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**PRACTISING SOCIAL WORK BEHIND BARS: SOME KEY
PRACTICE ISSUES FACING SOCIAL WORKERS**

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**PRACTISING SOCIAL WORK BEHIND BARS: SOME KEY
PRACTICE ISSUES FACING SOCIAL WORKERS**

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Master in
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ABSTRACT

The study addresses some key issues facing social workers in the prison setting.

In doing so, it discusses the historical context of criminology and the prison system in general. It further provides an overview of the social work profession and of the social work perspective including (a) the social work profession, (b) purpose, and c) values, to highlight the extent that prison social workers are able to fulfil professionals goals while practising in the prison setting.

A central part of this study is the analysis of the identified key issues of (a) involuntary clients, (b) security, (c) confidentiality and (d) advocacy and how these issues specifically pertain to working in a prison environment wherein organisational policies and procedures are often in conflict with social work methods.

This study concludes by asserting that social workers possess the necessary knowledge, skills and training for effective service delivery in the prison environment.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This research study explores the practice of social work within the prison system. The main issues considered are the involuntary status of offenders, security requirements, confidentiality, advocacy and their application in the context of the prison setting.

Literature reports that “imprisonment is, and will continue to be an important part of the system of imposing punishment for offences...”
(Law Reform Commission, 1988).

The criminal justice system deals with issues of crime and justice and affects thousands (or even millions in some countries) of individuals and families. The majority of people incarcerated are poor and from a low socio-economic background. Most are ill-educated and many are convicted on drug related charges (Showalter and Hunsinger, 1997).

The problem of crime and the administration of justice, however, is not just a matter of enforcing laws. It also necessitates the provision of programs and services that meet common human needs, address human behaviour, improve social conditions, and work toward addressing offending behaviour.

Social workers are important as active partners in providing services for offenders within the prison system. They can provide social services for offenders, in advocating for changes in the criminal justice system and in establishing prison programs.

Social workers' involvement and commitment to helping offenders is critical in every setting and, in particular, in the prison setting. Social workers are needed within prisons to assure a system of justice and fairness.

The primary thrust of this study is that social workers have important roles in the prison system and can be effective in rehabilitation and restoration. Effective social work in the prison setting requires the application of the same social work values – regard for individual worth and dignity, respect people's right to make independent decisions, assist clients to obtain needed resources. Further to this, social work strives to make the institution more humane and responsive to human needs and respect for and acceptance of the individual. However, this application is full of risks associated with the very nature of prison environments.

Social workers must be clear of their role within the prison system. They must be neutral and impartial and work with both offenders and the institution. Above all, they must not favour one group over another.

Showalter and Hunsinger (2000) strongly suggest that social work is an excellent profession to effectively cope with the numerous problems and stressful situations when working in a prison.

- **Statement of Study**

Practising social work behind bars requires social workers to focus on key practice issues. The involuntary status of offenders, security considerations, confidentiality boundaries and advocacy are important to effective service delivery: if not acknowledged, the ability to apply theoretical perspectives to the restrictive prison environment may be extremely difficult to achieve.

- **Method**

The method for collecting data involved an extensive literature review

- **Limits of Study**

Review of past and present literature provided a sound basis to the argument of this study. However, a literature review on its own has limitations and there is, obviously, a need for further research to collate statistical and qualitative data concerning this area of study.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CRIMINOLOGY

This chapter discusses the historical context of criminology and presents the primary ways chosen by societies to respond to crime.

The criminal justice system has remained a contentious area. It seems almost everyone has developed a view about the legal punishment process. Braithwaite (1988, p. 377) defines crime “as behaviour which is proscribed and punishable by law”. The literature on criminology shows the reflective and circular nature of society’s explanations of and responses to crime (Tewksbury, 1997).

As defined by Bartollas and Dinitz (1989) “the objective of criminology is the development of a body of general and verified principles regarding the processes of law, crime and treatment.” Specifically, criminology is about understanding the causes of crime in order to prevent or respond to crime. It is about social control of those who offend against general ideological and cultural values. Without understanding how criminal events occur and why offenders commit crimes, efforts in the criminal justice system would be without guidance.

Criminology offers a rational and scientific conception of crime. A number of theories were developed to explain behaviour that was considered deviant. Texts of criminology are categorised as classical, modern and post-modern.

Classical criminology was based on three principles: it was not concerned with understanding the cause of human behaviour since crime was seen as an inevitable fact of the social condition; people could be rationally motivated to refrain from crime

by their need to maximise pleasure and minimise pain; and crime could be controlled by the laws of rational government (Morrison, 1995).

With the development of positivism in the 19th century, crime was seen as the result of biological difference. In this manner, this process in humans would cause variations of humans that were predestined to crime and human behaviour became a problem for scientists to correct (Morrison, 1995).

During the 20th century, positivism contributed to the development of the medical model in which crime was seen as a disease. Hence, crime could be treated like any other disease by diagnosis of the problem, prescription, treatment and cure (Lester, Braswell and Van Voorhis, 1992).

During the 1960's and the 1970's criminology began to reflect on its value position and became critical of its relationship to power and of its view of social constructions.

The current conservative position on crime as expressed by Gottfredson and Hirschi, (Morrison, 1995) views crime as an unplanned and mundane activity committed by people who lack self-control which is caused by various socialisation practices. Recent trends in Australia and overseas have seen a move away from the prevention of crime and a return to a reliance on punishment as a primary response to crime (Sanson, Montgomery, Gault, Gridley and Thomson, 1996). People will commit crimes only if they believe that they are able to increase their pleasures and benefits with the minimal risk of pain and punishment. Consequently, this view leads to the notion that if the likelihood of people being caught is significant and punishment is increased, people may hesitate and consider the consequences of crime and punishment before committing crimes (Irwin and Austin, 1997).

- **Responses to Crime**

We are consistently faced with the issues of crime in today's world and crime is a major social problem. Basically, crime can be measured in two ways: by the number of officially reported incidents and by the number of incidents that people disclose whenever a survey is conducted amongst the public (in Australia, most of the criminal justice research is carried out by the Australian Institute of Criminology).

The way in which crime is currently viewed, is not the way civilised societies have always viewed crime. Indeed, the view that crime is a major social problem and criminals need to be either controlled or treated is a relatively recent way of thinking. According to Tewksbury (1997) societies have chosen four primary ways of responding to crime: retaliation, retribution, treatment and prevention.

Retaliation is "revenge". Perhaps the oldest response to crime, retaliation is based on the idea of responding to people with actions akin to the crimes they committed because it is considered that they deserve to suffer in a similar way.

Retribution replaced retaliation as societies progressed in complexity and grew in size. When an individual commits a crime it is society's responsibility to show offenders that their actions will not be tolerated and will be punished. In this way, society judged that individual offenders were responsible for their actions.

During the mid 1800's, the focus shifted from punishment to treating or changing offenders. The idea was based on when people commit crimes, society should work to change the people so that they would not repeat their crimes. In the 19th century, corrections were born out of efforts to identify what directed a person to be a criminal and what could be done to change the causes. "Energies were focussed on the individual and how changes in the individual could bring about a safer society" (Tewksbury, 1997).

Toward the end of the twentieth century, responses to crime emphasised protection of the community and the prevention of crime. Society can be protected by removing

those who threaten its safety or it can work toward preventing crime by trying to change offenders into law-abiding citizens.

Complex factors are involved in responses to crime. Literature cites a number of factors including an increasing fear about crime amongst the general public; crime rates that do not distinguish between numbers of crimes and the proportion of crime for a given population; media access and sensationalism; political grandstanding to gain votes; an increase of general vindictiveness and belief in punitive sanctions in society (Irwin and Austin, 1997; Innes, 1997; Mauer, 1997).

Current ideologies on why people commit crimes and the resulting sentencing trends will have long term consequences that will be difficult to reverse. According to Mauer (1997) and Benekos and Merlo (1997) – the sentencing responses, particularly in America, have resulted in the building of new prisons, which has led to funds being diverted from crime prevention and community based correctional programs.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPRISONMENT

“Imprisonment is, and will continue to be an important part of the system of imposing punishment for offences... Justice requires that serious offences can be matched by a severe punishment” (Law Reform Commission, 1988).

This chapter of the study presents an overview of corrections and, in particular, of imprisonment. The argument considers the correctional system and the conditions of prisons will be observed.

- **The Prison System**

Literature (Quinn, 1999) suggests society has long struggled with how to treat criminals. Criminal offenders were originally punished with little, if any, regard given to correcting behaviour. Physical punishments, often grotesque and extreme, were the norm. It was not until the nineteenth century that the penitentiary system and conventional sentencing were widely used (Tewksbury, 1997).

Severson (1994) claims that “corrections are a boom industry”. There is no dispute that prisons are a popular mode of punishment, housing a high number of offenders.

On June 30, 1995, US prison inmates totalled 1,104,074 (Beck and Gilliard, 1995). As is the case in almost all US prison systems (local, state and federal), population figures are rapidly increasing every year. In the 1900’s, the growth rate for

incarceration was 7% annually and there are no signs that this trend will change (Ditton and Wilson, 1999).

In June 1995, the average daily prisoner population Australia wide was 15,986 – 117.7 per 100,000 population. The average daily prisoner population for South Australia, at the same time, was 123 persons per 100,000 population (ABS, 1996). Findings from the Australian National Prison Population Count on 30 June of each year, show a growth of 4.1 per cent annually over the ten years between 1988 and 1998 (Carcach and Grant, 2000).

The prison has been described as inhuman and detrimental to the prisoner and staff alike (LRC, 1988). However, their existence is considered fundamental to the enforcement of community safety and protection (Biles, 1997). The goals and management of prisons are the product of political processes that reflect society's moral and social concerns. They are also the product of our beliefs about what is fair and efficient social control at a particular time (Maghan, 1997).

Social control is part of the structure of everyday life. It exists informally and formally between individuals, among families, groups, schools and organisations. "There is no human association which lacks social control" (Lyttkens, 1989, p. 12).

Crime control is merely one area of social control. Families, peers and communities exert a more significant impact on individual behaviour than could any criminal justice agency or policy. The criminal justice system is the last resort for social control. It is designed to be used only after all other control mechanisms have failed (Lyttkens, 1989).

Horwitz (1990) outlines the styles of social control commonly used to deal with behaviour considered deviant: compensatory, conciliatory, penal and therapeutic.

Compensatory – often used in the past, has currently gained new interest in New Zealand and some states of Australia. It relates to harm rather than guilt and is concerned with who will provide compensation and how harm can be redressed.

Conciliatory – this style is more likely to occur among equals or where close social ties exist. It involves a mediation process.

Penal – the objective is to punish offenders. Its emphasis is on guilt and on the intention and capacity of the offender. When the informal sanctions of family, church or community have failed, formal state methods take over.

Therapeutic – a more recent concept that utilises therapy to control, change and return deviant behaviour to acceptable behaviour.

All four styles are currently in use in the Australian Criminal Justice system. The popularity of a particular style depends on the current dominant ideologies and economical and political factors.

Imprisonment continues to be a popular method of social control. Prisons provide repressive sanction to punish offenders and retribute sanctions in the form of rehabilitation programs.

Imprisonment is supposed to deter people from committing crimes. It satisfies demands for justice but may be a costly mode of punishment. To be efficient, prisons must offer offenders rehabilitation programs, which promote the development of skills required to live a productive life.

Literature (Morrison, 1995; Mauer, 1997 and Quinn, 1999) indicates that more prisons and harsher punishments do not prevent crime, lower recidivism, reduce fear of crime or offer restitution to the victims of crime. The problem of crime and the administration of justice are not just a matter of enforcing laws but also one of providing programs and services that meet common human needs, address human behaviour problems and improve social and economic conditions.

Undoubtedly, there is a growing need for the provision of social services in the criminal justice system.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

This chapter commences with an overview of the social work profession and specifically refers to the role of the prison social worker. This is followed by a brief discussion of purpose and values that guide social work practice.

The nature of the various responses to, and explanations of crime, impacts on organisational structures and processes, on social work practice methods and on the way social workers implement social work theory in the prison context. To address this issue, it is crucial to consider the theoretical basis of social work for greatest clarity and understanding of this study.

- **Social Work as a Profession**

Social work emerged as a profession in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The literature contains many debates regarding whether or not social work can be classified as a profession (Williamson, 1990).

Ernest Greenwood (1957) mentioned that “all professions seem to possess: (1) systematic theory, (2) authority, (3) community sanction, (4) ethical codes, and (5) a culture”, which correlate with the attributes often ascribed to social work in the literature.

The social work profession has often been subject to differing perceptions and interpretations of what social workers actually do. The underlying view regards social work as characterised by the concern for “helping people function as well as they can

within their environments and to changing their environments to make that possible” (Sheafor, Horejsi and Horejsi, 2000).

At times, effective delivery of social work services within the prison system is difficult to achieve due to economic and political constraints, with fewer resources accessible to both the worker and the client. Although institutions and agencies are available that attempt to provide the supports, skills and understanding needed to allow individuals to take charge and become powerful in situations in which they have been powerless, the accessibility of resources is sometimes inappropriate for the client’s particular needs (Johnson, 1995).

The prison social workers’ role with offenders seeks to reflect the values and beliefs of social workers’ professional objectives. That is, to advocate and assist offenders to overcome personal and organisational barriers and return to a positive state of functioning.

- **Social Work Purpose**

“Social work is defined as a social institutional methodology of helping to prevent and resolve their clients social problems to restore and enhance their social functioning. Social work is a social institution, a human services profession and... practice” (Siporin, 1979).

There are many definitions and interpretations of the purpose of the social work profession. The AASW (2000, p. 1) says “the social work profession is committed to the pursuit and maintenance of human well-being”.

A definition by Baer and Federico mentioned in Compton and Galaway (1984, p. 5) is particularly relevant to the practice of social work in the prison setting:

- “To enhance the problem-solving, coping, and developmental capacities of people,
- To promote the effective and humane operations of the systems that provide people with resources and service, and
- To link people with systems that provide them with resources, services and opportunities”.

Other authors offer definitions of social work (Sheafor, Horejsi & Horejsi, 2000; Siporin, 1979 and Wells & Masch, 1986) and, in essence, define the purpose of social work as the focus of the interaction between the individual and their environment. If social workers observe problems with this interaction, it is their role to help people interact more effectively. This can be achieved by assisting clients to address issues in their social functioning and working to prevent social problems from surfacing or, if they already exist, from worsening.

- **Social Work Values**

The foundation of social work practice comprises knowledge, skills and values (Reamer, 1994). O’Hagan (1994) supports this view and adds that a sufficient level of self-awareness is also necessary for effective intervention. It is not enough to have extensive knowledge of skills, values and social work theories. Social workers must also be able to integrate these effectively and competently in their practice, according to the context of the practice and the roles and tasks required of them. Loewenberg (1972) asserts social workers require conviction, skill, understanding and clarity of thought in any intervention situation, describing it as a goal focussed process.

Effective intervention requires social workers to find ways to call on and enact their professional skills in such a way that clients are empowered (Hartman, 1994).

Values are fundamental to social work practice. As postulated by Compton and Galaway (1999), values are an integral base for social work. Values guide and direct

practice. As Day (1997, p. 3) says, “values are affectively charged for emotional mobilisation; that is, values make us want to take action or make us feel emotionally positive or negative about a situation”.

Dealing with values is central to social work practice. Social workers must be concerned with both societal and personal values, with the client’s values and with their own values.

Sheafor, Horejsi and Horejsi (2000. P. 41) define a personal value as “a consistent preference that affects one’s decisions and actions and is based on that person’s deepest beliefs and commitments. Values are our fundamental beliefs about how things ought to be and what is right and worthwhile”.

Social work values focus on the need for social workers to clarify their own personal values. The assumption is that personal values exert considerable influence on their views of their clients, their intervention strategies and their definition of successful and unsuccessful outcomes (Reamer, 1994 and Banks, 1995). This affects what type of change may be possible or achieved and what assistance the client ‘deserves’. For example, a social worker who believes a person chooses his/her offending behaviour may respond differently than a social worker who believes the person behaves as he/she does because of the societal forces surrounding him/her. Other values that need to be considered include those of the organisation, society and profession (Reamer, 1994). Values taken in the context of social work maintain social workers are to be committed to a set of moral and ethical principles contained in the AASW (2000). As people, social workers bring their own beliefs, attitudes and religious, political, moral or ideological principles to their practice (Banks, 1995).

As systems intertwine, their mixture creates a unique hierarchy of competing values and conflicting loyalties (Dubois and Miley, 1999). For example, approaches to resolving some social problems may reflect opposing community and professional priorities and the appropriateness of practice methods prescribed by organisational policy could conflict with the social worker’s professional opinion. Social workers should be conscious of the possible conflicts that can exist between different sets of values and the dilemmas that often arise from these conflicts.

Societal values influence how social work is viewed, personal and social values are defined and solutions are designed. Furthermore, societal views influence individuals, communities, agencies, social workers and the social work profession. In this way, the values of society influence the values of the profession and the profession, in turn, seeks to influence societal values.

Literature suggests social work has, at its roots and within its core, a value base underpinning the profession. Helping people clarify and understand value issues in their lives can be critical to bring about change.

Elements of social work in its purpose and values demonstrate the potential benefits of the profession for oppressive environments such as a prison. The importance of looking at the social work purpose and value system is relevant in order to highlight the extent that prison social workers are able to fulfil professional goals with their clients in the prison system.

Murphy (1997) describes the profession of social work as both a skill and an art. Masters (1994) suggests social workers are more aware of moral and ethical obligations to offenders and to criminal organisations such as the prison.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOCIAL WORK IN THE PRISON SETTING

The content of chapter five comprises a literature review of the issue of social work in prison: the purpose is to explore some key practice issues facing social workers employed in the prison system.

Prison social work is a challenging field that has received little attention from the profession in general or from social workers as individuals. In fact, very little is also being taught in schools of social work related to the fields of corrections and criminal justice system (Ivanoff, Smyth and Finnegan, 1991).

Social work practice in the prison environment is complex and requires an understanding of the criminal justice system in addition to knowledge of all other systems. The prison social worker is confronted with clashing social work and prison philosophies, a restrictive environment and a lack of resources for effective service delivery. However, the prison social worker often struggles to uphold social work values whilst simultaneously meeting organisational requirements. The prison social worker faces the dilemma of performing tasks and roles, which may contradict their own personal values and beliefs.

The presence of social workers in the prison system suggests images of clashing ideals and values. The conflicting relationship between social work as opposed to other types of work carried out in prisons can be attributed to several factors as expressed by Ivanoff and Smyth (1997):

1. A basic conflict between the philosophies of correctional and social work treatment
2. The perceived lack of effective rehabilitative treatment methods useful in corrections and criminal justice
3. The lack of criminal justice and correctional education and experience provided in schools of social work.

Effective social work in the prison setting requires an application of social work values in an unusual setting. Whilst the social work profession is based upon empowerment and growth, the prison system endorses the suppression of behaviours that breach social work norms. Hence, the correctional aspect of the system concentrates on the punishment of offenders and on protecting members of the community from further victimisation. The social worker is working in an environment under constant conflict with strong forces pulling in opposing directions. The very system they are employed under to provide the quality of intervention that will meet the needs of offenders and organisational policies and procedures may interfere with their ability to provide that level of service.

Social workers in the prison system provide two types of services:

1. Supportive services within the institution
2. Connections to resources in the community (Ivanoff, Smyth and Finnegan, 1993).

Within the prison, social workers might be involved with issues such as mental health, substance use, education, vocation and violent behaviour. Social workers may be utilised in the early stages of imprisonment and provide an assessment service, which will assist in the management and placement of offenders and the allocation of resources appropriate to meet their needs. Social workers also provide services in the

areas of “advocacy, brokerage and linkage between incarcerated individuals and their community ties” (Ivanoff, Smyth and Finnegan, 1993, p. 140).

Social workers may work with offenders both on an individual basis or in groups to assist them in making behaviour changes, by participating in offences focussed rehabilitation programs and adapting to prison life by coping with a number of prison issues such as violence, sexual assault, psychological victimisation, homosexuality, protection concerns, racial pressures and substance dependence (Dubois and Miley, 1999).

Working as a social worker in a prison may also require contacting families of offenders as family members deal with the consequences of imprisonment. Social workers can be instrumental with families at particular times of crises by offering positive support, providing concrete information, and planfully anticipating events (Lester, Braswell and Van Voorhis, 1992).

Offenders are incarcerated or confined in a prison setting to restrict their liberty and reform their behaviour. However, individuals placed in the prison setting are particularly at risk of continuing social dysfunction due to their isolation from the mainstream community.

Social work intervention with the imprisoned population demands the capacity to work in an objective and impartial manner. Working behind prison bars presents a dual link. On one hand, the social worker has to work in a negative and restrictive environment. On the other hand, the social worker has to work with clients with serious problems – drug and alcohol dependence, mental illness or mental retardation, sexual issues and violence - who are in the institution against their will (Dubois and Miley, 1999).

Imprisoned people are individuals who often come from low socio-economic and diverse racial backgrounds. Usually, they have a low level of educational and vocational skills – many have not completed high school and a few can barely read or write. There is an unequally high number of offenders from minority groups in prisons such as Aboriginal and Vietnamese in Australia (Carcach and Grant, 2000) and Afro-Americans, South Americans and American-Indians in the United States (Showalter and Hunsinger, 1997). Many come from broken families, while a significant number were emotionally and/or physically abused as children. A great proportion has abused alcohol and/or other drugs. They usually possess low self-

esteem, poor communication, social and problem-solving skills and they often mistrust others. In short, they present many problems and little capacity to deal effectively with them.

Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that people go to prison because they have been sentenced to do so and not out of free will. Offenders are people who have lost one of the most precious things a human being can have – freedom. In many instances, they are very reluctant to disclose information or talk about their most intimate feelings with anyone. It is, therefore, very important to develop a trustworthy working relationship with them.

- **Involuntary Clients**

The start of the intervention process is, usually, determined by where the client is, meaning what the client wants and experiences as most pressing. However, two types of clients need to be taken into consideration. As Compton and Galaway (1999) put it:

1. The voluntary client who comes to the worker of free will with a problem that has been identified, and
2. The person who comes to the worker either because someone in a power position has demanded this or because the worker has been asked to see the client and has initiated the transaction.

The clients of a prison setting do not seek out the services of this organisation and their needs and the objectives of the organisation are not the same.

The literature generally concentrates on two aspects of the involuntary status of clients (Harris and Watkins, 1987):

1. Definition of involuntary client, and
2. Theories on how to overcome the involuntary client's resistance

Some definitions describe involuntary clients as “persons who receive social and psychological services from service agencies, but do not actively seek them” (Ivanoff, Blythe and Tripodi, 1994, p. 4), or “people who are coerced into counseling” (Williams, 1996) and “unwilling clients who include both non-voluntary clients – those who receive services under social duress (e.g. individual, familial, organisational or situational pressure) and mandated clients – those who receive services as a result of a legal directive” (Rooney, 1992).

Other definitions propose there is an element of the involuntary in every helping situation as people would rather not be in that predicament (Borowski, 1989). Some people seek help, others are required to use help. They bring concerns, unmet needs and problems of social functioning. Regardless of the individual’s reasons for seeking social work assistance, one of the major tasks of the social worker is the understanding of the individual as a unique person in a unique situation.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (1999, p. 13), notes that “... In particular, involuntary clients should be made aware of any limitations that apply to their right to refuse services and should be advise how, and in what circumstances, information will be shared with other parties” and “social workers will encourage involuntary clients to participate in decisions about the goals, alternatives and services available to them...”

Most offenders are reluctant to trust social service agencies. Even when they knew they were not coping in the community, they did not ask for help, which might have prevented their imprisonment (Ivanoff, Smyth & Finnegan, 1993). Offenders may not, and usually will not, have given permission for information to be shared with social workers. For example, in cases of sex offences the offender may be very reluctant in providing details of his offending behaviour. Toward the end of the sentence, he will be required to attend a specialised sex offender treatment program, which he might have no desire to participate in but which he is mandated to attend: this may elicit anxiety and perhaps anger.

The social worker can make offenders aware of available services and different types of assistance, and they can motivate and instruct offenders toward achieving a better

way of life by offering support and guidance – if nothing else, they can show offenders what social service agencies can provide for them, if and when given the opportunity.

Often, social work services are marginalised within the prison, for a variety of reasons. The prisons have made some attempts to use social workers and social work skills constructively, but pressure of numbers has restricted the scope for intervention (Williams, 1996). Prisons have been forced to concentrate upon housing offenders and maintaining security as best as possible.

- **Security**

Security is crucial in the prison environment. This is a reality that social workers employed within a prison setting must learn to accept.

There are few areas of social work practice where social workers are required to observe strict security regulations as in the prison setting. As proposed by Schowalter and Hunsinger (1997, p. 362) “one of the requirements of any employee in a prison is to be an extension of the security force. In whatever capacity they have, caution and good sense is necessary for the reasonable functioning overall of the institution”.

Quinn (1999, p. 307) proposes that “prisons are miniature versions of urban society in which a variety of social problems are concentrated in a small area”. Maintaining the prison population involves numerous responsibilities. Prison budgets must cover the provision of all basic necessities and the cost of personnel to provide them: meals and preparation, clothing, laundry, building maintenance, recreation and education programs and medical treatment (in South Australia provided by Health Services).

Security is the central concern of the prison that underlies all other activities. Security regulations are designed to maintain order, discourage escapes, prevent violence and protect both staff and offenders.

Security is the most visible symbol of the traditional prison and is immediately present as one walks through the front gate of a prison: “prison bars”. It gets first consideration over treatment at all times out of necessity. Safety is the first goal of security procedures in the prison. While correctional officers are responsible for protecting the other employees (including social workers), their ability to do so depends heavily on civilian awareness and practice of personal safety and security procedures. Therefore, social workers need to be security aware for their own safety and the appropriate operation of the institution.

The higher the security levels, the greater the number of regulations and the more tightly they are enforced.

Controlling contraband is another way of minimising dangers inside a prison. Quinn (1997, p. 311) defines contraband as “any item that inmates are not explicitly allowed to have in their possession. It includes drugs, weapons, certain types of reading materials, and items that might be used in escapes, thefts or assaults”. It is important for social workers to be informed of what constitutes contraband. What is classified as contraband may vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction or even from prison to prison (depending on the level of security). However, as a general rule, it is advisable to bring in only what is needed, to avoid embarrassment and possible security violations – in South Australian correctional institutions staff, at all levels, are required to utilise clear plastic bags to carry all items in and out of the institution.

One of the requirements of social workers or any employee in a prison is to be an intrinsic part of the security force. As any other member of staff, social workers must ensure that offenders do not misuse programs. If facilitating a special family visit, the social worker must see that a spouse or other family member does not smuggle in contraband items. Above all, the social worker can act as a role model by adhering to prison regulations and demonstrate that abidance can be beneficial.

In a setting such as the prison no one should become complacent and assume that ‘everything will be all right’ or ‘nothing really ever happens’ and should always remain aware that they are working in a potentially dangerous environment. The

security risks and needs should, at all times, be observed with the utmost care and regard to confidentiality.

- **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is an equally important factor that requires careful attention in a prison setting for both clinical and ethical reasons and because it is closely related to security.

As proposed by Ivanoff and Smyth (1997, p. 316) “within prison culture, information is exchanged and used as currency”. A misspoken word, misleading remark or a misunderstanding comment can be taken out of proportion and cause serious harm. However, security concerns also raise questions about making exceptions to confidentiality.

Confidentiality is a client’s right to privacy and confidentiality of information is a basic principle of any client/social worker relationship (Master, 1994).

Offenders have the right to expect that they can say things in confidence to the social worker without being penalised. Ideally, social workers should respect offenders’ privacy and keep all information received in confidence. Nevertheless, under certain circumstances, the security role of the social worker will require that the confidentiality bond be broken.

The AASW (1999, p. 15) code of ethics states: “confidences may be revealed without client’s consent when compelling ethical and legal reasons prevail (i.e.) to fulfil legal or statutory requirements (e.g. child protection)”.

Pitts (1990) states that social workers have a contract with their clients to whom they owe first and unfailing loyalty and therefore, must maintain confidentiality and act in their client’s best interest.

The AASW code of ethics is unclear as to where the line must be drawn to move from protecting the client's interests to safeguarding broader community interests. Reamer (1994) regards a social worker's simultaneous commitments to the client's individual wellbeing and the welfare of society as one of the most persistent tensions in the value base of the profession.

Lowenberg and Dolgoff (1996) suggest there needs to be a correct balance between a client's right to privacy and the right of other people and of society to certain information. Interpretation of the correct balance and the 'right thing to do' will differ depending on people's own value system, level of experience and insight into the possible broader implications stemming from the subsequent form of action.

Some (Wells and Marsch, 1986) suggest that only under compelling circumstances should the clinician reveal the nature of a confidential communication. Incidents of expressed intent to commit suicide or to commit a violent crime are readily accepted by most social workers as sufficient reasons to disclose otherwise confidential information. However, the social worker should, whenever possible advise the offender whenever confidentiality cannot be maintained and thereby, not jeopardise the worker-client relationship. For example, when clients/offenders are potentially suicidal, the role of the social worker is to ensure clients' safety, which may then go against the clients' right to independently make decisions concerning their lives. Confidentiality and privacy may not, occasionally, be met, as there might be a need for a referral to other professionals such as psychologists or psychiatrists.

There are many responsibilities social workers must have towards their clients such as promoting their self-determination, autonomy and respecting their right to a relationship of trust, confidentiality and privacy of their discloses. Social workers also need to use the information disclosed responsibly while at the same time, exercising their right to professional judgement and discretion (AASW, 2000).

Lynch and Mitchell (1997) state general societal standards, benefits and duties that are established by the law should not be replaced by the standards relative to ethical practice outlined in the AASW code of ethics. Although the AASW code of ethics (2000, p. 8) advises social workers to ensure the principles of natural justice are

applied in all areas, it also states “in carrying out their professional practice responsibilities, social workers are entitled to reciprocal rights...”.

Most decisions in social work involve a complex interaction of ethical, political, technical and legal issues, which are all interconnected. When making decisions in situations where ethical dilemmas arise, social workers need to consider a range of factors including the working context, expectations laid down in the code of ethics, legal and civil responsibilities, personal moral codes of conduct and the possible consequences and impact of decisions made (Gaha, 1996).

A social worker’s role is both complex and contradictory. Working in a prison complicates social workers’ positions even more. Contradictions exist between the individualised caring concerns of social workers and the impersonal requirements of the bureaucratic organisation. Rhodes (1986) argues that being a good worker may sometimes mean acting unethically. Bureaucratic decision-making undermines moral responsibility because it is based on role and legal responsibility. She suggests it encourages a split between personal and professional life, therefore freeing social workers from the demands of their personal moralities. Our ethical principles or values will influence how we interpret the law (Banks, 1995).

Masters (1994) noted that situations without clearly defined ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ often present themselves to social workers in criminal justice settings and suggested that social workers should be more aware of moral and ethical obligations to offenders and to criminal justice organisations. All social workers must therefore develop the ability of handling challenging situations and sensitive information in a confidential manner.

The degree of confidentiality that can be provided will therefore depend on the type of information, the nature of the organisation, the policy and procedures of the organisation and other legal requirements such as mandatory reporting of child abuse. In prison, however, offenders can expect little confidentiality (Sheafor, Horejsi and Horejsi, 2000).

There is no easy solution to the issue of managing the limits of an offender's right to confidentiality. In essence, it is a matter of ethical judgment and flexibility. According to Jansson and Simmons (1986, p. 342) "the ethical challenge to social workers is to distinguish between the legitimate needs and objectives of the host... and those that are inimical to the needs of patients". It is the role of the social worker to decide if the importance of trust in the worker-client relationship outweighs the possibility of harm to someone.

Social workers have traditionally done their best to adjust to the constraints of the environment, while advocating for offenders to reach their full potential (Roberts and Brownell, 1999).

- **Advocacy**

Within a prison setting, offenders are without official power or influence. Consequently, there is a real need for social work intervention, which enables them to obtain services that will help them to cope more effectively with their problems and start to make changes.

A key function of prison social workers is that of advocate.

Webster's dictionary defines an advocate as "one that defends or espouses a cause or proposal; one that pleads the cause of another; an intercessor". Advocacy is one of the five social work roles described in Compton and Galaway (1999, p. 407) "in advocacy the effort is to win for the client; advocacy efforts are frequently direct toward securing benefits to which the client is legally entitled. Advocacy, like other roles, can be used with client systems of various sizes".

The AASW (2000, p. 26) describes advocacy as "action for and with an individual or group. The practice of directly representing or defending clients' interests and ensuring that clients' rights or entitlements are maintained. Advocacy includes action to empower clients or community groups; to enable self-determination and/or self-advocacy; to promote access to services, facilities or benefits; to achieve representation in decision-making processes".

Offenders must be assisted in coming to believe that they have the ability to change their position in life. As advocates, social workers act as intermediaries between clients and other systems to protect clients' rights. As postulated by Pincus and Minahan (1973, p. 113) advocates plead causes on behalf of clients to secure "a needed resource or service to obtain a policy change or concession from a resistant, disinterested, or unresponsive system".

The social work skill of advocacy can be essential for helping offenders cope within a prison. In general, social workers are advocates for the powerless people in society. In the prison, advocacy for offenders is a key role – it may provide the offender with some hope for the future.

Without social work intervention, offenders may find themselves in a powerless position in which they are unable to cope. In carrying out the role of advocate, the social worker is speaking on behalf of offenders to mobilise whatever resources are available. To fill an advocacy role, social workers must be comfortable with conflicting situations and knowledgeable about the means for conflict management. They must be willing to negotiate and be sensitive of the need to withdraw if the best interests of offenders are not being served. Usually, offenders must have considerable trust in the social worker before they will be willing for the worker to use advocacy on their behalf.

In the prison system, social workers also advocate for the institution and its staff. A full understanding of the needs of the institution is paramount.

Social workers advocate for the institution by assisting with policy and procedure decision, "helping the institution move in positive and progressive directions, knowing the nuances of the concept of confidentiality, understanding how the clinician can violate security and place the institution in jeopardy, and being willing to treat staff as well as inmates"(Severson, 1994, p.3).

Working with both offenders and the institution requires social workers to 'perform a balancing act' – only then have social workers a place in providing services in the prison system.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

- **Implications for Social Work**

The aim of this study was to explore some of the key issues facing social workers who practice behind prison bars.

In order to consider these issues, it was necessary to examine the prominent role the prison has played in the punishment process. Prisons are regarded as dominated by punitive philosophies (Quinn, 1999). These philosophies not only dictate punishment and retribution of offenders but also control the role and intervention of prison social workers.

The results of the literature review indicated a need for professionals such as social workers in the prison setting (Severson, 1994; Ivanoff & Smyth, 1997; Showalter & Hunsinger, 1997). Social workers have the advantage over most professionals in handling stress and job related pressures and dilemmas.

The literature identified a need for social workers to develop an awareness of how their personal values, values of the profession and societal values impact on themselves, their clients and the organisation (Reamer, 1994). This is particularly important in prison social work as social workers face the problem of resolving the conflict of professional values with the prison system. Social workers, constantly, struggle to uphold both systems (Masters, 1994; Severson, 1994; Ivanoff & Smyth, 1997). What is conducive to one environment may not be useful or viable to the other. Social workers face the dilemma of performing tasks and roles, which may contradict their own personal and professional values.

Working with offenders has been described in the literature as challenging, exciting, stressful, satisfying and as an opportunity to develop a comprehensive view of human nature and behaviour (Harris & Watkins, 1987; Lester, Braswell & Van Voorhis, 1992; Williamson, 1990).

In relation to the statement of this study, the literature indicates that the nature of the 'involuntary' client, security considerations, and confidentiality and advocacy are paramount factors in a prison setting (Harris & Watkins, 1987; Ivanoff, Blythe & Tripodi, 1994; Wells & Marsch, 1986; Ivanoff & Smyth, 1997).

First, most offenders are reluctant to ask for help and trust people. Prison social workers are required to invest more time engaging them in a trustworthy relationship so that they can overcome their 'involuntary' status (Harris & Watkins, 1987).

Second, social workers must be clear that security is crucial. Security is designed to maintain order and to reduce the threat of danger and violence to staff and offenders (Ivanoff & Smyth, 1997; Showalter & Hunsinger, 1997). This is a fact that social workers must accept and realise that security will take priority at all times out of necessity.

Third, social workers must understand confidentiality is a factor that requires special emphasis in the prison (Wells & Marsch, 1986). Social workers need to make a special effort to establish trust and demonstrate that confidentiality is possible. They must ensure the offender-worker relationship is based on trust, openness and honesty. Ideally, confidentiality should be respected. However, on a practical level, it is a matter of ethical judgment and flexibility (Jansson & Simmons, 1986). Social workers must determine if the importance of the trust in the working relationship outweighs the possibility of harm to the offender and the prison. As well, social workers must inform offenders at the outset of the relationship what their responsibilities include to both offenders and the prison.

Finally, social workers must be aware of their role as advocates. As advocates, they work with offenders, who are without official power or influence and viewed very

negatively, regardless of their crimes and for the prison (Quinn, 1999). They must act as intermediaries between offenders and the prison to protect offenders' rights. Social workers must also advocate for the prison, by assisting with policy and procedure decisions, and its staff (Severson, 1994; Showalter & Hunsinger, 1997). Providing advocacy services for both offenders and the prison requires a "balancing act" (Severson, 1994).

In summary, the practice of social work within the prison environment differs from the application in other settings in that the prison system is intrinsically punitive and oppressive (Severson, 1994; Johnson, 1995; Ivanoff & Smyth, 1997).

An intense concentration of clients presenting with a multiplicity of problems and the potential for violence necessitates a stringent security system (Showalter & Hunsinger, 1997). The need to consider safety issues whilst simultaneously providing an optimal social work service could lead to professional dilemmas. Social work purpose and values may be in opposition to the institutional rules and regulations, yet prison social workers must find the balance between equally meeting the needs of both without compromising their professional standards.

Social workers are suited to work in a multi-faceted and complex environment such as a prison as they are equipped to work with all systems through their generic social work training.

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