Managing the Dilemma
Occupational Culture and Identity among Prison Officers

av

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Abstract


Within the context of the Swedish prison system, this thesis aims to describe the work of prison officers and explain how the dilemma of rehabilitation and security in prison work influences the forming of occupational culture and identity. Empirical data consists of field notes from prison work, individual and focus groups interviews, and a nation-wide survey of prison officers (n=806) in a three-year research project. Occupational culture and identity are explored by means of the concepts of social/professional representations, emotional labour, and interaction rituals. The occupational development is also discussed in relation to theories about professionalism. As a result of changes in prison policy, the Swedish prison organisation has developed in several ways. After a “personal officer” reform in 1991, most prison officers were formally assigned to rehabilitative tasks like counselling and social planning among a number of prisoners in their wing. In the following years the treatment programs in prisons expanded greatly. After some high profile escapes in 2004, the security measures were strongly increased. These changes have resulted in a growing number of specialised tasks for prison officers to perform in the differentiated prisons and wings of today. The occupational culture of different groups of prison officers are currently diverging. This can be seen in their social/professional representations, as well as in how they perform emotional labour and interaction rituals. This is creating subcultural patterns among prison officers along wing and group lines. Their occupational identities, i.e. how they view themselves as prison officers and the work they perform, are formed around the dilemma of keeping prisoners in safe, secure custody while also providing treatment to rehabilitate them for a life without crime. The emphasis varies along with their varying roles and wing placements. In managing the dilemma, they may feel inadequate to the task, or stick to the formal rules, or successfully manage to balance security and rehabilitation. The crucial emotional labour in prisons – managing inmates’ emotions while controlling one’s own – follows a common low-key style with some variations due to wing and role. In certain situations, this style is challenged and differs more between wings and roles. Prison officers’ levels of experienced strain are primarily associated with their role, i.e. the intensity and closeness of prisoner contact. There are fewer opportunities for recovery for “strained” groups, as time and space to for them be “backstage” during the working days are limited. The occupational development is an example of organisational professionalism, where the employer controls the development of the occupation with goals of efficiency and standardisation. While the specialisation of the work is a technical means to manage the increased dilemma of security and rehabilitation, the occupational culture and identities of prison officers are collective, social, and individual ways to manage it.

Keywords: prison officer, occupational culture, occupational identity, prison work, representations, emotional labour, ritual, professionalism.

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