life, the main focus in the paper is on the officers. Small prisons (fewer than 50 prisoners) obtain more positive results than medium-sized (50-100) and large (more than 100) prisons, on several dimensions measured. The relationship between officers and prisoners seems to be of better quality in small prisons than in medium-sized and large prisons. Officers in small prisons also report more positive relationships with senior management than their colleagues in medium-sized and large prisons. The results are discussed in light of previous studies on officers and prison working life dynamics.

Introduction

Lately there has been an international focus on exceptional conditions in Norwegian prisons (see e.g. Time Magazine World, May 10th 2010 and July 12th 2010, <http://www.daserste.de/weltspiegel/>). At the same time there has been an ongoing discussion of the notion of 'Scandinavian exceptionalism' characterised by low imprisonment rates¹ and humane prison conditions (see Pratt 2008a, 2008b; Pratt and Eriksson 2009; Ugelvik and Dullum 2011). According to Pratt (2008a: 124), '[...] the exceptional conditions in most Scandinavian prisons, while not eliminating the pains of imprisonment, must surely ease them'. However, what matters most for prisoners and staff in Norwegian prisons is to be seen, heard and respected as human beings (White Paper to the Parliament 2007-2008). This is in accordance with what Liebling (2004a) has identified as a series of humanistic values crucial to the experience of prison life. Hence, our question is: do the exceptional prison conditions, as described by Pratt (ibid.) and others, imply humane environments in Norwegian prisons and decent treatment of those living and working within them?

¹ The average prison population in Norway in 2007 was 3,480 (74 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants).

According to Liebling (ibid) humanistic values are under threat in times where utilitarianism and managerialism inform crime and penal policy. As in other countries, elements of the ‘new penology’ (Feeley and Simon 1992, 1994) influence Norwegian crime policy, where the existing overall aim is increased safety in society. The Correctional Service’s main focus in recent years has been to manage an increasing number of people being sentenced to prison. Besides, official policy says that punishment should serve a utilitarian purpose of reducing recidivism. The workload of prison officers and the demands of professionalism have therefore increased in order to meet these requirements.

According to Mathiesen (1965: 53), ‘[t]he situation of prisoners in a correctional institution cannot be adequately understood without some knowledge of the situation of staff members’. However, in Norway – as in other countries – research on prison officers has been sparse compared to the number of studies on prisoners. Staff, and especially officers, are crucial in shaping prison cultures (Liebling 2004a). Culture can be defined as being based on a shared set of beliefs, assumptions, values and attitudes, which are expressed, maintained and re-enforced through different types of communication and action within a group (Schein 2004). Internationally, there has been an increased interest in research on prison culture and prison officer work – see Arnold (2005), Crawley (2004), Drake (2008), Liebling (2004a), Liebling and Price (2001), McLean and Liebling (2008), Tait (2008) and this volume. In Norway such studies have so far been published in Norwegian, e.g. Boedal (1979) and Hammerlin and Mathiassen (2006).

Prison officer work varies from establishment to establishment, depending on the nature of the prison population, architecture and prison history, as well as cultural differences (Crawley 2004; Liebling 2007, 2004a, 2004b; Sparks et al. 1996). According to Liebling (2004a), cultures and values are inextricably linked, and together they have major influence on the quality of prison life. Liebling (2004a, 2007) has found that the mindset of staff, and hence their attitude towards prisoners and managers, influences the prison’s moral climate. Prison officers, in their daily first-hand contact with prisoners, especially influence prisoners’ experience of imprisonment. This paper will therefore mainly concentrate on prison officers’ working lives, their perspectives and values. Our discussion focuses on closed prisons² and prison size – another aspect, according to Pratt (2008a), characterizing the Scandinavian region: the large number of small prisons, often with less than 100 prisoners in them.

² Closed prisons in Norway are physically separated from the surroundings with walls and/or fences, and hold sentenced prisoners as well as remand prisoners.

Prison officers' working lives

Prison officer work is relational and consists of creating and recreating relationships (Liebling 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Liebling and Tait 2006). Liebling and Price (2001) and Liebling (2004a, 2007) concluded that staff-prisoner relationships are at the heart of prison work. Liebling defines staff-prisoner relationships as '[t]he manner in, and extent to which, staff and prisoners interact during rule-enforcing and non-rule-enforcing transactions' (Liebling 2004a: 236). In Norway since the late 1980s, efforts have been made to improve relations between officers and prisoners. From merely guarding and keeping, prison officer work now also focuses on social work and care, together with an increase in personal influence and responsibility. One important initiative has been the arrangement for prisoners to have personal contact officers. A personal contact officer is supposed to motivate and assist the prisoner in the process of rehabilitation, and help the prisoner with problems and requests during imprisonment. This implies personal talks and interviews, and therefore more involvement and closeness to the prisoners than before (Hammerlin and Mathiassen 2006). At the same time, an important part of prison officer work is to maintain security, safety, control and order, and getting the balance right between carrying out care-related tasks and security-related tasks is extremely difficult (see Bruhn et al, this volume). Sykes (1958) argued that for prison life to flow in a smooth manner, the staff have to be somewhat reluctant to enforce all of their power.

The use of discretion in prison officer work, and the officers' under-use of power has been discussed in the literature (see e.g. Crawley 2004; Liebling 2004a, 2000; Liebling and Price 2001; Liebling et al. 1999), where it is shown that security, safety, control and order, as well as rehabilitative work, are achieved most successfully through positive officer-prisoner relationships. These positive relationships between officers and prisoners are most likely to occur through interactive social practices in day-to-day prison life. In interviews with prisoners and staff, Liebling and her colleagues identified respect, humanity, trust and support as core humanistic values that mattered in prison, all crucial for constituting positive prisoner-officer relationships (Liebling 2004a, especially 205-59). Liebling (ibid) argues that even if these values are related, they have different meanings. For example, while respect means 'recognition of the individual, their worth and autonomy', humanity (at its strongest) means 'kind regard for the person' (Liebling 2004a: 225). However, to relate to prisoners as equal human beings on the basis of solidarity and assistance, represents an ethical challenge for officers (Hammerlin and Mathiassen 2006). Trust, for example, is a loaded and strained word in the prison context, and Liebling (2004a: 248) defines trust in relation to another person as:

‘Reliance on the honesty, reliability and good sense of a person, the level of responsibility or confidence invested in and experienced by individuals’. In a ‘low trust’ prison environment where distrust is both ingrained in the prison regime and in the working credo of officers who say ‘never trust a prisoner’, building trust, in the sense of both showing trust and that you are someone to be trusted, can be quite difficult.

Trust was also important for the relationships between officers and managers, another factor identified by prisoners and staff as important in prison life (Liebling 2004a). According to Liebling (2004a: 405-6) staff wanted governors to ‘[...] provide leadership, direction, security and a sense of worth’. The governors’ expression of competence, fairness, support, and opportunities to be heard are important judgement criteria for staff levels of trust in them. Lack of trust is destructive, and Liebling (2006, 2004a) found quite low levels of trust by staff in their senior managers. The least trust was found among staff in poorer quality prisons. Coyle (2002, 2008) stresses that the governor as a leader must be visible and present in areas where prisoners and staff come together. For staff, this presence should have a supportive function rather than an inspectorial one in order to encourage staff to improve their job performance. Liebling (2004a) supports this finding, that visible management is appreciated by staff because then they feel recognized by and familiar with their leaders.

According to Brookes et al. (2008: 268) ‘[...] first line and middle managers play a significant role in determining the experiences of staff’. These positions are most likely to be held by senior officers and principal officers respectively, who started their careers as prison officers and have advanced to the positions they hold. They might therefore feel that they belong to the prison officer group, and according to Crawley (2004), senior officers find it hard to detach from the prison officer group, which is characterized by strong traditions of solidarity and cohesion. Officers’ primary loyalty is to their colleagues, and loyalty is expressed as providing an immediate back-up to colleagues in situations where there is risk of harm (Crawley 2004; Crawley and Crawley 2008; Liebling 2007, 2004a). Officers have a strong sense of ‘we’, and in relation to other groups, such as the prisoners and the senior management, the relationships might be characterized as an ‘us-them’ relation (see Crawley 2004; Crawley and Crawley 2008; Kauffman 1988). In a culture characterized by resistance to change, as identified among officers by Liebling (2004a), Liebling and Price (2001) and Sparks et al. (1996), a disparity might occur between the managerial goals and practices that emphasize process, change and auditing, and the sociological realities of prison life and work. These realities are characterized by a tradition-orientation, experience, short-term focus and daily survival (Liebling 2000).

Prison size and the quality of prison life

Few studies on prison life and quality have focused particularly on prison size. However, in times when the prison population is increasing and overcrowding and queuing become problems (in Norway, prisons are never overcrowded – if there is a lack of space, convicts are placed on a waiting list to serve their sentences), discussions about prison size arise in relation to the need to expand prison capacity. In the late 1970s, there was a rise in the prison population both in the USA and in England and Wales, but it seemed to be a general understanding that small prisons were more desirable than large ones. According to Boedal (1979: 39) size is a factor that increases problems in prisons, and he concluded: ‘Small institutions are best’ (our translation).

Since the late 1970s prison populations in most western countries have increased steadily, resulting in a continuous need for increased prison capacities. Liebling (2008), in a discussion of the three so-called ‘Titan’ prisons planned in England and Wales, which were at one stage planned to hold up to 2500 prisoners each (see Carter 2007), questions the legitimacy of building such giant prisons on the basis of presumable cost-effectiveness and efficiency, because research on morality, leadership, safety and quality of prison life indicates that ‘small is better’ (see also Booth 2009). The plan to build these prisons has been changed so that five new ‘mini Titans’ which may hold up to 1500 prisoners each are planned instead. Speaking about the new large projected prison ‘Thornton Hall’ in Ireland, O’Donnell (2005: 65) said:

[G]enerally speaking prisons work best if they are small. [...] Large prisons need to be highly regimented and life within them has an assembly line quality. Individual needs can quickly become lost in the drive to meet institutional priorities. These are dehumanising places where security and order are difficult to maintain, vulnerable prisoners become isolated, and the slim chance of reform is further attenuated. To minimise the harms of confinement prisons must be modest in size.

Hammerlin and Mathiassen’s (2006) study shows that the potential for performing successfully as a personal officer was better in small prisons (of fewer than 50 prisoners) compared to large ones, due to a closer social dynamic between officers and prisoners. In Iceland, Baldursson (2000) reported that in small prisons (6-14 prisoners) typically problems

did not occur. There is less pressure on the prisoners, and less need for treatment and efforts in order to alleviate the pressure inherent in the deprivation of liberty. Small prisons foster close social interaction, and because the prisoners become acquainted with staff, it is easier for them to talk to staff about everyday problems. Likewise, problems that occur in small prisons are more visible to staff and can therefore more easily be discussed and solved.

Methods

To study the quality of prison life further we used the questionnaires ‘Measuring the Quality of Prison Life’ – MQPL – for prisoners and ‘Staff Measuring the Quality of Prison Life’ – SQL – for staff (see Liebling 2004a; Liebling and Arnold 2002; McLean and Liebling 2008). The questionnaires have a similar structure and are divided into three sections. The first part asks for demographic data. The second part consists of statements in which the respondents are asked to agree or disagree on the statements on a 1-5 Likert scale, where 3 is a neutral score, higher than 3 reflects positive views and lower than 3 reflects negative views on given dimensions. In the MQPL questionnaire there are 98 statements which form 16 dimensions. In SQL there are 117 statements which form 17 dimensions (see Table 1). Part three consists of two open questions in which the respondents are asked to list the three most stressful and three most satisfying aspects of their lives in prison.

The sample consists of respondents from all 32 closed prisons in Norway in 2007.³ The prisons are located throughout the whole country and vary in size and architecture. The smallest prison in our study had 12 prisoners and 19 employees, while the largest prison had 392 prisoners and 565 employees. We split the prisons into three categories according to their prison population size. Small prisons have up to fifty prisoners (20 prisons), medium-sized prisons have between fifty and one hundred prisoners (5 prisons) and large prisons have more than one hundred prisoners (7 prisons). The composition of prisoners in small, medium-sized and large prisons is quite similar, though small prisons have a higher proportion of prisoners who serve shorter sentences (less than one year).⁴ Small prisons also have a slightly higher proportion of remand prisoners.

In the period between June and September 2007 we visited all the 32 closed prisons.⁵ The MQPL questionnaire was distributed to all prisoners present at each prison on the day of our visit (total available was 2,050). 1,132 questionnaires were returned. The SQL

³ In 2007 there were 50 prisons in Norway. All prisons are public.

⁴ Analyses of prisoners’ MQPL responses show that length of sentence does not exert any influence on the results.

questionnaire was distributed to all staff in closed prisons employed by the Prison Service, a total of 2,458. From staff 1,078 questionnaires were returned and 773 of these were filled out by front line staff (67.1 per cent men and 32.9 per cent women), who were prison officers (73 per cent), senior officers (10.5 per cent), operational support grade staff (10.5 per cent), and prison officers undergoing training – ‘Pelts’ (6.0 per cent). The mean age was 37.8, and on average they had been working in the prison service for 11.5 years.

In summertime many operational support grade staff in the prisons due to the Norwegian summer holiday, and we knew that the timing for collecting the data would be a challenge. Most probably this has affected the quality of prison life in general, and the staff response rate. The limited qualitative observational data included observations and impressions at our visits to each prisons, and the responses from managers and officers at meetings after the data-collection, and these have been valuable in our analyses and discussions.

Findings

The overall pattern of the prisoners’ results show that most scores are slightly negative on the dimensions measured and also that they are not very different from prisoners’ evaluations of their quality of life in other jurisdictions (see Johnsen and Granheim 2011). However, when analysing the results by prison size, we found that prisoners in small prisons had mostly positive scores, and therefore a more positive perception of prison life than prisoners in medium-sized and large prisons, where the scores were mostly negative. On the dimensions concerning relationships with staff, general treatment, and well-being, the scores by prisoners in small prisons were significantly more positive. The dimensions measured were highly correlated in general, and yielded one factor that explained more than half (52%) of the variance in the data concerning prisoners’ views on the quality of prison life. The most commented on issue in the open questions was the prisoners’ relationship with front line staff. In small prisons comments were overall positive, while in the medium-sized and large prisons these comments were in general negative (ibid).

Looking in more detail at the analysis of the officer data, 14 dimensions out of 17 had a Cronbach’s alpha score above .70. The dimensions ‘Professional support’, ‘Authority maintenance’, and ‘Views on punishment and control’ did not meet the acceptable reliability criteria and will not be reported on further here.

⁵ We are grateful to our colleagues who helped us visiting the prisons and collecting the data.

(Table 1 about here)

By conducting an exploratory factor analysis, these 14 dimensions yielded 3 factors, one of which is the relationship with prisoners. The other two factors revolved around relationships with senior management and relationships with peers. Table 2 shows scores on the relevant dimensions split into three different prison sizes. While small prisons had no negative scores, medium-sized prisons scored negatively on the dimension 'Involvement in prison' (2.99) only. The large prisons also scored negatively on 'Involvement in prison' (2.78), and in addition, they had negative scores on the dimensions 'Treatment by senior management' (2.98) and 'Attitudes towards senior management' (2.72). The dimension with the highest score in all prison sizes was 'Relationship with peers' with scores above 4.⁶ Almost all officers referred to their colleagues as one of the three most positive factors about their job.

(Table 2 about here)

The main results in Table 2 show that there are significant differences between prisons of different sizes on eight dimensions. One-way ANOVA results show significant differences in: – relationship to senior management; 'Treatment by senior management' ($F(2,737) = 49.88, p < .001$), 'Attitude towards senior management' ($F(2,745) = 58.20, p < .001$), 'Safety/control/security' ($F(2,759) = 16.88, p < .001$), 'Recognition and personal efficacy' ($F(2,757) = 3.50, p = .031$), and 'Involvement in prison' ($F(2,741) = 29.83, p < .001$); – relationship to prisoners; 'Relationship with prisoners' ($F(2,735) = 3.39, p = .034$) and 'Social distance' ($F(2,744) = 4.44, p = .012$); – and also 'Involvement in work' ($F(2,761) = 5.19, p = .006$).

By conducting a Bonferroni post hoc analysis, we looked more specifically at how the three size-categories of prisons differed from each other. Small prisons had a significantly higher score compared to large prisons on seven of the 14 dimensions, and medium-sized prisons had a significantly higher score on five dimensions compared with large prisons. Results on the dimension 'Treatment by senior management' show that both small ($M = 3.61$) and medium-sized ($M = 3.44$) prisons had a significantly higher score ($p < .001$) than large

⁶ For reasons of space, dimension items are not included here. They are available from the author.

prisons ($M = 2.98$). ‘Attitudes towards senior management’ differed among all three category prisons. Small prisons had a significantly higher mean score ($M = 3.39$) than both medium-sized ($M = 3.18$, $p = .031$) and large prisons ($M = 2.72$, $p < .001$), and medium-sized prisons had a significantly higher score than large prisons, $p < .001$. The dimension ‘Recognition and personal efficacy’ is related to management relations, and results show that the mean score of the small prisons ($M = 3.36$) was higher than the mean score of large prisons ($M = 3.22$, $p = .025$). Large prisons had the lowest score on ‘Safety/control/security’ ($M = 3.35$, $p < 0.01$) as well as ‘Involvement in prison’ ($M = 2.78$, $p < 0.01$). The results relating to officers’ relationships with the senior management thus follow a hierarchical pattern, with the most positive relationships in small prisons, then medium-sized, and large prisons having the lowest scores. These results are supported by comments in the open questions. Officers in small prisons tended to mention management as one of the three positive factors in their workplace more frequently than officers in the medium-sized and large prisons. When officers in medium-sized and large prisons mentioned management as a positive factor, they almost always referred to the nearest tier of leadership in the hierarchy. The dimension ‘Relationship with line management’ showed an overall positive score without any significant differences between the prison sizes. Nearly half of the officers in medium-sized and large prisons referred to senior management as one of the three most negative factors for their quality of life, compared to one third of the officers in small prisons.

Furthermore, small prisons had a significantly more positive score than large prisons on the two dimensions that indicated relationships with prisoners: ‘Relationship with prisoners’, $p = .031$ and ‘Social distance’, $p = .017$. Small prisons also had a significantly higher score on the latter dimension, compared to medium-sized prisons ($p = .047$). The officers’ experience of the prisoner-officer relationship as more positive in small prisons than in medium-sized and large prisons, is reflected in the prisoners’ results: prisoners in small prisons rated their relationships with officers significantly more positively than prisoners in medium-sized and large prisons. These results are also supported by comments in the open questions, where nearly one third of the officers in the small prisons mentioned their relationships with prisoners as one of the three most positive factors in their working environment. This was only mentioned by approximately one sixth of the officers in medium-sized and large prisons.

Discussion

In a separate paper, in which we present the prisoners' results in more detail (Johnsen and Granheim 2011), we discuss the results in relation to how prisoners in other jurisdictions evaluate their quality of life. It would have been reasonable to expect a better total score in Norway than in, e.g., England and Wales (see Liebling 2006, 2004a; Liebling and Arnold 2002) given Pratt's notion of Scandinavian exceptionalism, and other measures used as indicators human prison condition, such as the relatively few suicides⁷ and a rather low percentage of prisoners receiving a new prison or probation sentence within two years (20 %; see RETURN 2010 and the International Roundtable for Correctional Excellence 2009). As in the other studies, however, our findings indicate that prisoners tend to view their prison life somewhat negatively, and also as a whole and not as fragmented. Liebling (2007) argues that prisoners' relationship with staff is the most important aspect of how they experience their prison life, and that the other dimensions are influenced by the quality of this relationship. One could argue that the prisoner-staff relationship determines prisoners' perception of the quality of prison life to a very significant extent and that this outweighs other (more material) aspects of prison quality. The differences we found in the quality of staff-prisoner and staff-management relationships in small, medium-sized and large prisons will be discussed below in the light of some of the characteristics we find in small prisons in particular.

A decentralized and less hierarchical structure, with few levels and few employees at each level, together with close relationships between the levels, creates a flexible and a dynamic organization (Hammerlin and Mathiassen 2006). Coyle (2008) argued that good communication systems are critical in a prison. Short lines of administration and command ease the flow of information, and Hammerlin and Mathiassen (2006) found that information is exchanged quickly and decisions are made in a rather short period of time in the small prisons they studied. According to Boedal (1979) there is considerable informal contact between senior management and officers in small prisons. Small facilities with two or three staff hierarchical levels, few employees, and the management placed nearby the prison unit(s), make the management visible and more accessible to operational staff. This finding was confirmed by several officers in the small prisons we studied, as they commented that it was a short way up to the top leadership, that the communication with the leadership was good, and that the leadership team were easily accessible and visible. A leader who spends time with officers as well as prisoners on the unit(s) has a much better feeling for life in the organization (Coyle 2002). Besides, managers have a great opportunity to influence the organization in a

⁷ Between two and seven suicides in prison in each of the years 2001-2009 (Kristoffersen 2010, 2007).

positive way, and as Coyle (2007: 496) said: ‘The prisons with the most humane atmosphere, with the most positive culture, are likely to be those with the most visible leadership.’ By being visible and spending time together with the front line staff – as well as with prisoners – the senior leader gets to know both groups well, and together they can create a familiar and common social atmosphere.

Knowledge of each other is important for the building of trust. The smaller the prison, the more crucial it is for governors and officers to trust each other because the more they are involved in each other’s work, the more they depend on each other. Hammerlin and Mathiassen (2006) found that officers in small prisons have a less monotonous job than their colleagues in large prisons. Many officers in the small prisons commented that they had varied working tasks, and one said: ‘We are involved in everything that happens’ (our translation). Likewise, they have to make decisions that in the large prisons are ascribed to the management team – e.g. at weekends when there may be no leaders on duty they might be involved in administrative work. Likewise, in critical situations, officers may be as dependent on the back-up of the management as well as their fellow officers because there are so few people on duty. The necessity of being more operational in small prisons, and to a certain degree also in medium-sized prisons, makes the middle and senior management in these prisons more involved in prison officer work. The ‘us-them’ relation that characterizes the officer-senior management relationship (McClellan and Liebling 2008; Tait 2008) seems to get more blurred the smaller the prison is.

Tait (2008) argued that most officers in her study ‘[...] felt a large gap between their work as they saw it and the goals and workings of their managers and the wider Prison Service’ (Tait 2008: 74). Insight and involvement in each other’s work creates understanding and consideration for each other’s situation and reduces this gap. Following our argument above, this is most likely to occur in small prisons, and to some extent in medium-sized prisons. However, most of the progressive work within Norwegian prisons takes place in large prisons, e.g. the implementation of new offending behaviour programmes and focused support groups. These activities might for many of the operational officers be experienced as challenging to their primary concern: ‘making it through the day peacefully’ (Liebling 2007: 108), and increases the gap between the officers and the managers. A lower level of progressive work, e.g. few small prisons offering offending behaviour courses, might also be a reason why there seems to be a more congruence among the leadership and the officers in small prisons.

Concerning the relationship between officers and prisoners, the results from prisoners and officers are in harmony in that this relationship is more positive in small than in medium and large prisons. Liebling and Price (2001) found that officers had a more positive view of their relationships with prisoners than vice versa. So we found in our study too – officers evaluated their relationships with prisoners more positively than the prisoners did, except in some of the small prisons where the prisoner ratings were highest. As with staff and management, Boedal (1979) found that officers and prisoners in small prisons have considerable informal contact. As one officer in a small prison said: ‘We spend much time together with the prisoners, and we participate in activities together’ (our translation). With few prisoners and officers, the milieu becomes transparent. Staff continuity, in the sense that they mostly work at the same unit for many years (and see some of the prisoners repeatedly), makes it easier to get to know the prisoners, predict their behaviour, recognize their needs, and associate with them in a manner that is not strained. In response to the open question of satisfying aspects of prison life, one prisoner in a small prison expressed this as ‘a relaxed relationship between prisoners and officers’ (our translation). Due to a lower amount of progressive activities, officers in small prisons do not have to induce prisoners to take part in formal offending behaviour programmes, or focused support groups as often as corresponding officers in large prisons do, which may result in less resistance from the prisoners.

Architectural limitations, together with few possibilities for finding activities for the prisoners, brings about a collective effort by both staff and prisoners to get prison life to flow smoothly. Under these circumstances it becomes natural to cooperate with the prisoners and ‘[...] use what few possibilities we have’ (officer, Hammerlin and Mathiassen 2006: 112) (our translation). Discretion and the under-use of power then become pivotal. Fewer prisoners reported having experienced the use of Control and Restraint procedures in small prisons than in large and medium-sized prisons.⁸ In a small prison, security is extensively based on dynamic security, often due to few staff, which means that knowing and understanding the prisoners becomes an essential undertaking for fostering a safe environment. Because of transparency, and the knowledge they have of the prisoners, officers know what to expect of them, and can be more sensitive to changes in attitudes among them. Officers also have the possibility to react more quickly when a prisoner is experiencing problems (Baldursson 2000; Hammerlin and Mathiassen 2006). As one prisoner in a small prison wrote in response to the

⁸ Prisoners considered to be ‘difficult’ due to matters of security are most likely to be held in large prisons.

open question on satisfying aspects of prison life: ‘Staff show concern instantly in response to prisoners’ problems’ (our translation).

The arrangement for prisoners to have personal contact officers, when it was introduced in the late 1980s, was not new for officers in small prisons (Hammerlin and Mathiassen 2006). It was a formal addition to their role as prison officers, but was not an unknown practice. In the ‘80s it merely became a more structured part of their work. Hammerlin and Mathiassen (2006: 111) refer to an officer who worked in a small prison in the 1980s, who says: ‘It was quite another role, not unlike the arrangement of personal officers we have today. We were leaders, nurses, etc. at the same time. It’s a big difference between being an officer in a small and in a large prison’ (our translation). This means that care for prisoners, rooted in personal contact officer work, has a long tradition in small prisons, and therefore involvement with and closeness to prisoners was intrinsic to small prisons. According to Mathiesen (2008), a strong hierarchical regime seems to be an obstacle to humane conditions. In small prisons, relationships between officers and prisoners can be close because there are fewer layers of management and a smaller number of prisoners to attend to (Hammerlin and Mathiassen 2006). At the same time, the officers have to maintain boundaries in order to keep relationships with prisoners’ professional or ‘right’ (Bottomley et al. 1994; Liebling 2008; Liebling and Price 2001). But the relationships that develop between officers and prisoners in small prisons make it easier for them relate to each other as individuals and not exclusively as prisoners and officers. When they get to know each other as individuals, it becomes easier for them to develop trust in each other. According to the prisoners’ scores and their responses on ‘three satisfying aspects’ from prisoners in small prisons – like ‘[t]he staff’s attitude and care’; ‘[t]he staff are competent and show me respect’ (our translation) – humanistic values, important for positive officer-prisoner relationships (like respect, humanity, trust and support), seem to be more present in small prisons than in medium-sized and large prisons. According to Liebling (2006: 429): ‘Humanistic values mean nothing if they are not translated into day-to-day practices’. Following the above exploration, it seems to be easier to translate humanistic values into practice in small prisons than in medium-sized and large prisons.

It may be possible to achieve positive and good relations with prisoners in large prisons too, but small prisons have an advantage in having a shorter distance between top-level leadership and prisoners. In a small prison, it might be natural for the governor to have direct contact with prisoners so that problems can be discussed and perhaps solved right away. By this interaction the manager also gains first hand insight into the prisoners’

situation (Baldursson 2000). In a large prison, everything that concerns decisions takes more time. This is reflected in comments on the most stressful aspects of imprisonment made by prisoners in large prisons, e.g.: ‘When you deliver an application or ask for something, it takes very long time before you get an answer’ (our translation). This may lead to more frustration and dissatisfaction among prisoners, which means that good relationships as well as order in a large prison demand more intensive work (Hammerlin and Mathiassen 2006).

Conclusions and implications

One might expect that in a country widely regarded as having exceptional prison conditions, research should yield results showing a relatively good quality of prison life. However, our study shows that this is not necessarily so. Whilst there remains more to be done on comparing quality of life between prisoners in different jurisdictions, and this work is underway, our analysis so far found, importantly, that the relationship between officers and prisoners in Norway seems to be of better quality in smaller prisons than in medium-sized and large prisons, and that prisoners are not necessarily expressing a better experience than in selected prisons elsewhere. Officers in small prisons, meanwhile, report that they have a more positive relationship with the senior management than their colleagues in medium-sized prisons, and again these relationships were in turn more positive than in large prisons. What these findings indicate is that structural and organizational differences between small, medium-sized and large prisons lead to some cultural differences and that assumptions about ‘Norwegian exceptionalism’ (at least) in penal affairs remain to be properly tested. In these different cultures, values are produced that affect the quality of prison life. In small prisons there is a decentralized and less hierarchical structure with visibility, transparency and much informal and less strained day-to-day contact between the parties involved. These conditions, together with cooperation, discretion in the use of power, and a caring expectation where interaction is based on individual relationships, make it easier to achieve a humane environment and humane treatment for those who live and work in such prisons.

The proposition that ‘small is better’ is not new. Christie (1982) showed that positive relationships are more likely to occur in small societies than in large societies. In times where efficiency and cost-effectiveness govern crime policy, the quality of prison life is easily given a lower priority. Today, when more people are sentenced to prison than ever before, new prisons tend to be increasingly large, and this is also becoming the case in Norway. Positive relationships in prison and accordingly humanistic values need therefore to be considered as an issue on their own merits. Consideration for an individual’s quality of life calls for prisons

and units that foster close social interaction and involvement among the actors. Humane prison conditions (at their strongest) should include positive perceptions of the quality of prison life for those who live and work in them. If so, such humane prison conditions tend to be found in smaller prisons in Norway.

Acknowledgement

We owe Alison Liebling and her colleagues many thanks for letting us use the questionnaires, and for all the assistance they have provided during this study.

References

- Arnold, H. (2005). The effects of prison work. In A. Liebling and S. Maruna (eds.) *The effects of imprisonment*, 391-420. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.
- Baldursson, E. (2000). Prisoners, prisons and punishment in small societies. *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention* 1(1): 6-15.
- Boedal, K. (1979). *The prison staff has the floor*. Oslo: The Ministry of Justice (in Norwegian only).
- Booth, S. (2009). *The prison characteristics that predict prisons being assessed as performing 'well': A thematic review by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons*. London: HM Inspectorate of Prisons.
- Bottomley, A. K., Liebling, A. and Sparks, R. (1994). *An evaluation of Barlinnie and Shotts units*. Scottish Prison Service Occasional papers no 7.
- Brookes, S., Smith, K. and Bennett, J. (2008). The role of middle and first-line managers. In J. Bennett, B. Crewe and A. Wahidin (eds.) *Understanding prison staff*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.
- Carter, P. (2007). *Securing the future: Proposals for the efficient and sustainable use of custody in England and Wales*. London: The Ministry of Justice.
- Christie, N. (1982). *How closely knit a society*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget (In Norwegian only).
- Coyle, A. (2002). *Managing prisons in a time of change*. London: International Centre for Prison Studies.
- Coyle, A. (2007). Governing, leadership and change. In Y. Jewkes (ed.) *Handbook on prisons*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.

- Coyle, A. (2008). Change management in prisons. In J. Bennett, B. Crewe and A. Wahidin (eds.) *Understanding prison staff*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.
- Crawley, E. (2004). *Doing prison work: The public and private lives of prison officers*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.
- Crawley, E. and Crawley, P. (2008). Understanding prison officers: Culture, cohesion and conflict. In J. Bennett, B. Crewe and A. Wahidin (eds.) *Understanding prison staff*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.
- Drake, D. H. (2008). Staff and order in prisons. In J. Bennett, B. Crewe and A. Wahidin (eds.) *Understanding prison staff*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.
- Feeley, M. and Simon, J. (1992). The new penology: Notes on the emerging strategy of corrections and its implications. *Criminology* 30(4): 449-74.
- Feeley, M. and Simon, J. (1994). Actuarial justice: The emerging new criminal law. In D. Nelkin (ed.) *The Futures of criminology*. London: Sage.
- Hammerlin, Y. and Mathiassen, C. (2006). *Then and now: On the consequences of increased delegation of tasks for the relations between correctional staff and prisoners in a selection of closed prisons*. Oslo: The Correctional Service of Norway Staff Academy. (Report no. 5/2006) (in Norwegian only, English abstract).
- <http://www.daserste.de/weltspiegel/>
- International Roundtable for Correctional Excellence (2009). *Benchmarking: Trends and developments 2004-2008*.
- Johnsen, B. and Granheim, P. K. (2011). 'Prison size and the quality of life in Norwegian Closed prisons'. In T. Ugelvik and J. Dullum (eds.) *Nordic prison practice and policy – exceptional or not? Exploring penal exceptionalism in the Nordic context*. London: Routledge. (In press).
- Kauffman, K. (1988). *Prison officers and their world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kristoffersen, R. (ed.) (2010, 2007). *Correctional statistics of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden*. Oslo: Correctional Service of Norway Staff Academy.
- Liebling, A. (2000). Prison officers, policing and the use of discretion. *Theoretical Criminology* 4(3), 333-57.
- Liebling, A., assisted by Arnold, H. (2004a). *Prisons and their moral performance: A study of values, quality and prison life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Liebling, A. (2004b). The late modern prison and the question of values. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 16(2): 202-19.

- Liebling, A. (2006). Prisons in transition. *International Journal of Law and psychiatry* 29, 422-30.
- Liebling, A. (2007). Why prison staff culture matters? In J. M. Byrne, D. Hummer and F. S. Taxman (eds.) *The culture of prison violence*. Boston: Pearson.
- Liebling, A. (2008). 'Titan' prisons: Do size, efficiency and legitimacy matter? In M. Hough, R. Allen and E. Solomon (eds.) *Tackling prison overcrowding: Build more prisons? Sentence fewer offenders?* Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Liebling, A. and Arnold, H. (2002). *Measuring the quality of prison life*. London: Home Office. (Research findings 174).
- Liebling, A. and Price, D. (2001). *The Prison Officer*. Leyhill: Prison Service Journal.
- Liebling, A. and Tait, T. (2006). Improving staff-prisoner relationships. In G. E. Dear (ed.) *Preventing suicide and other self-harm in prison*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Liebling, A., Price, D. and Elliot, C. (1999). Appreciative inquiry and relationships in prison. *Punishment and Society* 1(1): 71-98.
- Mathiesen, T. (1965). *The defences of the weak: A sociological study of a Norwegian correctional institution*. London: Tavistock Publications Limited.
- Mathiesen, T. (2008). *Contribution and discussion at a debate about preventive detention*. Ila Prison 2008-11-5.
- McLean, C. and Liebling, A. (2008). Prison staff in public and private sector. In J. Bennett, B. Crewe and A. Wahidin (eds.) *Understanding prison staff*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.
- O'Donnell, I. (2005). *Putting prison in its place*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Irish Association for the Study of Delinquency. http://www.jsijournal.ie/html/Volume%205%20No.%202/5%5B2%5D_O'Donnell_Putting%20Prison%20in%20its%20Place.pdf
- Pratt, J. (2008a). Scandinavian exceptionalism in an era of penal excess. Part I: The nature and roots of Scandinavian exceptionalism. *British Journal of Criminology* 48(2): 119-37.
- Pratt, J. (2008b). Scandinavian exceptionalism in an era of penal excess. Part I: Does Scandinavian exceptionalism have a future? *British Journal of Criminology* 48(3): 275-92.
- Pratt, J. and Eriksson, A. (2009). Scandinavian exceptionalism in criminal policy. *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Kriminalvidenskap* 96(2):135-51.

- RETURN: Recidivism in the Correctional Services in the Nordic Countries (2010). Oslo:
Bjerch Trykkeri.
- Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational culture and leadership* (3rd edn). San Francisco:
Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Sparks, R., Bottoms, A. E. and Hay, W. (1996). *Prisons and the problem of order*. Oxford:
Clarendon Press.
- Sykes, G. M. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*.
Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tait, S. (2008). Prison officers and gender. In J. Bennett, B. Crewe and A. Wahidin (eds.)
Understanding prison staff. Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing.
- Time Magazine World May 10th 2010 and July 12th 2010.
- Ugelvik, T. and Dullum, J. (eds.) (2011). *Nordic prison practice and policy – exceptional or
not?* Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing/Routledge
- White Paper to the Parliament about The Correctional Service (Punishment that work – less
crime – safer society, St.m. nr. 37 [2007-2008]).

Appendix

Table 1 Dimension reliability

| Dimensions | Cronbach Alpha |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| Treatment by senior management | .94 |
| Attitudes towards senior management | .90 |
| Perception of Prison Service | .76 |
| Relationship with peers | .88 |
| Relationship with line management | .90 |
| Treatment by SOs and Pos | .81 |
| Commitment | .82 |
| Safety/control/security | .71 |
| Recognition and personal efficacy | .82 |
| Involvement in prison | .80 |
| Involvement in work | .84 |
| Stress | .76 |
| Relationships with prisoners | .71 |
| Social distance | .70 |
| Professional support | .59 |
| Authority maintenance | .50 |
| View on punishment and control | .64 |

Table 2 Results of first line officers split into small, medium, and large prison sizes

| Dimensions | Prisons | | | | | | F- ratio | Probability |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|------|----------------------------|------|---------------------------|------|-------------|-------------|
| | Small size (n= 169-196) | | Medium size (n=139-145) | | Large size (n=407-426) | | | |
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Treatment by senior management | 3.61* | 0.83 | 3.44* | 0.71 | 2.98 | 0.76 | 49.88 | 0.000 |
| Attitudes towards senior management | 3.39** | 0.85 | 3.18* | 0.76 | 2.72 | 0.71 | 58.20 | 0.000 |
| Perception of Prison Service | 3.24 | 0.63 | 3.24 | 0.62 | 3.20 | 0.61 | 0.32 | 0.728 |
| Relationship with peers | 4.07 | 0.43 | 4.05 | 0.36 | 4.07 | 0.42 | 0.15 | 0.859 |
| Relationship with line management | 3.81 | 0.77 | 3.83 | 0.54 | 3.91 | 0.55 | 2.14 | 0.119 |
| Treatment by SOs and POs | 3.71 | 0.74 | 3.66 | 0.56 | 3.60 | 0.57 | 2.04 | 0.130 |
| Commitment | 3.86 | 0.56 | 3.87 | 0.59 | 3.76 | 0.61 | 3.00 | 0.050 |
| Safety/control/security | 3.54* | 0.65 | 3.66* | 0.56 | 3.35 | 0.58 | 16.88 | 0.000 |
| Recognition and personal efficacy | 3.36* | 0.64 | 3.27 | 0.56 | 3.22 | 0.60 | 3.50 | 0.031 |
| Involvement in prison | 3.25** | 0.71 | 2.99* | 0.73 | 2.78 | 0.68 | 29.83 | 0.000 |
| Involvement in work | 3.74 | 0.61 | 3.79* | 0.52 | 3.63 | 0.59 | 5.19 | 0.006 |
| Stress | 3.32 | 0.89 | 3.25 | 0.81 | 3.22 | 0.87 | 0.80 | 0.449 |
| Relationships with prisoners | 3.88* | 0.41 | 3.79 | 0.40 | 3.78 | 0.47 | 3.39 | 0.034 |
| Social distance | 3.34** | 0.48 | 3.21 | 0.42 | 3.22 | 0.47 | 4.44 | 0.012 |

*Significant mean difference from large prisons.

**Significant mean difference from both large and medium prisons.