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Working in a Man's World: Women Correctional Officers in an Institution for Men¹

E. SZOCKYJ
PROGRAM IN SOCIAL ECOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

Introduction

During the 1970's and 1980's, the federal and provincial governments introduced women correctional officers into prisons for men. The integration movement was the product of affirmative action and equal employment policies. Prior to this shift in policy, women had been excluded from the entry level correctional officer positions and, since corrections has adopted the tradition of selecting from within its institutional ranks for promotions, women had been, to a large extent, deprived of a major employment avenue.

Although females have shown their competence at handling female and youthful prisoners, a population of adult men presents a myriad of questions. There are some perceived drawbacks to employing women on an equal basis with men; for the most part, these involve issues of inmate rights to privacy^{7, 24, 25} and the physical abilities of the female correctional officers.^{4, 9, 12, 14, 16} Yet, in Canada, minimal attention has been paid to the receptivity of the institutional organization and co-workers to the presence of women or their effectiveness in the performance of correctional duties.²

Method

Between June and October 1985 the experiences and perceptions of the staff and prisoners at a provincial pre-trial centre in western Canada

were solicited. The highly sophisticated complex, housing up to 150 prisoners, affords added privacy for the inmates. A random sample consisting of prisoners, male correctional officers and supervisors was selected to complete the questionnaire³ and interview. Subsequently, the questionnaire was distributed to the remaining population. Since the responses between the randomly chosen participants and the rest of the population were comparable, the items were collapsed for analysis. The entire population of nine actively employed female correctional officers participated in both the interview and questionnaire portion of the study.

Discussion

The major findings of the study, based on the responses of the male and female officers, supervisors and prisoners, reveal an overall picture that is consistent with the results from similar studies in other countries. Various dimensions regarding the employment of females are assessed under the following subheadings: interactive abilities, physical abilities, protective attitudes, acceptance of female officers and privacy concerns.

Interactive Abilities

It was found that the presence of female officers contributed to a more relaxed, calm environment as well as an increase in morale. In the discussions, most of the females felt that the approach women used was more "laid back"; women did not have a "macho" or abrasive attitude.¹⁷ It was stated by many of the females that inmates handled themselves differently in a female's presence and were less prone to violence because they had nothing to prove to a woman. A male officer confirmed this by stating:

The effect they [female officers] have on the prisoners is that they are more subdued. They don't become as agitated. It seems they have more of a calming effect naturally, rather than if it was a male they wouldn't think twice of flipping out or whatever. If it's a female they seem to hold it back.

A number of the prisoners said they responded to orders by females quicker with less retaliation.¹⁶ For example, one inmate stated:

They're glad to do it if a female says something. . . . Women can tell an inmate to do something and most of the time they don't mind. They do things quicker for women. The job is easier for them. Men have more hassles.

Thus, prisoners gave female correctional officers fewer problems and they appeared to be more responsive to them.

The vast majority had a positive image of the female officer's interactive abilities because, as one inmate said, "they sit down and talk to you like people, with respect, and the males treat you like shit". Another prisoner commented:

It's more than a job for women. Some males put in their hours and then get out. But the women are interested in you and what you're feeling and how things are going with you. They're more feeling. You need to know that someone's interested in your welfare.

Some of the women felt that they tend to be more sensitive to the needs of inmates. As one female officer stated, "Little things are important to us like getting a visit or special phone call or family pictures brought in — women see that as important to prisoners. A lot of men let it go." A large number of prisoners noticed this difference in atmosphere as well. Moreover, the attentiveness and thoroughness that the female officers exhibited may pay off in other ways. For instance, a supervisor claims that:

I've got my best leads on contraband in units and breaking up cliques that are in units from one or two female staff that work here.

The ability to defuse potentially violent behaviour is a beneficial skill in this setting. All the respondent groups felt that women were equally or more effective in "cooling down" an angry prisoner.^{15, 18} In the interviews, the females indicated that women tend to rely on their communication skills to a greater extent than men.^{10, 15, 18} As one officer said:

Men are more aggressive to begin with; women are pacifiers. Men will use their fists; women will use their tongues. They'll use their heads to talk themselves out of a situation.

Although many male correctional officers mentioned in the interviews that the women generally did have better interpersonal skills, a few saw this as creating problems or difficulties for the male staff who take over a unit from a female officer since they do not have the same relationship with the prisoners.

Physical Abilities

There was a tendency for male correctional officers, supervisors and prisoners to rate men as more effective in dealing with situations which may require physical strength. The women correctional officers, though, believed that they were just as effective in handling such situations.^{5, 15} The ability of female officers to cool out or calm prisoners and their more positive relationship with prisoners may explain why more of the respondents felt they were just as effective in controlling or separating prisoners. Although females, in the interviews, admitted that men were physically superior to women they did not believe this fact speaks deleteriously for their own performance. It was felt that women were new to corrections and lacked the experience of physically subduing inmates or even physically fighting in general. As a result, men may be better in a one-to-one situation but, it was stated by some female officers and supervisors, brute force was rarely required.^{7, 8} All officers, male and female, received the same training; it was the competence and ability of the individual not their sex that was important.

In relation to back-up, the following feelings were expressed by the females:

What kind of back-up is any guy going to be when the ratio is 17 prisoners against two.

It doesn't matter who your partner is, because they're not allowed to move by themselves to help you anyway. Either way you're looking at a whole group of people. So I don't think it really matters.

The females were not worried about working with other females and did not believe male officers were justified in any concerns they might put forth. One inmate reflected on the situation as follows:

Guards don't step into a fight when there's inmates fighting. They don't step into it alone. All they do is push a button. Both can do that equally as well.

But most of the prisoners interviewed felt that female correctional officers lacked the physical strength in a fight situation. This was perceived as one of the few disadvantages to their employment.

One male officer commented that:

I think the biggest question that we had when we first opened was would they [female officers] be able to back us up in a situation where it was warranted.

I think that was the biggest concern at the time, but since then it's no longer the question or issue because we've had situations where the back up was a woman; it was handled quite good. So I can't believe that it's much of a worry anymore.

Nevertheless, in the discussions, the majority of male officers expressed a preference for male back-up in a violent situation. A number of officers cited as reasons the feeling that either most females are simply not as physically capable as some of the men, or, those who indicated that the females could handle such occurrences, that an instinctive or protective attitude to females in general prevailed. Less than one-third of the males interviewed stated that they were comfortable with female back-up.

Protective Attitudes

It was generally stated by all the women that inmates were more protective of female officers than males in the sense that striking a female was frowned upon by the prisoners. It seemed to be almost an unwritten law that "you do not hit a female" and if an inmate did "his name would be mud". A female officer confided that:

One inmate had me literally pinned against the wall and I talked my way out of it. A few of the inmates came up to me and said '_____ we would not have let him touch you'.

Whether this would be true in a riot situation was debated but in a normal setting the women felt they had an advantage.

The prisoners confirmed this assessment in the interviews. Not only did they feel inmates were more likely to help a female correctional officer in trouble but they were also apprehensive about taking physical action against females.^{12, 15, 19} The male officers, on the other hand, were divided on this issue. Some thought that inmates would be slightly more inclined to protect female correctional officers whereas others stated that prisoners would treat both male and female staff alike with respect to protecting them in dangerous situations.

Initially, there seemed to be evidence of protective behaviour on the part of the staff,^{5, 8, 11, 12, 15, 7, 9} especially from the older officers. In the interviews, a few male staff felt that some males were more likely to put themselves in a precarious situation to aid or protect a female. Others said that they simply did a few extra checks if a female was

working with them. And still others stated that there was generally no difference in their treatment. As one male reflected:

If there's a code yellow on a female unit, then the officers' response is no quicker and no more efficient, but it is more fervoured.

The women reported that male officers felt there was favouritism because females were stationed in "easier" units or received more attention. The women countered this by saying that some men were also given preferential treatment. One female stated that in emergency situations there did not appear to be a difference in gender, rather:

As far as the riots and code yellows go, they'll do that [demonstrate protective behaviour] with the guys as well. They'll pick somebody who's . . . a big strapping guy known for his roughness over a guy who's maybe not like that. So I don't necessarily know if it's just because they're female. They pick and choose who they want anyhow regardless of what sex.

The women wanted to perform the job on the same terms as men. A representative response was:

I don't want to be treated any differently. I don't want any favouritism. I want to find out if I can do it myself. How else are we going to build our own self-confidence up?

By the initiative of the females, male favouritism appeared to have declined considerably at this facility. Still, some males felt it existed. They argued that the females hired tended to be more outgoing and received more attention from the male officers and supervisors.

Privacy Concerns

All of the females and most of the male correctional officers and prisoners interviewed thought inmates have enough privacy and did not believe it was an issue for the prisoners.^{8, 10, 17, 19, 21, 24} The building was designed to protect inmate privacy: the cells have a solid door rather than bars and the toilet is in an area which is not visible from outside the cell. The women indicated that they respect the privacy of the male inmates; if the door is closed they will knock before entering. The females are restricted from working in the area of the institution where incoming or outgoing prisoners are changing. Moreover, they may not perform skin search on the male prisoners. The only complaint

cited by a few of the prisoners was a resentment toward females frisking them.

Acceptance of the Female Correctional Officers

On the whole, the majority of the respondents approved of female correctional officers.^{15, 16, 9, 11} Yet, female officers still did not feel fully accepted by their male peers. It appeared that this negative sentiment was specifically aimed at a small segment of the male staff that adhered to the "old boy" traditions. The biggest obstacle reported by most of the women was having the male officers accept them and allow them to perform the duties that the job entails.^{9, 10, 13, 18}

The female officers are very sensitive about drawing attention to themselves. Many felt that they were "being watched"; their performance was singled out due to the recent entrance of women into the field and the small number employed. The comment, "When a male staff member makes a mistake then it's forgotten, but if a woman makes a mistake then it's talked about for weeks", was typical of the opinions expressed by the female officers.

Many prisoners and male officers interviewed were also aware of this. They mentioned that being recognized and treated as equals by the male staff was one of the biggest problems faced by the female correctional officers.¹⁹ Some of the male officers went on to say that women must also perform at a higher level to prove they were just as capable of performing the job. And, in general, the perceived performance of the female officers was comparable to or better than their male counterparts.^{6, 11, 15, 16, 19, 23}

Limitations

Only one institution was surveyed extensively. Not only was this a new provincial pre-trial facility but its modern design provided additional privacy and security benefits. Unlike other integration attempts into an existing male officer network, female correctional officers were present when the institution opened. Consequently, responses provided by its inhabitants may not be representative of those from other institutions across Canada. Furthermore, since the research site was a provincial facility it was not subject to an affirmative action programs as are the federal prisons.

The results were not cross-checked using institutional records. As a result, the extent to which the perceptions of the respondents correspond to the behaviour in question is unknown. Moreover, because the principal researcher was female, this may have coloured the responses obtained. Nonetheless, answers to the questionnaires distributed to the population of male officers and prisoners were quite similar to those received in the more intimate one-to-one questionnaire/interview approach used initially. The results are also reflective of those reported by others who have researched this area (some of whom were male).

Future Research

Only the perceptions of correctional staff and prisoners were discussed; observational data and record inspection could offer alternative perspectives. For example, a researcher's observation of the interactions amongst staff and with prisoners could flesh out the fine subtleties touched upon in this study. Moreover, an analysis of institutional records could indicate whether there is a difference, based on gender, in the number of charges laid against prisoners, the types of charges laid and the outcome of the charges. Such an approach has yet to be implemented.

It appears that the role of the institution plays an integral part in the shaping of correction officers' attitudes and perceptions. The literature suggests that this is perhaps more important than gender. One study has shown that the security level of the facility has an effect on the attitudes of the staff toward female officers.²² Furthermore, Jurik and Halemba¹³ and Zupan²⁵ expound on the similarities between male and female officers; emphasizing the influence of the job on determining behaviour and attitudes. It is therefore necessary to examine the impact of the setting on the officers.

The contrast between the provincial policy of equal employment opportunity and the federal affirmative action program needs academic attention. The provincial "merit principle" criterion of hiring and promotion requires scrutiny to ensure it does not result in discrimination against females; whereas the females hired under the affirmative action program may face resentment and devaluation of their abilities. A more intensive examination of the impact of the affirmative action program would be informative for policy analysts.

Finally, consideration needs to be given to the proportion of females at the facility. The changes in the institutional environment and the relationships and performance of staff as well as any procedural modifications made when different ratios of females are employed should be examined. It is hoped that these suggestions will plant the seeds for future endeavors.

References

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