

Achieving and maintaining prison officer-prisoner relationships: Tasmanian perspectives from a time of culture change.

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John Cianchi

Abstract

Prison officer-prisoner relationships are at the heart of prison life. This thesis seeks to understand what, from the perspective of the prison officer, is an effective officer-prisoner relationship. Secondly it asks how a prison that overtly places the prison officer-prisoner relationship as the central mechanism through which organisational and operational policies are understood and implemented might differ from a more traditional way of managing the prison.

Effective staff-inmate relationships enable staff to maintain a peaceful prison environment in which staff and inmates are able to meet their needs. They are characterised by mutual respect, trust, humanity, good communication and a clear understanding of the correctional officer role. Effective relationships are important because they contribute to a safe prison environment and greater inmate compliance. They are also necessary before officers can work with inmates to address their problems and reasons why they are in prison.

The basis for effective relationships seems to lie in the prison officers' attitudes and beliefs about inmates. The prison officers interviewed in this study view the inmates as autonomous human beings who have individual differences and who are entitled to humane treatment. They hold values about relationships that include notions such as respect, honesty, empathy, compassion, humanity, fairness and a belief that inmates can change. Importantly the officers are able to balance the security and welfare dimensions of their role.

A prison that places the prison officer-prisoner relationship at the centre of prison management would respond to prisoner misconduct and disorder by first examining the status of prison officer-prisoner relationships and monitoring efforts to improve their effectiveness. It would endeavour to broaden the prison's imaginative circumference to incorporate a rich correctional landscape that extends beyond simply warehousing criminals, to encompass a role that is concerned with the human rights and dignity of the prisoner, a belief in their capacity to grow and a desire to play an active part in this process.

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Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Introduction.....	1
The prison as the site for prison officer-prisoner relationships	3
Achieving a complex task.....	4
Prison Standards	6
Human rights	9
Humanity	11
The prison officer	12
The paramilitary nature of prisons.....	13
The effects of working in prison.....	15
The prisoner.....	15
The Tasmanian context.....	16
Summary.....	19
Dimensions of prison officer-prisoner relationships	21
Prison order and the exercise of power.....	22
Prison officer and organisational discourses about purpose and process	27
Attitudes towards prisoners	30
How consistent are prison officer attitudes?.....	31
Role conflict.....	32
Modes of staff-prisoner interaction	33
Relational dimensions of staff-prisoner relationships	35
Summary.....	36
An investigation into officer-prisoner relationships in Tasmania	38
Introduction.....	38
Research design & approach	38
Results.....	40
The nature of successful prison work	40
The values and attitudes underlying effective relationships	48
What happens in effective relationships	52
When the prison environment is too oppressive or too relaxed.....	57
Too oppressive	58
Too relaxed	59
How other officers might develop more effective relationships with inmates	61
Discussion.....	63
What are effective staff-prisoner relationships?	63
Why are effective relationships important?	63
What distinguishes prison officers who achieve effective relationships (the subjects) from less effective officers?.....	64
How do these findings compare with the literature?.....	65
Conclusion	67
References.....	70