

Book Reviews

Caged Emotions: Adaptation, Control and Solitude in Prison **By Ben Laws**

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Reviewer: Ray Taylor LL.M. is a security policy official at His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, formerly a prison officer at HMP Pentonville.

Studies of emotion in prisons are hard to find. This is somewhat surprising, given the highly emotionally charged environment of a typical prison. As the author says: 'In spite of these explicit descriptions of feeling, academic accounts of imprisonment are prone to expunge rather than foreground emotionality (p4).'

In the Introduction, Laws argues that the problem is not so much absence of emotions in prison writing as the lack of any detailed analysis. That and limiting the scope of consideration of the 'affective dimension' to aggression and violence in men's prisons and to sexual relationships in women's, with little work on other emotions such as anger. There is also a tendency to focus on emotionally charged incidents such as riots, assaults, self-harm and deaths. Thankfully, there is now an increasing interest in the 'emotional geography' of imprisonment.

The book has two parts reflecting the two separate studies the work is based on. The first involves an examination of the experiences of 25 men in HMP Ranby and 25 women in HMP

Send, both 'closed' prisons. In the introduction, Laws states that his work has studied emotions as 'powerful energies in motion that have personal depth... but are shaped by the crucible of (anti) social life in the prisons studied (p6).' He also states that he 'gives much credence to psychoanalytical views of emotions and how these perspectives intersect with the biographical, social and spatial dynamics of imprisonment (p6).'

This approach involves a highly subjective appraisal of the emotional landscape of prison life, reflecting the author's own perspective on what is and is not important when it comes to studying the affective dimension. There is therefore a risk, I would suggest, that the analysis has been shaped by the feelings and thoughts of Laws' selection of what he has considered relevant to this environment, at the expense of objective analysis.

Laws asks how prisoners regulate and express emotions in the closed world of a prison. Further, what are the social and spatial pressures that control, limit and constrain emotional expression in this environment? What role does gender play in the expression and control of emotion? In both studies, these questions were sometimes hard to stare at directly, says Laws, and other questions need to be considered, not least how people's emotions have shaped their lives in the time before being imprisoned. This is the main subject of chapter two, in which 'troubled lives' outside of prison are considered. Laws states that the aim of the book is to shift the emphasis from

emotional masking to emotional suppression, presumably because the latter is more within the scope of the psychoanalytical tradition previously mentioned. Laws quotes examples of horrific childhood experiences and makes reference to much of the prevailing research in these areas, supported by testimony from his research participants.

Chapter three talks about emotions and the self. It provides evidence from research subjects that prisoners will tend not to let their emotions out into the open for fear of scrutiny and, ultimately, what is often a punitive response from staff. Being made subject to the 'ACCT' self-harm reporting system, for instance, is seen by many prisoners as detrimental. Prisoners, says Laws, do not find such systems supportive, rather they are at best report writing for its own sake, at worst, a means of regulating emotion and suppressing it.

Suppression of emotions in prison will typically take place in a male prison in response to pressures from peers and staff alike. For instance, one prisoner was quoted as saying if he came out of his cell crying and getting upset, people would just call him a 'pussy'. For one woman who was interviewed, having to bottle one's emotions up is contrary to what happens outside of prison where she is allowed to cry, to show emotion, without worrying about the consequences. Suppression of emotions for long enough will inevitably lead to episodes of emotional 'explosion' and this too is explored. The narrative continues with consideration of

how prisoners process and distil their emotions, sometimes flexibly and sometimes with rigidity. The chapter concludes on an optimistic note that, although the self-regulation of emotion is typical within prison, relational aspects of imprisonment including family ties, relationships with other prisoners and with staff, will contribute to an understanding of prisoners' emotional worlds.

Chapter four develops the theme of regulation through relationships further and provides a detailed picture of how prisoners support their emotions through the process of interaction with those around them. Most prisoners, says Laws, engage in what he describes as the social exchange of emotions to some degree. The narrative breaks down this process into relationships with friends and family, with staff and with other prisoners. Describing how the process differs between men and women we find that, not surprisingly, female prisoners are 'more fluent' than their male counterparts when it comes to emotions.

Chapter five continues with an exploration of emotions and spaces, and this is to be welcomed in a narrative about emotions in the carefully controlled spaces within a custodial environment.

Part two focuses on segregation and emotions and provides a welcome exploration of isolation and solitary living. It is based on 16 in-depth qualitative interviews with prisoners segregated in HMP Whitemoor, a high-security prison in Cambridgeshire. Laws is particularly concerned with self-segregation and why men might choose to self-isolate, despite the obvious disadvantages and health risks of living in solitary conditions. Laws explores the complexity of motivations and the degree to which isolation affects the emotional state.

In conclusion this work makes a valuable contribution to the study of life in prison and the emotional drivers that make the prison environment what it is. The work might have benefitted from further clarity by explaining how the 'psychoanalytical approach' suggested has assisted with an interpretation of the meaning and context of the emotional experiences encountered and reported on in the study.

That said, it does provide a detailed and highly thoughtful descriptive account of the emotional geography of three prisons, as experienced by 41 men in prison and 25 women and is a powerful reminder not to ignore the emotional context of incarceration. Further work on the 'emotional geography' of prisons would be very welcome as would a specific methodology to help present theoretical interpretations of the emotional dimension of incarceration.

The Prison Psychiatrist's Wife By Sue Johnson

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Reviewer: Tim Newell is a retired prison governor. He was editor of the Prison Service Journal in the 1990s and is currently a member of Quakers in Criminal Justice.

This is a beautifully written account of the experience of working creatively in a top security setting of control. The insider family view of the impact of the tension between creativity and control makes for a compelling read about the events as they rolled out. This is an emotive account by Sue Johnson of what it was like to be committed to the ground-breaking work of her psychiatrist husband, Bob Johnson,

in putting original ideas of creativity, compassion, and challenge in the most demanding of settings in prison.

Bob Johnson was asked in 1991 by John Marriott, the Governor of top security prison Parkhurst, on the Isle of Wight, to work with the most dangerous group of prisoners in the Secure Unit on C Wing. For the preliminary visit, Sue was invited and she and Bob both visited the wing with the Governor. They met staff and some prisoners, one of whom addressed Sue and asked if she would let Bob come to work in the prison. There was a clear felt need for Bob's innovation. Bob agreed to work there after this most unusual preliminary visit.

The whole experience of working on the wing was unusual and exploratory. The personal and professional demands on Bob were considerable and given his style of working required resilience and courage. Bob's approach was to help men consider the roots of their violence through early childhood experiences. Realising that childhood experiences form people's outlook, approach and view of life, Bob sought to work with the challenges of the men's early years. Frozen fear was explored within a relationship of trust and consent. Clearly this was sensitive work and called for a focus that was demanding. To facilitate the work, Bob filmed the sessions so there was a record of developments. He gained the confidence of the men through a consistent presence and his enthusiastic personality. Suppressing anxiety through medication had been the norm on C Wing, but Bob worked with the real experiences and memories of the men. Bob's work in Parkhurst showed that compassion and trust succeed in gaining consent. Working with prisoners who had experienced childhood trauma developed understanding and

increased their sense of control. But there was a quiet scepticism from fellow medical staff in the prison and few officers showed enthusiasm, yet respected Bob's consistency and commitment. Although he had good support from the Governor, Bob's theories and practice were seen as a challenge to political left and right. While the left described poverty (economic and political) as the primary cause of offending, the right proposed criminality to be an inherent human attribute in criminal individuals. The right were unlikely to agree with economic causal explanations or believe in the possibility of transformation.

In the book, Sue Johnson describes how the stresses of prison life were lived through her, reflecting the experience of many prison staff's families in the need to share and to be supportive of stressful, demanding work. This is a rare insight into the stresses on the partner while innovative,

challenging processes were trialled with those categorised as dangerous. Sue had a rewarding position at Manchester Metropolitan University which she enjoyed when Bob was invited to work on C Wing in Parkhurst. Once Bob had started working on the wing he realised, as did Sue, how demanding it was going to be and it became clear he wouldn't be able to do the work without her support. There were very few people in the prison who understood or supported Bob's exploration of prisoners' trauma in early childhood and as such, Sue played a vital supporting role.

Sue decided to retire early from her position. She had enjoyed the work and found it rewarding so was sorry to leave. But the book shows how fully involved she became in her husband's pioneering work with the prisoners and eventually in the legal and political fallout when C Wing closed. The prison in effect had

two people serving the therapeutic work of C Wing. Sue expressed her anger on reflection of observing the mind games being played within the high-risk setting. Bob sought to reassure her, but as explained in a very powerful description in this book, her anger bubbled over.

Bob's work continues to be challenged by the medical establishment despite his years of experience working with significantly dangerous people. Further, the Prison Service does not emerge very well out of the book with resentful officers, and a mixed response from senior staff. Bob Johnson was championed by the Governor, John Marriott, who sadly was removed from his command following the escape of three Cat A men from the prison. For many of the men Bob Johnson worked with, the world has changed in that they understand why they did what they did, and that it need never happen again.