

Work conditions and health among prison staff

- presentation of ph.d. project



Dorte Raaby Andersen.
Cand.scient.soc, PhD stud.,
Dept. of Occupational Medicine
Herning Hospital

Ph.D. - project

- Purpose: Examine emotional work demands and health among prison officers
- Financed by The Danish Working Environment Research Fund
- Project carried out in the Clinic of Occupational Medicine, Herning Hospital
- Enrolled as a Ph.D. -student at Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University

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Disposition:

- Background of the study
- The Design and method (quantitative part and qualitative part)
- Preliminary findings from each part of the project

Background of the study

- Prisons are often considered dangerous settings partly due to promiscuity and violence, leading to suffering and frustration among inmates and also to challenges for the prison officers.
- Prison officers must be professional and meet all kind of prisoners, no matter how repellent the crimes committed seem to be, and no matter how threatening or violent the inmates might act.
- Furthermore prison officers must manage the permanent dilemma and double task, which comes along with the occupational role: maintaining safe custody while planning active rehabilitation
- They are in frontline and exposed to violence and stressful traumatic events.
- These work conditions can have a significant effect on the well-being of prison officers, who suffer from high sick-absence and have a high turnover-rate.

Research on prison officers and well-being

- Prison officers seem to suffer from high levels of stress (Liebling 2012)
- Prison officers suffer from psychosomatic risk factors such as hypertension (Cheek and Miller, 1983)
- Prison officers have a higher risk of cardiovascular diseases, and elevated secretion of stress hormones (plasma cortisol) (Härenström et al 1988)
- Prison officers experience alienation (Lombardo, 1981; Toch & Klotz, 1982), occupational tedium (Shamir & Drory, 1982) and powerlessness, and are characterized by cynicism, scepticism and pessimism (for a review see Phillips 1987).

Prison officers in Denmark

- High sick-absence and high turnover-rate
- More episodes of threats and violence from inmates. (Increase of 31 % percent from 2011-2013.) (Fængselsforbundet 2014)
- 1/3 of the members of in the union of prison officers have experienced threats and violence in their spare time (Fængselsforbundet 2015).
- Threats and violence between inmates (In closed prisons 3/10 inmates have experienced violence from other inmates (Fængselsforbundet 2015).

Research questions:

Against this background I wanted to examine:

- Why do some officers suffer from burnout (and high sick absence), while others don't?
- What are the associations between work-conditions and health among prison officers in Denmark?
- What are the (emotional) job-demands?, and how do officers manage these demands? Do they use different strategies? How are these demands and strategies socially and culturally constructed?

Emotional demands and health among prison officers in Denmark

Study-design

Quantitative part

Purpose:

Examine associations between work demands and burnout among Danish prison officers

Data:

- Data comes from a follow-up study examining links between work demands and health outcomes. Questionnaires sent in 2010 and 2011. (Charlotte Gadegaard)

Qualitative part

Purpose:

- Examine how prison officers define, experience and manage emotional demands in the job.
- Analyze how different cultural, structural and social processes affect these experiences and managements

Data:

Interviews with prison officers

Fieldnotes from field work conducted in two different wings in a closed Danish prison

Quantitative part: “Burnout among prison officers”

“Associations between individual, occupational and organizational factors and burnout among prison staff.”

Design:

Follow-up study. Questionnaire on work and health sent in 2010 and 2011.

Method and data analysis:

Prison staff (N=4,808) having client-contact in the Danish prison and probation service received an electronic questionnaire in the year 2010 and again in 2011. Questions on work demands, work characteristics and health. In 2010 2843 participants responded to the questionnaire (response rate 59.1 %) in 2011 1741 responded to the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 61.2 % of the baseline population, and 36.2 % of the total population.

Burnout and work demands and work characteristics were measured with scales from the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire, and data analysed by logistic regression.

Quantitative part – preliminary analysis

Results: The risk factors with the highest impact on burnout were quantitative work demands, emotional demands, involvement in - and meaning of work.

Role conflict, role clarity and demands for hiding emotions had a borderline significance. Besides cohabitation, there was no effect to be seen from either individual factors or from occupational (open/closed facility, uniform or no uniform) characteristics.

Conclusion:

Efforts for preventing burnout ought to be concentrated on easing and improving staff-inmate relationships (emotional demands) but also on quantitative work demands

There is a high risk of burnout among both uniformed guards and non-uniformed personnel working in both open and closed facilities.

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The associations and conclusions are not surprising. They confirm the burnout literature.

However...

... we still don't know:

- What are the content of emotional demands?
- How do prison officers experience and manage these demands?
- How are they constructed?
- Why and when are they difficult to manage and why and when are they harmful to the well-being of prison staff?
- **An examination of such questions is necessary if scholars are to offer practical suggestions about how employees of emotionally challenging occupations can deal with the emotional challenges of the job.**

Qualitative part

Purpose:

Examine how prison officers define, experience and manage emotional demands in the job and how different cultural, structural and social processes affect these experiences and managements.

Method

Field work conducted in two different wings in a closed Danish prison
+ Interviews with prison officers

Data

- Thick descriptions of interactions from fieldwork
- Interviews with prison officers.
- My own experiences in the meeting this field

Presentation of the qualitative part of the study

Disposition

- Read up from my field notes (To show you the method, the data, and the field I am examining)
- Preliminary findings on:
 - Visible and invisible characteristics of prison work
 - Social rules on what to feel, how to feel and what to express in different situations
 - Strategies the officers use in managing emotions
 - Social and cultural factors that affect experience and managements

Contribution of the project

- 1) Quantitative examination of associations between work conditions and health outcomes (burnout)
- 2) Qualitative examination of work demands, focus on emotional labor and emotion management
 - How a focus on emotions can qualify the understanding of social life and the relationship between work and health
 - To show how focus on emotions can give a nuanced picture about emotional job-demands in organizations and to raise a discussion on why emotional labor may be difficult.
 - Input to the development of new quantitative scales on emotional work demands