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The Correctional Officer-Inmate Relationship:  
*Evaluating Job Functionality to Enhance Rehabilitation*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The correctional officer plays a valuable role in the functioning of prison society. Officers exist within the prison system to enforce order, as well as complete a myriad of other tasks. Regulating security, guiding prisoner conduct, and ensuring inmates are given proper physical and mental health checks are responsibilities that fall onto the correctional officer. Prisons with officers who perform these tasks function more efficiently and are better suited to rehabilitate the inmate population. Rehabilitation is a key element in prison society, a task correctional officers should be involved with in order to produce inmates that are able to function in society upon release. Unfortunately, increased involvement within the inmate's life can lead to heightened amounts of job stress.

Job stress contributes to low levels of enjoyment in the occupation. With increased levels of stress, various officers become susceptible to voluntary or involuntary turnover. Unfortunately, stress is not the only reason for correctional officer turnover. Some in the correctional officer position view the occupation as a foundation for a higher, better-paid career in the criminal justice system. When an opportunity for advancement appears, correctional officers with minimal attachment to the job are subject to turnover. Correctional officers are thrust into positions of authority without proper training and may lack coping mechanisms for burnout, but are expected to maintain levels of order in prisons by whatever means necessary. These factors, as well as job confusion and stress, contribute to creating a negative relationship

between guards and the inmates they oversee. Changes in job training are vital towards creating empathetic, rehabilitative oriented officers to prevent prison riots as well as positively impact inmate needs for reentering society.

## **BACKGROUND**

The primary risk associated with the correctional officer position is the possibility of a prison riot. The Attica prison riot is the most discussed prison riot in United States history. Order collapsed during the Attica prison riot that occurred in New York in 1971 as a result of improper training of correctional officers. These officers failed to ensure safe conditions, maintain inmate-officer communication, and respect various religious lifestyles of inmates (Tartaro 2012). During the four day riot, prisoners seized an opportunity to overtake the prison and address basic human rights that were being overlooked including a lack of prison jobs, inadequate food, minimal educational programs, and restricted contact with people outside of the prison (Tartaro 2012). If officers had proper job training, and prisoner needs were heard by correctional officers and the institutional administration, the four-day riot would have never occurred.

Human behavior dictates members of a society will experience a call to action or attempt to overthrow an administration when the environment possesses various threats. (Ferdik and Smith 2016). Not only have studies illustrated this fact, but the Attica prison riot is also a critical example of what can occur when inmates feel stripped of their rights. Some frustrations inmates experienced were numerous inadequate prison conditions. Poorly designed work and educational programs, subpar nutrition, failure to hear inmate requests, and the absence of mutual understanding between officers and inmates ultimately contributed to this call to action (Tartaro 2012). To reduce the possibility of a riot, officers should be given proper training on riot prevention, which would consist of eliminating physical and mental threats to inmate well-being.

Correctional officers would ensure inmates receive proper opportunities for enrichment, engaging in work opportunities or extra programs. General human needs would also be respected, such as proper housing, adequate meals, and engaging in healthy conversation.

In prison, a blind obedience is often expected from prisoners, instead of assessing individual needs. Milgram's obedience study can be used to understand officer-inmate behavior. In 1963, psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a controversial study to explain what forces lead humans to obey authority (Ent and Baumeister 2014). To examine this characteristic, Milgram gave research subjects the ability to shock a research confederate, an actor who was actually in on the study. Research subjects were told to give the confederate increasing shocks for failing to produce correct answers on a given task. The shocks were fake, and the confederate simply pretending to be hurt (Ent and Baumeister 2014). Multiple variations of the Milgram experiment exist. Some reveal the extent to which people will obey authority more than others. In those effective studies, participants failed to recognize their own ability to refuse to continue. Although Milgram's work has been labeled as unethical, it shows people will forget their own goals when being instructed by an authority figure. Milgram's study showed that authority figures, such as correctional officers, are often respected and obeyed by subordinate populations, prisoners. It is important to note, however, there are conditions that accompany respect. Inmates will respect the power dynamic in the relationship when officers properly demonstrate a respectful voice in the institutional setting (Ent and Baumeister 2014). When respect is absent, inmates are less likely to comply and low levels of compliance can escalate into prison riots.

Using one's voice instead of coercive contact is crucial to the success of the officer-inmate relationship. Coercive, physical force is a delicate form of power as officers must be careful not to use excessive force. Not only is force harmful to the inmate-officer exchange, but

it can be detrimental to inmate health. One specific case of excessive force describes, “correctional officers using excessive force to restrain a 60-year-old prisoner after refusing to look at his written medical excuse” (Rembert and Henderson 2014:210). It is unknown why the officers chose to act aggressively against the individual, but it is certain the officers betrayed bases of power by acting in such a manner. Without a balance of power and respect, order within institutional settings suffers.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### ***The Correctional Officer’s Role in Prisons; Order, Attitudes, and Risk***

The correctional officer has an indispensable role in the prison system, something commonly unknown amongst the general United States population. Unfortunately enough, even some officers remain unclear about everything this position entails. The main tasks of a correctional officer include regulating prison security, guiding prisoner conduct, and keeping a balanced level of “order,” in the hierarchical relationship between officers and offenders (Ferdik and Smith 2016:498). Creating a protective environment for inmates, redirecting them to proper counseling, and establishing an effective rehabilitative point of view from which accomplishing institutional goals are also the responsibility of the correctional officer (Ferdik, Smith, and Applegate 2014). As time on the job increases, so does an increasingly heavy emotional burden, as officers must maintain proper rehabilitation of the inmate population they oversee. Correctional officers must decide independently whether or not an inmate is in need of counseling services, a task often overlooked due to a myriad of other tasks requiring a correctional officers attention (Ferdik et al. 2014). Failure to direct a mentally ill individual to the proper outlet can have negative repercussions for the inmate or surrounding inmates, including attempted suicide or harm to the affected prisoner themselves or other inmates. The

prisoner is at risk for harm as other inmates might attempt to control the mentally unstable individual by use of force, and at the same time, inmates who try to intervene might become physically abused by the affected individual. Officers struggle to rehabilitate inmates, as they lack the proper training required to perform properly with increasing responsibilities. Expanding rates of incarceration in the United States prison system have added strain to the occupation. Prison populations have grown “more than 200%” over the last 30 years (Misis et al. 2013:1). As a result of this sharp increase, there is also increased demand for correctional officers to patrol an abundant prison population. However, institutions often struggle to fulfill this increased demand for correctional officers. The position itself is not enticing to most people. There are multiple risks and stressors associated with the occupation, which are not compensated for properly. Most would enjoy working at higher levels within the administration and use this position to advance throughout the organization.

For correctional officers working inside institutions of incarceration, maintaining order is crucial. Without properly maintaining order, prisoners are not kept to specific time schedules that each individual prison demands. A lack of order leads to chaos where correctional officers have no power and inmates are not restricted to what they can do at a given time. Correctional officers are required to maintain harmony by keeping inmates on a regulated schedule and enforcing rules established by the institution. In order to create the healthiest prison system, officers should use their voice to lead inmates and gain respect and mutual understanding from them. Effective displays of order require properly using available power.

French and Raven’s theory of power identifies five applicable power bases. Each base of power can be directly applied to how officers must gain power and respect from the inmate population. “In prison, order can be achieved through...coercive (e.g., physical force), reward

(formal and informal benefits), expert (skills), legitimate (respect for the officer's position), and referent (respect for the officer himself or herself)" (Gordon and Stichman 2016:1592). As one of the five bases of power in French and Raven's theory of power, referent power plays a considerable role in institutional settings (Gordon and Stichman 2016). Referent power occurs when "prisoners obey an officer because of their respect and admiration for those officers" (Gordon and Stichman 2016:1594). Respecting referent power is a task the inmate must learn from interactions with officers. At the same time, officers should be compelled to act respectfully and with a level head. The key to creating referent power is to establish an understanding exchange in which the needs of inmates and officers are discussed to form a compromise. Officers will be able to maintain power without harming the mental and physical aspects of each prisoner.

The management of a prison population is dependent on correctional guards, but they can only be as successful as the institution determines (Ferdik and Smith 2016). Institutions are responsible for training correctional staff and prioritizing certain tasks to maintain prison order. When training correctional officers, institutions should spend an appropriate amount of time instructing each task to ensure all officers understand how to handle situations experienced within the institution. Training should also encourage and explain how to develop positive interactions between guards and prisoners. In order to create this meaningful relationship, officers must understand how to use phrases that avoid conflict and hold their posture in a way that is not menacing. Social bases of power used by correctional staff rely heavily on word choice and gestures (Ferdik and Smith 2016). The inmate population values positive, respectful interactions with correctional officers, as an agreement is not reached through physical means but instead through a meaningful conversation (Ferdik and Smith). Through meaningful

conversations, rehabilitation can be achieved as prisoners trust officers and will approach them with any mental health or other issues they experience.

Rehabilitative or correctional attitudes are employed by officers within institutions. Most times correctional attitudes, enforcing order and enacting punishment for undesired actions, are encouraged by institutions. Officers should use rehabilitative attitudes towards prisoners that encourage individuals to become the best they can and leave the prison in a better state than when they entered. Evidence shows officers who emphasize rehabilitation and interact kindly with prisoners are more revered than those who do not (Gordon and Stichman 2016). Despite being guided by institutional administration towards harsher interactions, officers should interact kindly with the prison population they survey (Ferdik and Smith 2016). Order through the legitimate and referent bases could be established and successfully utilized. Officers should not only seek respect from inmates, but they should also restrain themselves from issuing severe punishments to insubordinate inmates. When problems between officers and inmates arise, officers should direct inmates to proper counseling channels and attempt mediation to re-establish a positive relationship. The prison administration should stress rehabilitative-oriented attitudes to demonstrate higher levels of respect and eventually compliance.

### ***Correctional Officer Stress and Turnover Rates***

Stressors for correctional staff are numerous and challenging. Officers often choose to put the responsibilities of work first, rather than treating any internal stress they hold (Griffin et al. 2010). Without proper mechanisms for dealing with stress, officers can act against prisoners as a result of their own frustrations. Observing correctional officers has shown the negative effects of occupational stress. "...[it] appears that job stress leads correctional workers to treat others callously and impersonally. This may reflect a lack of willingness to interact with other

people” (Griffin et al. 2010:249). Stress can be detrimental to the inmate-officer relationship as officers may not be willing to help inmates due to personal stress. Contact with inmates who challenge officer authority puts an incredible amount of strain on the officer-inmate exchange. Offenders who are cooperative lead to less emotional burden, while argumentative and pompous inmates add anxiety to job function (Misis et al. 2013). The main function of being a correctional officer is to ensure inmate needs are being met. To properly maintain this function, officers should seek out ways to reduce stressors as well as job burden. Reducing stressors and job burden allows officers to function effectively as coping with individual stress provides techniques to handle inmate stress.

Career stage theory is easily applied to the correctional officer occupation and can explain the impact stressors have on voluntary termination. Career stage theory argues throughout different times in a career, employees experience changing necessities, goals, and ambitions (Cohen, 1991; Super, Zelkowitz, and Thompson, 1981). Griffin, Hogart, and Lambert (2014) used career stage theory to examine its role in correctional work, particularly the work of correctional officers. They write:

Using data from a survey of all state correctional officers in one Southwestern state, this study examined the effects of personal characteristics and workplace factors on turnover intent across four career stages. The four career stages were entry/initiation (less than a year working for the correctional agency), transitional and early career (1 to 4 years), midcareer building (5 to 9 years), and later (10 or more years). In order...to reduce turnover and turnover intent among correctional staff, it is important to know which predictors vary across career stages and to what extent. (Griffin, Hogan, and Lambert 2014:5).

Turnover occurs when employees voluntarily or involuntarily leave the organization for which they work. Examining four different career stages, data from various correctional officers show those who recently gained the position have a low commitment to the job, high levels of stress, and require support from various branches of the institution are more susceptible to turnover than those with more experience in the position (Griffin et al. 2014). Officers within the

earliest career stage, less than a year worked, often report voluntary turnover due to high levels of institutional stress. This form of stress arises when officers are not given the proper tools to eliminate stressors in the prison they survey. As officers spend more time within the institution, there are fewer variables that predict career turnover, but leaving the job even after ten years remains a possibility (Griffin et al. 2014). It is vital that incarcerative institutions ensure officers can cope with levels of stress and burnout associated with the role to reduce turnover rates.

Positive inmate and officer relationships cannot exist when an institution faces high levels of turnover. Unfortunately, due to turnover in the position, there is not often enough time for proper training to occur (Ferdik et al. 2014). Being overcome by a variety of emotionally demanding tasks can create a stressful work environment for correctional officers (Ferdik et al. 2014). Limiting tension is important for reducing burnout and maintaining an effective relationship between officers and inmates. Mental exhaustion from burnout occurs when officers become overwhelmed from work and lack time to cope (Griffin et al. 2010). Passion for the job also plays a role in stress and burnout. People who thoroughly enjoy their occupations are more susceptible to emotional exhaustion and burnout as a greater emphasis is placed on success (Griffin et al. 2010). Burnout is common within the correctional officer occupation and damaging to work success. Correctional officers who have not been presented outlets for relieving feelings of burnout are susceptible to voluntary turnover. Turnover proves challenging to the officer-inmate relationship as guards are often not employed long enough to establish meaningful rapport. Officers should be incentivized by institutions to build healthy relationships and experience first-hand feelings of success when an inmate becomes properly rehabilitated. Officers feelings of anxiety would reduce after observing a direct, meaningful impact, proving the job burden to be worth it.

Astonishing rates of turnover are not only detrimental to the correctional field, but they also damage relationships between inmates and officers. About half of United States correctional administrations in 2004 experienced hardships keeping and finding correctional staff (Sumter 2008). Other studies have also expanded upon officer turnover rates, expressing that 15 to 20 percent of officers leave each year (Blakely and Bumphus 2004; Minor, Wells, Angel, and Matz 2011). When the correctional staff is constantly changing, inmates must learn quickly which officers are trustworthy and which are not. This rate of turnover not only affects the relationship between officers and inmates, but institutions also experience financial deficits.

Every time a correctional officer is hired, a period of training must occur before they can fulfill their position. This training is expensive for institutions to provide, and when an officer leaves shortly after money for training replacement officer decreases (Griffin et al. 2014). Eventually, a cycle of turnover is created as institutions with financial deficits cannot ensure proper training. Officers who are not properly trained lack the ability to properly ensure inmate needs are being met. To decrease turnover and increase the number of positive relationships between inmates and officers, institutional administrations should accept input from officers, respect their work, and maintain their physical safety (Ferdik et al. 2014). Officers selected to fulfill this position should also be people who value correctional officer work (Ferdik et al. 2014). Employing those who show a direct interest in correctional officer work alone should be hired, and then given credit and positive reinforcement when performing the job. Institutions that do so will experience a decreased rate of turnover and an increase in rehabilitation as officers employed for a considerable amount of time can establish healthy relationships with inmates.

## **ARGUMENTS**

### ***Lack of Data Examining the Correctional Officer-Inmate Relationship***

Unfortunately, no data exists that analyzes the correctional officer-inmate relationship. The only studies that can be applied to examining how to create a successful relationship involve correctional officer perceptions. In order to understand the full extent of the relationship, prisoners must be surveyed in the same manner as officers. Information regarding inmate perceptions would benefit this area of research, however ethical guidelines prohibit researchers from obtaining data. A document called the Belmont Report was created in 1976 to prevent unethical research (Morling 2015). The document includes three sections, one of which include a respect for persons. Inmates are specifically identified in this section, as respect for individuals includes allowing participants to leave the study when they desire as well as informing the participant about what the study will include (Morling 2015). This group is often required to follow demands without the ability to voice their own opinion. Prisoners have to be treated with more consideration than other groups when it comes to using them as research subjects, because they may fail to realize their ability to leave the study (Morling 2015). Because inmates require special protection, getting approval for studies using them is incredibly difficult and most do not want to take the risk.

If someone did get ethical approval and wanted to take the risk of working with this population, they would still meet resistance from prison administration. Prisons operate on set schedules, and the time that a study requires disrupts the schedule in place by the administration. In a study performed by Misis, Kim, Cheeseman, Hogan, and Lambert (2013), researchers had to use a smaller sample of correctional officers available at the time. This purposive sample could have been stronger if a larger sample was able to be used. There are also elements of bias as the officers available at the time may not properly demonstrate the feelings of the correctional officer population as a whole. In order to obtain a more representative sample, a study could

exist with people who were released from prison. Data could be obtained by parole officers who are still in contact with a sample of the population of former inmates. Former records held by prisons with current contact numbers could be used in order to create an even more representative sample. Through these means, studies could be developed to understand the inmate perception of the correctional officer-inmate relationship.

### ***Improper Training of Guards***

Prison administrations should emphasize rehabilitative relationships over correctional attitudes. This training would require an extended amount of time to ensure that the training proceeded properly. When guards are improperly trained, problems with prison order occur. Administrations, however, do not often want to spend the proper amount of time training guards as this task can be expensive. Spending the money would be worthwhile however as guards would be better suited to perform correctional officer tasks. The money would also not be an issue if administrations hire officers who are devoted to the correctional officer position. Hiring those who see the career as an entry-level position used to advance throughout the system, are minimally devoted to the job. It is possible that this group seeks advancement because they believe they can accomplish more in a higher position. If the rehabilitative relationship was properly trained and emphasized, this group of people would feel fulfilled.

### ***Increasing Rates of Turnover***

The correctional officer position experiences high rates of turnover. This turnover occurs partly because administrations do not properly acknowledge job stress. Career stage theory is necessary when evaluating the correctional officer position as identifying predictors of stress can help to reduce possible stressors (Griffin et al. 2014). When an individual is new in the position, they are not as capable of handling new stressors. With lower levels of commitment and higher

levels of stress than officers who have been in the position longer, this group is susceptible to high rates of turnover (Griffin et al. 2014). In order to decrease the effect of stressors, officers should be taught during training how to handle stress caused by the occupation. This training would include learning coping mechanisms and proper resources to decrease job stress. Through this type of training, correctional officers would not be as susceptible to turnover as stress levels would decrease significantly.

## **CONCLUSION**

The correctional officer-inmate relationship cannot survive with improper training of guards and high rates of turnover. Constantly replacing guards puts a strain on prison administrations financially, and it is also disruptive to maintaining prison order. In order to prevent increasing rates of turnover and establish a positive officer-inmate relationship, correctional officers should be trained to establish rehabilitative relationships. When officers expect submission from the inmate population, incidents such as the Attica prison riot can occur. These incidents are harmful to the inmate population as often excessive force accompanies correctional attitudes. Not only can correctional attitudes be physically harmful, they are also inefficient. For example, Milgram's obedience experiment demonstrated there is a certain extent to which people obey authority. Inmates are more receptive to obey authority when they are treated in a positive manner that shows the officer wants proper rehabilitation to occur. Milgram's findings should be acknowledged by administrations, who should seek proper rehabilitation through rehabilitative means. Ensuring proper training and taking care of the needs of correctional officers also need to be a focus of interest for prison administrations. Overall, correctional officers are vital to the success of a prison. Without this occupation, the order on which prisons rely would decrease significantly, creating a chaotic criminal justice system.

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