Work, Culture, and Wellbeing Among Prison Governors in England and Wales

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Publisher: Palgrave MacMillan (2024)
Price: £109.99 (hardback) £87.50 (ebook)

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Governors have a particular legal, institutional and cultural status in prisons. They represent the prisons they lead and are often considered to shape and embody the establishment. They are seen as key players in success and failure. Belief in the potential of prison managers is reflected in a recent government White Paper, which set out key policy proposals, acknowledging that:

'Our plans for reform have been built on our trust in Governors to deliver, and on the recognition that they are best placed to drive effective change in their establishments to improve prisoner outcomes'.[1]

This book, written by a multi-disciplinary team at University of Lincoln, draws on interviews with 63 prison managers in the UK. The research is novel, focussing on the wellbeing of prison managers, describing how and why they experience stress and distress, how they cope with the demands of their work and how the culture and institution ameliorate or exacerbate harmful effects. While much management research is instrumental, focussing on how to make managers more effective or efficient, this research is profoundly humanising, seeking to understand the affective experience of people working in prisons.

The participants in the research — managers in prisons who are members of the Prison Governors' Association — talk movingly of some of the harmful effects of their work. Some described compromised physical and mental health, and impacts on relationships with others. Many described a work-life imbalance, tipped in favour of work, which left a feeling that they 'gave most of themselves to work with just a little left for family and friends, and hardly anything for themselves' (p. 59). Some reported a decrease in self-care leading to poor eating habits, poor sleep patterns, and reduced exercise levels. These stark accounts highlight that prisons can be harmful environments not only for those who live there, but also for those who work in them, with the impact spilling over into family life and life outside.[2]

The authors delve deeper into the features of organisational culture that reinforce and exacerbate the harmful effects of prison work. They particularly highlight two factors — masculinity and managerialism. Masculinity has long been recognised as a feature of prison work[3]. The authors here draw upon the concept of 'Masculinity Contest Culture' (MCC), which has four core dimensions: show no weakness; strength and stamina; put work first, and; dog-eat-dog, a kind of hypercompetitiveness. These dimensions drive a culture of overwork, presenting a front of coping, and resistance to accessing support. The masculine culture also has negative effects for women in the workplace, leaving many feeling that they cannot be their authentic selves, must adapt to survive and struggle to balance caring responsibilities.[4] The second factor is managerialism, which describes the increasing use of surveillance through targets, audits and other measures, the promotion of general management approaches rather than distinct prison management, and nurturing a more compliant professional culture.[5] The authors describe how managerialism has driven increasing, unrealistic and unsustainable workloads, a demanding hierarchical structure, and internalised desire to comply.

Much of the findings make bleak reading, if recognisable to anyone who manages prisons. The authors, however, do not simply offer a prophecy of doom, but also excavate some of the ways in which managers are able to survive and indeed thrive in such a difficult environment. These factors include good self-care, access to informal support from line managers, colleagues, and family, and valuing the meaningful opportunities prison work offers such as having a positive impact on the lives of others and serving the community. The authors propose ways in which prisons can move from disenchantment to re-enchantment, such as offering greater professional autonomy, improving resources and shifting the culture through better support. These reforms, they suggest hold out the utopian prospect of

1. Ministry of Justice (2021). Prisons strategy White Paper. HM Government.
2. For an account of 'spillover' experienced by prison officers see: Crawley, E. (2004). Doing Prison Work: The Public & Private Lives of Prison Officers. Willan.
3. For example, see footnote 2: Crawley (2004); and Bennett, J. (2015). The working lives of prison managers: Global change, local cultures and individual agency in the late modern prison. Palgrave Macmillan.
4. See Smith, V. (2021). The experiences of women prison governors. Prison Service Journal, 257, 22-28.
5. See also footnote 3: Bennett (2015), and; Bennett, J. (2024). Managing Prisons: Managerialism, austerity and moral blindness. Palgrave MacMillan

'enchanted workplaces…that allow people to be active agents through the facilitation of autonomy, where people feel they are impacting within their work environment, where they perceive meaning and purpose, and where they can flourish' (p.193).

The book concludes by proposing the Humanisation of Workplace Wellbeing (HoWW) model. This model sets out that the prison working environment is made up of core factors, which can positively or negatively affect wellbeing, including power, culture, and relationships. Individuals are impacted by this culture, albeit they can respond and make sense of this in different ways. This model is the theoretical contribution offered by this book and is one that could inform an evidence-based approach for thinking about organisational wellbeing strategies.

This fascinating book is a significant and novel contribution to the body of knowledge on prison managers. In their choice of subject, methodology and analysis, the authors show a profound concern for the lived experiences of prison managers. The findings will be of great interest to prison managers themselves but also to policy makers thinking about prison staff, leadership and culture.