Working at Sharpshock

A prison for young offenders

Ruby Millington

Ruby Millington *provides valuable insights as to why penal institutions do not find it easy to maintain a rehabilitative or therapeutic mission. Her article applies to a different field some of the approaches explored in our recent 'States of Mind' issue* (Soundings 15).

In 1997 I was appointed Writer in Residence at Sharpshock Young Offenders Institution and Remand Centre, through a scheme financed and administered by the Home Office, the Arts Council of England, the local Arts Board and the prison. Employed to work two-and-a-half days a week, my remit was 'to encourage the self expression and help raise the self esteem of all people in the prison', a wide and nebulous brief. When the initial funding ran out, the prison raised money from assorted trusts, renewing my contract on a yearly basis. However, despite management's efforts to maintain my post, I was unclear about their motives for doing so, and often suspected it was for public relations purposes. Giving someone freedom to work creatively within the establishment can make the regime seem more liberal and progressive. The reality is very different.

Sharpshock is a prison for young males aged between 15 and 21. It usually holds between 700 and 800 inmates. On arbitrary dates in early 2000 the roll

showed that of 772 prisoners 395 were white, with 377 from ethnic minorities; and of 734 inmates, 391 (more than half) were still awaiting sentence. The prison comprises 22 discrete units, many of which have a dedicated purpose - one for example provides protection for vulnerable inmates, another runs a programme for bullies. Most have a distinct personality which tend to reflect the attitude and values of its staff. For example the segregation unit - a prison within a prison where the most difficult adolescents are disciplined - is staffed almost exclusively by former soldiers whose exacting regime reflects their military background.

Following two damning reports by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCIP) in the late 1990s, the prison has embarked on an ambitious programme to build new facilities to cope with the burgeoning 15- to 17-year-old juvenile population. The prison's mission statement was recently changed from 'Serving the Future' to 'Challenge and Change'. The unintentional irony of this motto is that challenge and change is a permanent state that staff are passively subjected to, rather than a dynamic movement in which they are actively involved.

Sharpshock is also a training prison for graduate staff who have been recruited to the Prison Service's Accelerated Promotion Scheme (APS). In order to gain their next 'fast track' promotion, such staff must demonstrate that they have made two substantial changes to the regime within two years. This means that those with the power to transform are not required to remain in position and sustain the 'improvements' they have made, but are routinely replaced by others who are obliged to make more changes. This does not go unnoticed by the uniformed 'discipline' staff who work on the wings. For one writing project I invited 50 staff and 50 prisoners to answer the question 'What would you like to know?'. Many officers wished to know why the prison was in a constant state of upheaval, and why management were not required to stay for longer. In contrast, an APS officer said that she wanted to know 'Where will I be in ten years' time?'. At this point she had been at Sharpshock for less than a month, but she already had her sights firmly fixed on the future in terms of her own career. There is even less stability at the very top. In three and a half years there have been four different Number One Governors, and numerous deputies. No-one would send their child to a school where the head teacher changed every year. But Young Offender Institutions, of course, are not schools.

What are they then? According to the Prison Service's mission statement the duty of the staff is twofold:

> Her Majesty's Prison Service serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts. Our duty is to look after them with humanity and to help them lead law abiding and useful lives in custody and after release.

It would seem that the first part of the mission statement defines the primary task, and applies to the discipline staff (the keepers); while the second encompasses the role of agencies employed in more 'caring' areas, such as education or drug rehabilitation (the helpers). That the officers' role has diminished, to the extent that even those who join the service with therapeutic motives find themselves mere 'turnkeys', partly explains their high level of dissatisfaction.

Regarding staff, the differences in gender, colour and class, as well as the division between those who do and don't carry keys, means that dynamics within the prison are prone to distortions. Like the inmates, the officers are predominantly male and working-class by origin. Many join the Prison Service after military careers. By contrast, many of the 'caring' professionals are middle-class and female, with a higher level of education. In the same way that adolescent prisoners idealise harshness and brutality and denigrate tenderness, there is a large amount of splitting and projection among staff, with minority groups being used as receptacles for certain characteristics. A cycle of mutual projections takes place, which paralyses relationships between different factions in the establishment, and leads to individuals making assumptions not only about those in different groups, but also about those they consider to be within the same group.

The mission statement, and confusion about the primary task of the staff, also leads me to wonder about the primary task of the prisoners. If one considers their relationship in the 'them and us' context so often adopted by both sides, one might logically assume that the boys' primary task is the opposite of the officers' - i.e. not to be kept in custody. But since escape attempts from the prison are extremely rare, can we suppose that the primary task of prisoners is to rehabilitate themselves, in accordance with the second part of the mission statement? If this is the case - and a large majority of those incarcerated within the prison claim that they do wish to change - then it must be said that many fail in this intention. I believe the reason for this can be seen in Kleinian psychoanalytic

terms. That is to say, there are a number of parallels between the way young offenders progress through the penal and judicial systems and the infant's negotiation of the paranoid schizoid and depressive positions.[1] The adolescent prisoners' failure to use the system as something good, which might help them to achieve integration, experience guilt and wish to make reparation, is caused by the system's frequent failure to fulfil what is basically a parental role.

Hinshelwood (1993) explains that 'prisons exist as they do because of the prisoner's psychology, because of his own attitudes to life and to relations to others'. I would add that the young prisoner's generally poor attitude to life, and often dysfunctional relations to others, is compounded by his prison experience (much in the same way that the infant's development is helped or hindered by his real, external mother and surrounding environment, and not just by his internal perception of it (Klein 1940)); and this contributes to the failure of the rehabilitative process. By examining this dynamic of the prison as parent, I think it is possible to understand why the work of staff is so difficult, and, subsequently, why the establishment's 'parenting' of the young prisoners is so inadequate.

The prison as parent

Through its duty to help rehabilitate offenders, Sharpshock is cast somewhat reluctantly into a parental role - indeed owing to the age of many prisoners, the Young Offender Institution does act in loco parentis. Unfortunately, in most cases it fails to be a 'good enough' parent in the care of its prisoner 'children'. In my experience, most of the 'parenting' done in the prison is merely a repeat of the sadly inadequate care most prisoners have received from their own parents or previous institutions, and this serves to compound their previous experience. This is not necessarily due to wanton neglect on the part of the Young Offender Institution. Poor parenting is widely recognised as a criminogenic factor, and, ironically, the teaching of parenting skills to the boys, almost quarter of whom are

1. The paranoid schizoid position in Kleinian psychoanalytic theory is characterised by a radical splitting of good and bad objects, in which the good is idealised and the bad denigrated. It is difficult to recognise good and bad qualities as belonging to the same object, including the self. In the depressive position, there is recognition that good and bad qualities can be found in the same objects. It becomes possible to feel concern for the injuries suffered to others, rather than remain wholly preoccupied with risks and injuries to the self. These are core ideas of the Kleinian psychoanalytic tradition.

fathers or expectant fathers (HMCIP, 1997), is considered so important that all young offender institutions are required to have parenting courses in place by 2001 (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999).

Many boys are remanded into custody while they await trial and will spend an average of three months, and anything up to two years, on remand (HMCIP, 1997). Reasons for this include preventing the offender from intimidating the witnesses who will appear at his trial, and avoiding the risk of his failing to appear at court. However the Prison Reform Trust (1991) points out that denial of bail also appears to be influenced by socio-economic factors such as homelessness and/or unemployment; this suggests that it is those who already suffer the most deprivation who are most likely to find themselves on remand. Although in the eyes of the law one is innocent until proven guilty, this implies a certain judgement of the prisoner before he has even been tried. Those held on remand are usually resentful of this, feeling persecuted by society and the authorities. This feeling of aggrievement tends to set the tone on remand wings, life on which is characterised by uncertainty: boys do not know when their trial will be, whether they will be convicted, what kind of sentence they will receive, or where they will serve it. Their present predicament is as uncertain as their future. They have no control over what remains of their life or relationships outside the Young Offender Institution, and do not know what fate waits them inside its walls, or how best to survive the system. They have simply to learn by experience. Unfortunately, most experience in the dog-eat-dog, sink-or-swim remand environment comprises not having their needs met, not being thought about and being at the mercy of a capricious and often neglectful system. The prisoners relinquish control of their lives to the officers, who dictate with whom they share a cell, when they can shower, what mail they send and receive, etc, etc. As a consequence the boys become infantalised - even mealtimes are referred to as 'feeding' - reminiscent of the babies seen in documentary footage of Romanian orphanages. Unlike the situation within a psychoanalytic process, where the patient's regression to an infant-like state of dependence is used in a positive and therapeutic way, the infantilised prisoners have only their most basic needs met, and receive no nurturing; they are thus forced into regressive patterns.

Remand wings are volatile and violent, the 'paranoid schizoid' position personified, where attack and retaliation take place in reality as well as in phantasy. Defences are rife and splitting takes various forms, one of the most obvious being

the boys' idealisation of their lives outside the prison - lives which have usually been characterised by dysfunctional family life, failed interventions, drug addiction and crime, but which are now remembered as a blissful paradise in contrast to the real and perceived horrors of their incarceration. Boys deny, through relentless omnipotent bravado about 'busting the case', that they will be found guilty. This splitting off and disowning of guilt does not, however, bring relief, as it serves to fuel their sense of persecution since they feel they are being punished unfairly. Clinging to their 'innocence' is a favourite defence of remandees, and is sustained by disowning their own bad parts, which are split off, denied and projected. Being in prison, there are plenty of receptacles for these disowned parts. In the Young Offender Institution hierarchy, sex offenders (known as 'nonces') are considered the lowest of the low and vilified for being unable to contain their impulses. Informers (known as 'grasses') and vulnerable prisoners (known as 'fraggles') are also denigrated. Such individuals are often segregated for their own protection, which makes them easily identifiable targets and prevents the projections from being tempered by reality. Boys in the Healthcare Centre, who suffer from mental illness, are scorned by the rest of the population, who often feel that their own emotional and mental equilibrium is precarious and consequently fear 'madness' as if it were contagious. Violence and brutality are idealised and are employed as ways of coping (the story of the Kray brothers is the most borrowed book in the prison library, perhaps confirming the common belief that Young Offender Institutions are 'universities of crime'). While bad objects are easy to come by, the availability of good sustaining objects is extremely limited at Sharpshock. Things that are traditionally perceived as good - such as education, phone calls and association - depend on staff availability, and cannot be guaranteed. Every time a boy is denied one of these he experiences the denial as further persecution.

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The judicial process of public Crown Court trial, with its attendant scrutiny by media and public, provides a sobering intrusion of reality for prisoners. Denial is diminished when they are confronted by evidence of their crimes. But although conviction seems to catapult the boys into a more depressive situation - the ethos of the convicted side of the prison is all about 'addressing offending behaviour' - the state of mind which this implies is often absent. I feel there are a

number of reasons for this, not least that the adolescent inmates start out at a disadvantage due to their life experience, 38 per cent of them having experienced local authority care (Prison Reform Trust, 1991). Klein (1935, 1940) points out that infants constantly internalise the outside world, and that a lack of real good experiences, in particular that of being in a reliable and loving relationship, results in a checking or even arresting of the development of a sense of inner security. Instead there will be fear for one's own survival and an expectation of attack from without. This means that the boys are poorly equipped to make the best of what there is on offer. Even when there is something on offer in the way of external goodness with which to temper his internal badness, the prisoner often disparages this, destroying any hope in the process. The little that people such as myself can offer is considered sadly insufficient and our inevitable departure is resented.

There is also a problem with reparation on the part of the prisoners. Whereas the infant makes phantasied attacks, the crimes of the boys are real. Many have attempted or succeeded in murderous attacks, actual reparation for which is impossible, and I wonder if this makes their guilt intolerable. Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) point out that in the depressive position 'all loss is experienced as a result of one's own destructiveness and as a retaliation for past hatefulness and injuries'. Again, for the prisoners, this is true in reality as well as phantasy. I have worked with boys who went out for an evening with their friends and partners, expecting to return home that night, but who instead 'accidentally' killed someone in a fight and were immediately imprisoned, with no prospect of returning home for perhaps fifteen years. I often wonder what becomes of the possessions, jobs, pets, etc. that they left, so abruptly, on the outside. In the boys' minds of course, these things become idealised.

For many prisoners their experience of confinement could be something of a reassurance, in that it allows a sense of being contained, and of having an external authority figure to prevent them acting out their more violent phantasies. Winnicott (1939) regards threatened or actual acting out as an externalisation of the adolescent's inner world, used as an attempt to secure control from the real people in the outside world. However he also stresses that those who provide this external control must also provide a degree of toleration - something which is often lacking in prison. The container can also prove unreliable in other ways, not least by rejecting and ejecting those within it. Being 'shipped out' to another prison at half an hour's notice is a threat that constantly hangs over the convicted adolescent.

Movements between prisons happen on an apparently arbitrary basis, with little account being taken of where an inmate's family comes from, or how difficult visiting may prove, or of any commitments he may have in Sharpshock. On one occasion the Young Offender Institution was thrown into disarray when the entire complement of trained kitchen workers was suddenly shipped out, leaving no-one to cook that evening's meal for the remaining inmates. At the more extreme end of the scale, incidents such as attacks or even murder demonstrate that the Young Offender Institution cannot always be counted on to contain the young prisoners' aggressive urges. Finally, their unwavering belief that they have little to be thankful for means that they lack the gratitude essential for the development of concern.

While discipline staff are clearly not in a psychotherapeutic role, I feel that theories about countertransference can be applied to the uneasy relationship between them and the boys.[2] The relationship between officer and inmate has parallels in the dyads of analyst/patient and mother/baby, in the emotional transactions that take place between them. The first part of the prison's mission statement refers to 'keeping in custody those committed by the courts'. And although this containing role is clearly about physical security, most people working in the establishment would agree that there is a duty of containment in another sense, i.e. the provision of some kind of emotional security for the teenage inmates, a parental function.

Prison officers are subjected to forceful 'projective identifications' from the young prisoners. That is, to projections of violent feelings of many kinds, which the offenders are unable to tolerate or deal with themselves. The prison officers are often poorly equipped to deal with these projective identifications (and indeed, unlike a parent or analyst, many lack basic goodwill towards those they are working with); but they are also up against what Segal (1977) describes as the patient's pathological intention to disrupt the containing situation, by forcefully invading the analyst's mind in a bid to destroy understanding. Young prisoners are astute when it comes to finding someone with a susceptibility for a specific projection (Carpy, 1989; Brenman Pick, 1985), and this gives the projective identification a particularly powerful effect on the recipient. The unconscious feelings are projected not just because of their unbearableness, but because their

2. Countertransference (Heimann 1950) refers to the states of mind evoked in parents, analysts or carers, by infants, patients or others with whom they are in emotional contact.

incomprehensible and primitive nature prevents them from being expressed verbally. This is further complicated by each person's natural wish to avoid pain, which in turn adds to difficulty in identify the feelings (Brenman Pick, 1985). And the more violent the emotions, the greater the pressure to act out (Heimann, 1950).

Money Kyrle (1956) reminds us that no amount of theory can provide insight into a patient's unconscious unless the analyst also partially identifies with the patient. Staff at Sharpshock by and large do not have any theory, but are often identified with their charges to an extreme degree. During my first year as Writer in Residence I was invited to attend the Prison Service's Introduction to Groupwork Facilitation training course. The four-day course was delivered by the prison's psychology department and attended by a mixture of officers and agency workers such as volunteer basic skills teachers. Much of the learning was experiential and we were required to take part in various exercises, playing the role of either facilitator or inmate. Initially the participants agreed that each time we had to adopt the role of prisoners we would play a different type, for example a bully, followed by a vulnerable prisoner and so on. However, having assumed our roles in the first exercise it became impossible to change them in subsequent exercises. The member of staff who had adopted the persona of a disruptive boy became increasingly seditious and unpopular with those playing the facilitator, while the staff member playing the disturbed and withdrawn teenager became increasingly isolated within the group and the target of derision and hostility from the other 'boys'. Eventually it became difficult to relinquish our roles even during lunch and tea breaks, with the member of staff who had taken on the 'victim/scapegoat prisoner' role being bullied by the others even outside the training department. I was interested to see how, even without prior discussion, each of us immediately took on a very individual role which we then could not change. This seemed to demonstrate that we were all heavily identified with certain types of prisoner, a position which would logically extend into our working lives where we would have a valency for unconscious interaction with such boys who would (again unconsciously) detect this susceptibility within us.

The vicious circle created when what the patient brings matches aspects of the analyst's own psyche with which s/he has not dealt was identified by Money Kyrle in 1956. Acting as a barrier to understanding, it produces more conscious or unconscious anxiety, which further hinders understanding. The analyst may begin to feel that the patient is beyond repair, and experience this as persecution. Since s/he will necessarily have introjected aspects of the patient, s/

he may then resort to reprojection in a bid to defend against the feelings. This again impedes understanding, and may be complicated by the analyst having got rid of parts of her/himself as well as the unwanted parts of the patient. Applied to the young prisoner/officer relationship, this means that instead of containing and attempting to process the prisoners' projections, the officers may block or reproject them, thereby confirming their intolerableness.

Unfortunately, providing emotional containment is hard for the staff at Sharpshock, who seem unwittingly or unwillingly cast into the role of harassed parents; the lack of personnel and resources means that they struggle to stay on top of practicalities, with little time left over for thinking, processing, or anything but very basic caring. Many have little experience of prison. In April 2000 the detail list of the 12 staff running a remand wing housing 64 18-21-year-olds revealed that four of them had less than four months experience and four had less than one years experience. One officer was Not In Post (i.e. the post was vacant) and of the remaining three staff, none had been in post before November 1997. The younger officers, some of whom are in their very early 20s, could actually be considered adolescents themselves, but they receive little support from above, as the more senior and experienced members of staff have less contact with either the boys or discipline staff. The geography of the prison contributes to this, with all management staff being located in separate buildings away from the units, and the care and support of staff care is often overlooked. For example, when the officers' canteen was closed for several weeks for refurbishment - 'a Standard Audit requirement ... to comply with the Food Act 1990' rather than a bonus for those who use it - staff were told that they could buy sandwiches ('cold fillings only') and confectionery, but that these would have to be pre-ordered by telephone. One Sunday, when the kitchen was closed, staff were given the option of purchasing the meals normally given to prisoners on reception. For discipline officers working an 11-and-a-half-hour 'A' shift, from 7.45am to 5.15pm (during which time they would be expected to serve three meals to the boys), this seemed poorly inadequate. It was as if those in charge of them simply did not care.

The bottom line is that the prisoners and staff are caught in an escalating series of mutual projective identifications, since nothing can be owned, tolerated or processed. The result is that the boys are not helped to negotiate the paranoid schizoid position with its inherent sense of persecution and move towards the depressive position in which they could experience guilt and attempt reparation.

This movement should be the goal of all those working in any kind of therapeutic or rehabilitative capacity within the prison - which of course is pretty much everyone. I think the lack of any resources to aid such a movement explains why the work of people such as myself is so difficult.

Writing, unlike activities such as drama, is deeply unattractive to prisoners, among whom levels of literacy and general education are extremely low. HMCIP (1997) reports that more than half of young offenders have been excluded, or excluded themselves, from school. According to the Prison Reform Trust (1991), more than 40 per cent have no formal educational qualification on entering prison and around half have literacy problems. This means that writing as a form of self expression is a frustrating experience which a large majority are unable to sustain. Many are also either unsure what they want to express, or reluctant to express it. Furthermore, written work naturally falls into two categories. The first encompasses creative, imaginative work such as stories and poetry. This could be useful, as a way of exploring something in fantasy rather than through action. But the boys seldom have the patience for this, and often lack a sophisticated capacity to think in symbolic terms. The second form of writing, documentation, is concerned with truth, which, for the boys, would mean exploring their present and past experiences. While this might prove valuable, it is undoubtedly painful and therefore something they wish to avoid if possible.

Much of the work done with convicted boys seems to be aimed at fostering compliance rather than at attempting any real psychic reparation. There are a number of accredited courses, for example anger management programmes and Enhanced Thinking Skills, into which prisoners may be coerced - completion of them being a prerequisite for parole and early release. In the same way the Young Offender Institution adjudication system punishes 'naughty' prisoners, while the 'levels' system offers rewards such as in-cell television for good behaviour, as a parent might reward or punish a toddler. The compliance engendered in prisoners by means of incentives puts me in mind of Winnicott's theory of the 'false self', a splitting defence which originates from the infant's first months of life as the result of being subjected to an unpredictable external environment. This may instil the expectation of further trauma, against which the child then protects herself by concealing her true self and presenting a false self that is more acceptable to the outside world and thus less prone to attack. As Winnicott points out, the false self and its accompanying sense of disorientation

adds to the psychic burden of adolescents who are already struggling to discover and establish their identity. Persuading inmates to adopt the values laid down by the Young Offender Institution in return for privileges is like training animals to perform tricks for treats, and overlooks the fact that repression is not the healthiest option. By presenting a more sophisticated and socialised persona to the world, and hiding the latent violence that Winnicott reminds us is always present, the prisoner gives the impression of being a more integrated individual than he really is, and thus deprives himself of opportunities for real help. At the same time the adolescent's false self not only protects him from the outside world, but protects the outside world from his own projections. It is therefore in the interest of staff, who are at the mercy of such psychic onslaughts, to encourage such compliance.

The incentive ethos extends to group work and education. A recent development is to issue juveniles with cards on which staff are supposed to give marks out of three each time they attend an activity, according to their behaviour. This 'certificate' culture encourages boys to focus on the end product - usually proof of attendance - rather than on the process itself or the less tangible rewards they might get from it. This means that the process is seldom internalised, and confirms the widespread belief that the answers to all problems lie in the future, which undermines retrospection. It is no wonder that convicted prisoners have their sights firmly fixed on their EDR (earliest date of release). Unfortunately the result, when they do leave, is that they have few internal resources to sustain them. The best they can hope for is an 'external superego' in the form of a Home Detention Curfew tag.

I feel the 'false self' syndrome also manifests itself on an institutional level, when the Young Offender Institution responds to criticisms by making cosmetic changes that masquerade as improvements without actually altering anything. The prison's false self seemed to be very much in operation in a shocking incident in which a 19-year-old prisoner was murdered by his cell-mate, who beat him to death with the leg of a table. Three weeks prior to the murder the Governor had removed all the cigarette machines from the officers' mess and circulated a Governor's Information Notice (GIN) clarifying the dangers of passive smoking and decreeing that non-smoking prisoners should not share cells with those who smoked. This seemed to demonstrate that he was out of touch with the reality of what happened on the wings: firstly because most prisoners have to make a 12.5g of rolling tobacco last a whole week, and, because roll-ups produce very little smoke, the amount of

smoke on the units is minimal; secondly, on busy units with a high turnover of prisoners and few staff, the idea of their being able to arrange accommodation in this way was risibly impractical. The GIN gave the impression that care of prisoners was so high that they would be protected from passive smoking. The murder proved that in reality they might be locked up with potential murderers, whether they smoked or not. It seemed that the prison's own murderousness was hidden behind a benign and caring facade. This incident highlighted many issues, not least the formidable levels of anxiety to which both staff and inmates are subjected regarding the containment of murderous impulses, something which staff, in particular, tend to deny. West (1996) observes that 'working in extreme settings entails the likelihood of being very frightened not only in fantasy but in reality and, however rare, it is a dangerous kind of omnipotent defence to presume otherwise in the face of such potential unpredictability'. The realisation that murderousness could not be contained within the apparently secure environment was itself a violent attack on the previously impenetrable defences of many staff, and it was as if the entire establishment rushed into denial. For example, having issued a 'Notice to Staff' in which he chose to identify the victim by his prison number followed by his last name, the Governor declared that the regime on the unit must return to normal as soon as possible. No form of support was offered to either the prisoners or the officers in charge of them.

The murder of the young prisoner and the subsequent events made me feel, more than ever, that the system is in need of help in order to change, perhaps even more than those within it. While one would imagine a murder to be the most shocking thing that could happen, even in such a bleak environment, in fact the system's response to the murder seemed even more shocking.

Some creative projects with young offenders and staff

The constantly-changing environment and lack of resources at Sharpshock can be a spur to creativity. One is continually required to find solutions to problems and ways of making things work. However it is not just problems of a practical nature and resistance from the boys that need to be overcome, but also, sometimes, quite unhelpful or even destructive attitudes among staff.

Initially at Sharpshock I focused on group and one-to-one work, material produced in the sessions forming the basis of the prison magazine. In an attempt to tackle issues, I devoted each edition to a pertinent topic such as drugs or

Christmas (a notoriously terrible time) One issue I took up was sexual health, a subject about which many boys are poorly informed, often arriving at Sharpshock with sexually-transmitted diseases. Their lack of knowledge about basic things such as conception became apparent through their creative work. One 16-year-old boy, for example, wrote a story about meeting a girl with whom he had sex; she then announced to him, the following morning, that she was pregnant. The magazine provided information about HIV and contraception, and included a section where boys' anonymous questions were answered by experts from the Sex Education department of a local hospital. My intention to solicit questions from the boys by getting them to write them down on a piece of paper which they put in a special box was met with derision by some colleagues, who maintained that no serious questions would be asked. However all the questions were valid, and I noticed that officers also contributed questions. The magazine was vetted and approved by the duty governor. However, following distribution, there were a number of complaints about its content which some people felt to be offensive and even pornographic. My line manager insisted that all copies should be withdrawn. This seemed ironic as, in literal terms, withdrawal is not an effective form of contraception and, on a more metaphorical level, the boys would already have conceived (the information) by the time it was removed. Eventually the lack of facilities - it wasn't until my third year that I managed to get hold of a donated second-hand computer - meant that the magazine ceased production. This was disappointing as it had been extremely popular with the boys and had won several awards which were a source of pride.

My work has also included projects for the officers, although my efforts here have met with a certain amount of denigration. On one occasion I made a game called Fridge Magnet Philosophy for a unit office. Each magnet bore an aphorism pertinent to prison life. These included 'to understand all is to forgive all'; 'all truth is subjective'; 'it takes one to know one'; 'those who tolerate injustice are as guilty as those who perpetuate it'; 'freedom is a state of mind'; and 'that which must be earned can never be bought'. They were accompanied by two larger magnets saying true and false. The idea of the game was to decide under which of these headings each aphorism belonged and to place them accordingly. I hoped that this might encourage some discussion about issues that were usually avoided. A few days later I noticed that the officers had added some aphorisms of their own, mainly about each other's sexual behaviour. I

wondered whether in disparaging my artwork the officers convinced themselves that what I provided for the boys was equally substandard, and therefore nothing to be jealous of.

I have also tried to think of ways to do projects that would involve the whole Young Offenders Institution, the most successful of which has been a series of surveys in which 50 staff and 50 young prisoners give anonymous answers to questions. The responses, typed on different colour paper according to whether they came from boys or staff, have then been displayed as artwork. This project has had interesting results and staff have approached me asking to take part, and have even suggested questions ('What effect has prison had on you?' and 'What are you going to do when you get out?'). My intention was to give people a starting point for thinking about their situation, in the hope that by expressing an opinion there might also be some awareness of the emotional state behind it. I hope that this project has also helped the establishment work towards integration (albeit on a very small scale), not just because both staff and boys are involved, but because the answers reveal more similarities than differences between them. For example, the answers to 'What effect has prison had on you?' revealed that prison tends to have the same negative effect on everyone, whether keeper or kept. In response to the question 'Why are you here?', money was a common reason for those on both sides of the fence. Similarities between staff and boys were most vividly illustrated by answers to the question 'What's your problem?'. Responses to 'What would you like to know?' demonstrated the frustration of all those in Sharpshock. While a large number of staff wanted to know the reasons for what they saw as the prison's mismanagement, many boys wanted to know why they got their breakfast at 5pm at night. This change in the regime, whereby prisoners collecting their evening meal were simultaneously issued with a cold breakfast to keep in their cells for the following morning, had been introduced without any explanation, which seemed to exemplify the prison's poor 'parenting' on a practical level. Unfortunately responses to this question served to remind me how little one can do to improve matters, and I realised that by encouraging people to express themselves in this way I had put myself in a position where I could not give them the answers they desired. I had myself become the 'not good enough parent'.

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In the last year I have attached myself to C wing, a unit which accommodates 65 convicted and remand inmates aged 18-21. The convicted boys are serving sentences of various lengths, generally for crimes such as armed robbery, and occasionally include those serving life sentences for murder. I feel I have developed a good rapport with the officers on C wing who, although often sceptical about my projects and ways of working, treat me with a mixture of indulgence and protectiveness. There is something parental, perhaps specifically fatherly, about the way in which they indulge my creative ideas, often going to great lengths to facilitate my projects, and yet always knowing where to draw the line when my creative ideas go beyond what is practical or advisable. When I was asked to help make a Home Office video about the dangers of self-harm, the unit was host to a full film crew for a weekend - a massive burden on top of the staff's normal duties, but one they accepted with enormous good grace, realising that this would be a source of great excitement for the boys in their care. The unit seems to be more integrated than other units. For example, the ethnic make-up of staff on the unit is sufficiently diverse - with officers coming from India, the Philippines, Nigeria, Wales and Scotland - for them to refer to themselves as the 'United Nations'. I feel that C wing is unique in its acknowledgement of these differences and its finding them a source of pride, rather than of racial conflict, and that this is important on a unit where around half of the young prisoners are from ethnic minorities. Staff are also proud of their record of 'turning around' difficult boys, and a large number of the inmates are 'red bands', trusted with important jobs and rewarded with a greater amount of freedom within the prison. In the same way that I feel safer there than on other units, and consequently more able to work creatively, I think that the inmates also feel more 'parented'.

Projects I have done on C wing have ranged from simply providing a bed-time story for each boy on the unit to arranging for a Christmas show by a famous magician, who taught them close-up magic which they could practise in their cells over the holiday, when staff leave results in long hours of 'bang up'. At New Year each boy was allowed to select a picture postcard on which he could write a message and have sent to himself on any nominated date throughout the following year. Most of them chose to have the cards sent to themselves a few days after their release as a reminder not to come back to prison.

During a period of extremely low morale due to staff shortages, groupwork became impossible, as there were insufficient officers available to supervise the

sessions. Mr X, the senior officer on the unit, volunteered to come in on his evenings off in order that a group I had organised could proceed. The group comprised four boys aged 17 and 18 who had responded to flyers that I had circulated advertising the group, which was billed as an opportunity to 'Free your mind' through writing and discussion. Two of the boys were from different units, where they were considered troublesome by staff who advised me against including them. I was keen that they should be given a chance and Mr X agreed. I subsequently learnt that he had visited both these boys to inform them he would allow them to take part as long as they did not disrupt the group. Interestingly, I felt supported rather than undermined by Mr X's action, and I think in retrospect that our being seen to work together in a co-operative fashion may also have provided some containment for the boys.

This is in contrast to other occasions when I have co-facilitated groups with men. Whenever I have been allocated a budget for visitors to work with the boys I have invited people who can provide something that I cannot, usually someone from an ethnic minority, male and with a different speciality, such as rap or performance poetry. These sessions, although superficially successful, have stirred up mixed feelings among the young prisoners, many of whom come from mixed race backgrounds. I wonder if the combination of a white female and a black man working together stirs up memories of their parents, many of whom are not living together. In this situation the prisoners seem to become immediately attached to the male figure, as if he represented their father, but their excitement about having his attention inevitably turns to disappointment when he leaves with no guarantee (because of my budget) that he will return. This usually means that I am cast into the role of the mother - present but inadequate, and deserted by my strong, male counterpart. I cannot keep their 'father' there for them and whatever I can provide in his absence is deemed not good enough. But with Mr X's support the groupwork was successful and the boys were able to confront some very painful issues.

My last example is of groupwork that I organised in response to the murder of the 19-year-old. This incident highlighted many issues, some of which I touched on earlier in this article. When the investigating police needed someone to check statements given by boys who could not read, the officers asked for my help. I felt this was partly because they could not face hearing what the boys had said, and I asked if I could do a drop-in workshop which might provide a forum for those who

wanted to talk. Rather than actively soliciting their thoughts and feelings about the murder, I decided to provide beads which could be strung to make jewellery to send out to their children and partners. At the time I felt that an absorbing activity which required a great deal of concentration might allow feelings to emerge more freely and spontaneously. I also hoped that the sorting of the muddled beads first into separate sizes and colours and then into complicated patterns would give some metaphorical sense of inflicting order upon chaos. In retrospect I wonder if my decision not to confront what had happened in a more direct way was because I had also succumbed to the establishment's reluctance to accept the reality of what had happened and its impact upon the young prisoners. This would explain why, although the workshops were extremely popular, the talk generated was not of the murder and the anxieties it stimulated, but about sex and bitches (the boys' slang word for women), and unprecedented in its unpleasantness. I felt under a constant onslaught as boys tried to touch me and even to share my seat. I also felt unable to interpret their behaviour and left each night feeling completely helpless and overwhelmed. I felt that they wanted to let me know that this was how they themselves were feeling. In retrospect I feel that their attacks on me also indicated that I represented the prison as a 'parent' who had let them down, who had failed to protect them, and who could not provide them with a real space for thinking about what had happened.

Many of the beads were stolen, mostly by 17-year-old Tommy, with whom I had had a long conversation earlier in the week during which he had become tearful, explaining that he had suffered a long catalogue of losses and was anticipating the loss of his mother to cancer. Theft of my resources is extremely rare, and initially I felt aggrieved that Tommy, a boy who was very unpopular with other staff, but to whom I had been sympathetic, should steal from me.

Winnicott (1956) outlines the origins of the antisocial tendency and its manifestation in two ways, stealing and violence, each of which he defines as a sign of hope. Winnicott explains how this antisocial tendency originates from the loss of something good very early in the child's life. Although the child may be able to keep the memory of the lost object alive for some time, if the length of its absence is longer than the child's ability to remember, the child starts searching for an alternative object. If the original loss of the good object has occurred at a sufficiently late stage in the child's development, the child realises that the source of its loss is external and begins to search the external world for a replacement.

This search can take the form of the child stealing, not because it unconsciously wants the thing stolen but because it represents the lost object, i.e. the mother. In the child's unconscious such object-seeking theft is not really stealing, as the child has rights over the (lost) mother on account of his having 'created' her out of primary love during infancy. The child's search is a positive sign of hope as it demonstrates his belief in there being, somewhere, a substitute available. It seems to me that on this occasion, the theft of the beads was due to the absence of a 'parent' who would help them to think about their feelings. The boys were forced to fend for themselves, to steal something 'good' instead, something tangible which could help them through the long periods of 'bang-up' when the alternative activity would normally be to think - in this case about something they were unable to make sense of. In this way the boys were able to get something, despite the withholding of the prison 'parent'. The finished jewellery also seemed to represent something good, and their creativity gave the young prisoners a sense of pride. One boy, sending a delicate bracelet to his mother for Mother's Day, wrote an accompanying note. 'See, I'm not as useless as you think I am', it said. The subtext of this message seemed to be that he felt let down and misunderstood, but that in the absence of any outside help he had been able to find some resources inside himself.

Conclusion

Put in its simplest form, my feeling about Sharpshock is that it is relentlessly defending itself against a state of paranoid anxiety from which it cannot escape due to the lack of a good object. It is worth noting that my move from working with individuals to working with the institution, and my corresponding belief that it is only by relating and responding to the establishment as a whole entity that real change can occur, is in direct contrast to many of my peers, many of whom are initially fired with enthusiasm for reform, but who end up convinced that the system cannot change and one must be content with helping individuals caught within it. Staff responses to a survey I did asking people to give anonymous answers to the question 'Why are you here?' seem to confirm this. Sentiments included: 'If I can prevent even one coming back then I have not failed'. While I am not attempting to offer a solution, I would suggest that admirable though such dedication is, a greater change would come from attempts to integrate the system - as one would the psyche of a patient, or the members of a family - rather than

working with individuals on what seems to be a part-object basis.

Finally, I am aware that my article paints a bleak picture of the young offender institution, and should add that, while the rewards of working within it are few and far between, this serves to make them all the more welcome. Once, when asked by a visitor what I did, a senior officer replied, 'She makes us think'. This feels, to me, to be a step in the right direction.

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