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## Abstract

This article explores emotional labour strategies among Swedish prison officers, and shows how these affect their well-being. Case studies of five Swedish prisons and a national survey of prison officers are used. Analysis indicates that prison officers perform complex forms of emotional labour. Owing to differences in subcultures and informal norms, the strategies officers use in managing their displays of emotion vary between wings and roles. Different strategies may cause different kinds of emotional strain. So-called ‘surface acting’ may lead to cynicism and alienation, whereas ‘deep acting’ may lead to stress and exhaustion. Finally, the lack of opportunities for recovery is discussed.

## Keywords

emotional labour, emotional strain, prison officer, recovery, subcultures

## Introduction

Prison officers (POs) are often described as homogeneous with a common set of tasks to undertake. The ‘double commission’ of late-modern prisons – maintaining safe custody while planning active resettlement – demands both security and rehabilitation. To fulfil this mandate, the PO role has been in transition and prison work has recently become increasingly specialized in Sweden. The division of labour into more specialized prisons, prison wings and tasks has given POs more specialized roles and has led to different patterns of thinking, feeling and acting (Nylander et al., 2008). However, the double task of prison work – security and rehabilitation – is still the foundation for the majority of POs in various prisons and wings. Managing this double task is a permanent dilemma that POs confront in their occupational role.

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Prisons as institutions are emotional work environments. In their everyday work, POs must manage prisoners' varying emotional states, while controlling their own emotional display and concurrently managing their emotional strain (Crawley, 2004a; Tracy, 2005). PO work involves professionally encountering all kinds of prisoners, no matter how resistant they are or how repellent the crimes committed. The current division of PO labour suggests that the emotional management tasks faced at work may not be entirely homogeneous owing to the range of subcultures, representations of 'the other' (regarding both staff in other wings and prisoners) and occupational identities involved (Bruhn et al., 2010).

POs have formal rules of conduct that partly regulate workplace emotional display. The most important rules, however, seem to be informal ones that POs develop with colleagues in their wings and work groups (Crawley, 2004b). Informal rules are primarily learned through in-service training and interaction with colleagues and prisoners in the wings. These rules become key elements of the POs' occupational identities.

This article explores how emotions are managed and displayed by POs in relation to their roles in different wings and prison security levels. What strategies do POs use to manage emotions in relation to the division of labour, the different subcultures and the double task dilemma? In addition, what differences in work-related emotional strain can be identified?

The article is based on data from a three-year research project on POs in Sweden (2007–9) and is organized as follows. The next section briefly describes the Swedish prison system, the data and methods used, and our theoretical framework. We then describe emotional labour differences among POs, using Hochschild's (1983) distinction between 'surface acting' and 'deep acting' as a point of departure. Finally, we discuss differences in emotional strain and recovery in relation to the work organization and different kinds of emotional labour.

## The study framework

### *Prison officers in Sweden*

Approximately 5000 POs (35 percent women) are employed in 57 Swedish prisons of six security categories, ranging from A (high) to F (low). Swedish prison wings are often specialized into regular, treatment and special security wings. The focus in treatment wings is on rehabilitation and in security wings on handling prisoners who threaten others or who are threatened themselves. Through a 1992 reform, most POs became *personal officers* responsible for counselling 4–10 prisoners, helping and motivating them to rehabilitate and be able to live 'normal' lives after 'doing their time'. The 1992 reform emphasized the rehabilitative side of PO work. However, since some dramatic escapes from high-security prisons in 2004, a 'security boom' has increased the number of *security officers*. It is important to stress, though, that some security POs are concurrently personal officers. The role of the personal officer is thus, with some exceptions, intended to be an inherent part of the occupational role of rank-and-file POs. All POs have the same basic training. POs in treatment wings, however, in addition to basic training, often undergo training in managing rehabilitation programmes.

## Data and methods

The methodological approach and research design of the project include both qualitative and quantitative methods (Danermark et al., 2002). The core of this study is intensive and qualitative; we use some quantitative data to complement our qualitative analysis. The qualitative part of the project consists of case studies of five prisons, selected to mirror different prison sizes and security levels. In total, 25 in-depth interviews, 7 focus-group interviews and 120 hours of all-day PO shadowing were conducted.<sup>1</sup> The quantitative part of the study consists of a survey of approximately 20 percent of the PO population ( $n = 1218$ ), randomly selected. The response rate was 66 percent ( $n = 806$ ).<sup>2</sup> The survey questionnaire was developed from the case studies and earlier validated instruments (mainly Liebling et al.'s Measuring Staff Quality of Life questionnaire) adapted to the Swedish context. The survey was tested in several wings of a Swedish category C prison (not sampled) before the final version was completed.

## Emotional labour: Concepts and previous research

The *emotional labour* concept was developed by American sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who states: 'This labour requires one to induce or suppress emotions in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild, 1983: 7). This means that emotional labour concerns managing emotions so that they are in accordance with the organizational display rules. Emotional labour is often divided into two modes: 'surface' and 'deep' acting. Surface acting concerns simulating emotions that the performing individuals do not feel, representing a kind of 'faking it'; the employee is simply acting in accordance with organizational display rules, without displaying genuine inner feelings. When the displayed emotions are inconsistent with inner feelings, the disharmony is called 'emotive dissonance' (Hochschild, 1983). Deep acting is when the individual makes an *emotive effort*, attempting to feel the emotion he/she is expected to display. Deep acting and emotive effort do not give rise to emotive dissonance, because more genuine feelings are displayed (Hochschild, 1983; Kruml and Geddes, 2000). Suppressed feelings, for example compassion, may be evoked, possibly impeding the emotional labour (Crawley, 2004b). Whereas wholehearted deep acting might lead to exhaustion, surface acting is more likely to lead to self-blame, cynicism and detachment (Hochschild, 1983). In fact, studies have found deep acting to be related to job satisfaction and a sense of personal accomplishment (Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Kruml and Geddes, 2000). The consequences of emotional labour may thus be much more complex than Hochschild argued (Wharton, 1999). The relationship between different kinds of emotional labour and emotional strain has not been the focus of any prison studies in Sweden.

One can expect several ways for POs to recover, 'let off steam' or obtain support after exposure to workplace emotional strain. In addition, social exchange with colleagues is crucial in prison work (Tracy, 2005). According to Hochschild, employee emotions were displayed differently 'backstage' (Goffman, 1959) when only colleagues were present. Backstage 'recovery' is important to employee well-being. Other possible arenas in which to 'let off steam' or obtain support are outside work, in the family or among

friends. Emotional labour is also controlled and supervised in organizations in accordance with formal display rules. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service Order (2007) contains formal rules concerning PO interaction with prisoners, calling for 'behaviour that infuses confidence, appearance showing respect/firmness, and avoidance of acts of unfriendliness and small-mindedness' (Swedish Prison and Probation Services, 2007: 31). 'Be personal but not private' is an expression that has official status. POs are expected to act correctly, to be honest and humane and to show respect, but not to become too emotionally involved with prisoners. Naturally, the formal rules affect not only how POs act but also how they think and feel in their daily interaction with prisoners. As noted by Hochschild (1983), employers exercise control over their employees' emotional work, in this case through training, regulation and policy.

In recent studies of POs' emotional labour, several authors have identified a great variety of prisoner emotions, for example, sadness, anger, fear, frustration and resentment (Crawley, 2004b; Sykes, 1958; Tracy, 2005). Researchers have found general emotional labour strategies among POs such as de-personalization and detachment in relations with prisoners (Crawley, 2004b), but also emphasize that respect facilitates the work (Tracy, 2005). Another common strategy entails suppressing 'weak' feelings such as fear or anxiety (Crawley, 2004b).

Studies of emotional labour in prison work usually regard POs as fairly homogeneous. In the current research, we noted differences in thinking, feeling and acting among POs, in attitudes towards their 'double commission' and in their feelings of job satisfaction. These differences obtain mainly in relation to their positions in the division of labour and their belonging to particular subcultural groups. These key factors in work environment and occupational role conditions raise the question of how emotional strain relates to different kinds of emotional labour.

## The emotional labour of prison officers in Sweden

### *The low-key strategy*

*'A good day at work – yes, that is a day of peace in the wing.'* (PO, category C prison)

When asked to describe a good working day, POs often said that such a day is characterized by calmness and lack of conflict on the wing, time to do what is planned and no staff shortages. To create calmness in the wing, even details such as how one behaved when opening prison cells were crucial. In regular wings, we observed that POs used a 'low-key strategy'. They opened the cells at 8 o'clock in the morning by knocking, unlocking and opening the cell door, waking the prisoner by simply saying 'Good morning' and briefly checking that everything seemed well with him/her. In responding to this check, the prisoner might initiate a conversational exchange. If the prisoner did not answer, the officer left quietly for the next door. One officer described his low-key style, used in the morning round:

*'This waking-up routine seems quite uncomplicated, but if you do it the wrong way, going in without knocking, being too loud, etc., you may already provoke unnecessary conflict in the morning.'* (PO, field note)

By acting provocatively, officers may cause trouble for all their colleagues and continuing conflict throughout the day. The low-key strategy, with some minor variations, seemed to be a general approach. When observing officers performing the morning routines, we often found respect and friendliness, very much in line with the formal organizational requirements.

Humour was often used to release tension and create a good and relaxed atmosphere. However, humour was a precision tool to be used cautiously. Several POs said that one must be very careful with whom one joked, what the situation was, and the mood the prisoner was in at the moment:

‘You must not laugh at them, but you may laugh with them. They often say themselves that “Now, I was a bit stupid”, and then it is ok to laugh with them.’ (PO, treatment wing)

Humour was used for many purposes by POs, but was mainly appropriate in calm, relaxed situations, when prisoners were psychologically balanced and the officer–prisoner relationship was ‘stable’. Prisoners tended to accept more jokes from older, more experienced POs than from younger ones. An important factor was the quality of the personal relationship and the depth of the emotional labour deployed.

When comparing different kinds of wings and prison categories, the differences in relation to closeness and distance became obvious. In treatment wings and some low-security prisons, positive relationships and deep emotional behaviour were more apparent. The morning routine was similar to that described above, but it was more common for officers to stay for short chats. Prisoners and officers here were often involved in shared rituals that positively affected their relationships: they had morning meetings, cooked together, engaged in group activities/programmes together, and watched TV together in the evening (this was impossible in regular and security wings in higher-security prisons). The atmosphere in treatment wings and open prisons was more relaxed, with evident mutual respect between officers and prisoners.

In special security wings, staff–prisoner interaction was quite limited and prisoners were constantly monitored and supervised by several officers when outside their cells. The prisoners were allowed to leave their cells, one at a time, for exercise, to walk outdoors or to talk to their personal officer. The prisoners were not only directly supervised but monitored by officers watching TV monitors in an office. Officer–prisoner relationships in these wings were often characterized by distance and detachment. Interactions were not relaxed, but were distanced and instrumental, based on formal rituals and politeness – typical of surface emotional labour. The low-key style was more important here than in regular and treatment wings, and humour was more restricted. The following example illustrates what may be constant inner feelings of insecurity, exemplifying emotional dissonance:

‘We must be very careful in the wing when using humour. You never know what state the prisoner is in and the whole thing might end up going terribly wrong.’ (PO, security wing)

Even if the described low-key strategy for managing emotions was general and much in accordance with formal display rules, this does not mean that it simply manifested

surface acting. In some wings, it was evidence of closer and more natural PO–prisoner relationships, built on fairly relaxed mutual respect and characterized by deep acting by officers.

There were some important differences in levels of emotional strain between POs in these different wings. Feelings of insecurity and fear may be more overtly present in security wings, manifesting themselves in distance: in formal politeness, strict rituals and POs cooperating closely. POs in treatment and many regular wings operated with less distance and were *more* exposed to tensions, which may be more stressful because they aroused a range of the POs' own feelings. Even in 'low-key situations', talk went deeper in treatment and regular wings and more personal life stories were told by prisoners, stories that sometimes affected the POs deeply.

### *Managing prisoners' disappointment and anger*

The prison is the prisoner's home, and prison life offers many reasons for feeling and expressing negative emotions. Some situations are more critical than others. Bringing prisoners decisions on refused applications – a difficult and emotionally demanding task – is one such situation. When applications about attending family funerals, visits, leaves or telephone access were refused, prisoners usually reacted with anger and disappointment. Although most decisions were made by principal officers, the PO in a wing often had to convey the decision to prisoners. The low-key style was crucial, though especially challenging, in this situation:

'When prisoners' applications are refused, they often get very disappointed and the disappointment changes into anger, shouting at us officers. It is crucial to stay calm in those situations, and never shout back. Of course I get angry, very angry, but I really try to stay calm.' (Female PO, regular wing)

This PO tried to present a 'proper', calm state of mind to the prisoner, explaining why the application was refused. The officer displayed an emotion (calmness) that was not felt inside – a suppression of 'real' feelings that represented a case of emotional dissonance.

In treatment wings, reactions of disappointment and anger were less frequent. When they arose, though, they were managed in the same way, but closer personal officer–prisoner relationships made a difference to how such outbursts were perceived:

'If an application is rejected, it is a kind of natural reaction – they get frustrated and shout at us for a moment. I stay calm because I know they need to "let off steam". There is a need to burst out in anger, and then perhaps they come and apologise after a while.' (Female PO, treatment wing)

This officer interpreted the situation quite differently, and was also affected differently, from those in the regular wing described above. This officer's understanding that prisoners must 'let off steam', and therefore she should not become angry herself, arose from the generally closer officer–prisoner relationships in treatment wings. This officer did



not experience emotional dissonance. Her displayed emotions were more in accordance with her inner feelings; she acted calmly, because her understanding let her feel calm in the situation. She felt sorry for prisoners in this situation, and she allowed herself to display that.

To express emotions in interactions with prisoners seemed more common in treatment wings than in regular and special security wings. The following example describes a more genuine, though controlled, expression of feelings:

I: 'Do you try to control your anger in situations in the wing?'

R: 'I think I did so my first time in the treatment wing. Now I am *surer* of my feelings and we [staff] have agreed that it is ok to show our feelings in the wing. But it is my responsibility how I do this – that is, what we *say* to our prisoners – and we, as staff, must think of that as well. So I think it is ok for us to show anger, sadness or whatever, but we must do it in a controlled way. Instead of just shouting, I say to the prisoners, "I get angry when you act like this or talk to me like this". But I think we have the right to tell prisoners how we feel.' (Female PO, treatment wing)

There was an *informal* display rule in the treatment wing that it was acceptable, even important, to display anger or sadness, a rule that was not incompatible with formal display rules: one may feel an emotion and display it, but in a 'controlled way'. This deeper mode of expressing emotions was, though controlled, quite honest with respect to inner feelings and did not therefore cause dissonance.

Officers and prisoners in special security wings did not spend much time together. When they did, other officers always monitored the encounter. In these wings, attitudes towards prisoners were often more negative than in regular and treatment wings. Surface acting was clearly dominant in the special security wings. POs had to appear confident and firm in interactions. To some extent, they had to 'wear a mask' and simulate behaviour and emotions they did not feel. In interviews and observations of security wing officers, some claimed that it was not good for their well-being or job satisfaction to work too long in these wings. They cited colleagues who had asked to move to regular wings because of the strain of always thinking about security risks and measures and because of the risk of becoming blunt and cynical in their relationships with prisoners.

Of course, POs helped each other to uphold functional relationships with prisoners, trying to reduce pressure on each other. We observed a manifestation of this in a regular wing. The officer work group noticed that a female colleague had delivered several negative decisions to several prisoners in a short space of time. Her personal relationships with these prisoners became worse and she developed problems communicating with them. The group decided that for a period she should deliver only approved applications, and two other POs would deliver 'the bad news'. This slowly changed the situation and improved her relations with the prisoners. This group strategy was also used in the special security wings:

'Sometimes the prisoner thinks I'm the best officer in the world because I've solved some problems. Then everybody wants to talk to me . . . Then, I must also take care of more difficult

problems – we sort of balance the good and the bad messages between us.’ (Male PO, security wing)

To deliver negative or ‘bad’ messages to prisoners was emotionally demanding for POs owing to the high risk of outbursts and conflicts. This problem could affect the whole work group, since general conflict could increase, spoiling work days. The strategy of sharing the burden of delivering negative messages was a collective way of solving a workgroup problem.

Sometimes prisoner–officer conflict descended into harassment and more or less overt threats towards staff. All such threats are supposed to be reported to the disciplinary board and could even lead to charges in court. Swedish national labour market statistics indicate that POs are an occupational group that is often subjected to threats, and that many threats are never reported (SNCCP, 2006). POs mentioned several ways of dealing with harassment or less severe threats. One was to ignore them and another was to ‘downplay’ the situation, treating it with humour instead of seriousness. A third way was to project the threat as ‘intended’ for the prison service in general:

- I: ‘You said you’ve experienced some threatening harassment from prisoners?’  
 R: ‘Yes it happens, but not often. But I’ve “downplayed it”, you could say. This has worked, at least in my case. And I am a person who used to think like this: “It is probably because of my uniform, it is not directed at me personally.”’ (Male PO, regular wing)

Even though harassment and threats sometimes caused insecurity and fear, negotiating was a more common response than reporting. Other studies have found negotiating styles in many wings, despite a tough official stance (Liebling, 2000), and Swedish statistics point in the same direction (SNCCP, 2006). Very strong outbursts of prisoner anger, for example in response to refused applications, are meant to be reported. The problem is that this often leads to more refused applications; over time, the climate worsens and conflict arises. Officers with more rehabilitative tasks – officers in treatment wings and often personal officers as well – might have much to lose by reporting the prisoner, since good relations with prisoners are their main tool. They therefore try to examine the whole situation strategically and use discretion in resolving matters, thus avoiding escalation.

In the survey, one aspect of harassment was measured by the item ‘Assaults by prisoners on staff are rare in this prison’: 45 percent staff agreed, 19 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, and 36 percent disagreed with this statement. There was a significant correlation, indicating a higher rate of agreement among treatment wing staff ( $\chi^2(4) = 40.9$ , contingency coefficient (CC) = .288,  $p < .001$ ). One assumption is that officers in treatment wings interpret situations differently from POs in other wings. They do not feel insulted in situations of prisoner anger, because they regard the behaviour as ‘a kind of natural reaction – they get frustrated and shout at us for a moment’, as the female officer above commented. Another assumption is that harassment is not as frequent in treatment wings, because the atmosphere and relationships are different there. However, it is also important to recall that there are differences between the prisoners populating different kinds of wings, not least when it comes to rehabilitation

motivation. There is no simple association between type of wing and degree of prisoner motivation: there may be prisoners who are motivated to seek treatment but do not do so for fear of sanctions from other prisoners.

### *Encountering prisoners' sadness and despair*

In their daily work, POs frequently meet sad and depressed prisoners. These feelings are often related to their families and friends, but sometimes more directly to their imprisonment. A female PO in a regular wing in a low-security prison described the first time she encountered a prisoner in a sad emotional state. This was a male prisoner with serious trouble concerning his children at home, and the principal officer had asked her to talk to him:

'The first time I had to manage a prisoner who was really sad – he sat and cried – I thought it was very stressful. It was worse than meeting a very angry prisoner, because I suddenly saw the human being. . . . He could not stop crying. And I had to sit there consoling him, being humane while performing my role of prison officer. It was really difficult and I felt I wanted to cry myself. It was really too much for me.' (Female PO, regular wing)

In endeavouring to console the prisoner, the officer felt strong sympathy and 'wanted to cry' herself. She held back, trying to stay professional, which can be difficult in a situation of deep acting emotional labour in interaction with a sad, depressed prisoner. The emotive effort summoned emotions almost beyond her control. She said it was 'very stressful' and 'really difficult' to suppress her sadness. As described elsewhere (Crawley, 2004b), we also noted that POs are very careful not to lose control over inappropriate emotions. This conflict between the professional role and the more humane, compassionate role in relation to prisoner situations is often present in everyday work:

'Some are in really deep depression. I can imagine their situations, and think, "How the hell is this guy surviving here?" It is tough, but I still must keep my distance. I must not get personally touched by his situation; I must remain in the professional role. But sometimes it is difficult.' (Male PO, regular wing)

This effort to keep some distance is in accordance with formal regulations concerning interactions with prisoners. Getting too involved is not in line with established representations of the professional role in care-giving work ('be personal but not private'). It is also an important defence, a shelter from emotional stress. However, keeping excessive distance, and neutrally suppressing one's feelings, triggers emotive dissonance and in certain situations may not be 'professional' either.

### *Differences and similarities: the institution of personal officer as an integrative force*

So far, we have discerned some important differences between POs' emotional labour based on the existing division of labour between types of wing and different security

categories of prison. However, when looking at this occupational group from an integrative perspective (Martin, 1992), we also see notable similarities, or that dissimilarities are not always as dramatic as expected. Some survey items clearly indicated this. Two items expected to indicate the low-key interactional style were the following:

'I try to disregard my real feelings when dealing with prisoners' (agree: 48 percent; neutral: 21 percent; disagree: 31 percent,  $n = 796$ )

'Being professional in this job means holding back what you feel inside' (agree: 65 percent; neutral: 16 percent; disagree: 19 percent,  $n = 798$ )

There were no significant differences in responses to these items between wings and roles. Officers in special security wings, though, tended to agree more often than did other groups. Another item we used was originally developed by Kruml and Geddes (2000) to measure emotional dissonance:

'The emotions I show prisoners match what I truly feel' (agree: 54 percent; neutral: 25 percent; disagree: 21 percent,  $n = 793$ )

Arguably, these results indicate that emotive dissonance is not generally very high among POs, though there were differences between wings and roles. POs in regular and treatment wings agreed more often with this statement than did those in special security wings (where only 35 percent agreed), and personal officers agreed more often than did security staff ( $\chi^2(4) = 19.5$ ,  $CC = .205$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Checking this item for gender differences indicated that women agreed slightly more than men (not significant).<sup>3</sup>

Collectively, these items indicated the general presence of a low-key style, together with some differences in emotional labour. Staff in treatment and regular wings performed more deep acting and experienced less emotive dissonance. Meanwhile, and contrary to the preceding analysis, one would expect stronger differences between groups. Another item in the survey also indicated an interesting similarity:

'It is important to take an interest in prisoners and their problems' (agree: 85 percent; neutral: 12 percent; disagree: 3 percent,  $n = 798$ )

As expected, there were significant differences here: treatment wing officers agreed the most, security wing officers the least and personal officers more than security staff ( $\chi^2(4) = 16.9$ ,  $CC = .190$ ,  $p < .005$ ). However, the item also revealed a striking similarity in that a large majority of all groups agreed. It is possible that respondents answered in accordance with the prison's formal display rules (the Swedish Prison and Probation Service Order). Still, the results for these four items strongly support our qualitative data: genuine differences exist between different wing cultures and roles, although the situation is complex and there are no black-and-white positions.

According to our analysis, the most important factor promoting similarity in POs' emotional labour is the 1992 personal officer reform. Most POs are personal officers with counselling responsibility for 4–10 prisoners, and even POs in security wings are often personal officers. We hold that this institutional role serves as a wedge upholding

the rehabilitative side of the PO dilemma in some wing cultures (Bruhn et al., 2010). It forces even security staff to develop some closer relationships with prisoners and to foster their rehabilitation. They must provide sit-down counselling, get to know the prisoners' social background, help them in contacts with the authorities, promote treatment programmes, organize visits and plan for the future after release. Officers may be rejected by the prisoner, but they must at least try to build more personal relationships with some of them. Therefore, the institution of the personal officer guarantees that many POs uphold some degree of a rehabilitative approach in their work and occupational identity. Many POs therefore do at least some deep emotional labour. Of course, other measures also support an integrative way of maintaining the double task of POs – for example, management policy, on-the-job training and established prison cultures. On the other hand, some very strong forces currently further emphasize the specialization of PO roles. In addition, not all POs are personal officers. The special security units developed in several places uphold only security measures, and the often high-status security officers serving in them frequently speak disparagingly of treatment wings. Overall, the security versus rehabilitation dilemma exists for most POs, making the effects of surface versus deep acting harder to discern.

## Emotional strain and recovery

### *Differences in emotional labour and emotional strain*

*Emotion-related strains are negative emotions and emotional responses that are produced by stressors, such as anger, frustration, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and depression.*

*Emotional processing serves as a first-response system for interactions with the external environment because it coordinates and activates different physiological, cognitive, and behavioral responses in order to aid adaptation to ongoing changes. Thus, emotional strain may be the most basic form of strain, possibly occurring before and eliciting other forms of strain. Indeed, preliminary evidence suggests that emotional strains cause job-related strains e.g., job dissatisfaction . . . and physiological strains.*

*(Chang et al., 2007: 314)*

Different kinds of emotional strain caused by working conditions are closely connected to health and job satisfaction. According to Hochschild (1983), deep mode emotional labour and surface acting cause different kinds of strain. Broadly speaking, two kinds of strain are connected to her theory: first, there is stress emanating from emotional 'overload' or excessive engagement, often causing exhaustion; second, there is under-stimulated emotional exchange where 'the other' is objectified, which is more likely to cause cynicism and detachment.

POs' emotional labour embodies a diversity only briefly exemplified here. For most POs, their work seems to contain both surface and deep acting, though in varying combinations. As discussed, the personal officer institution seems an important factor encouraging most POs to do some deep acting. Thus personal officers who do more deep acting should experience more emotional stress and exhaustion than other POs, and some items in our survey indicate this. In all the items below, 'role' was the strongest predictor of

emotional stress: personal officers agreed much more with these stress-indicator items than did security officers or night staff:<sup>4</sup>

‘Working in this prison is highly emotionally demanding’ (agree: 50.1 percent; neutral: 21.5 percent; disagree: 28.4 percent,  $n = 799$ )

‘Many of the stressful aspects of this work stay with me when I am at home’ (agree: 35.1 percent; neutral: 9.6 percent; disagree: 55.3 percent,  $n = 801$ )

‘The emotional strain in my job stops me from getting involved with family and relatives in my spare time’ (agree: 33.8 percent; neutral: 16.3 percent; disagree: 50 percent,  $n = 800$ )

The above figures indicate that prison work is found emotionally demanding by half the sample. A smaller proportion, just over a third, had problems relaxing and recovering in their spare time – a serious and alarming indicator of stress.

Pure surface acting logically risks creating distant and reified relationships between actors and an objectified view of ‘the other’ (Hochschild, 1983). Among POs, particularly those specialized in extreme security tasks, work increasingly comprises technicalities and strict formal rituals. This, together with permanent feelings of insecurity and fear, combined with a blunt and cynical view of prisoners and a low-key style, is a recipe for emotional dissonance and alienation. In contrast, pure deep acting should be a typical stress mechanism: it rests on subject–subject relationships and emotional engagement that could lead to ‘overload’ – taking too many ‘client’ problems on one’s shoulders – and constant feelings of not helping enough.

As mentioned, pure surface acting is not very common in Swedish prisons today. However, we hold that cynical views and reification tendencies are present in some subcultures, especially in special security units. Stress in various forms is evident in all the studied cases and in the survey results. Of course, there are different kinds of stressors (heavy workload, role stress, etc.) but, as seen in the items above, we observed many indications of emotional stress. As expected, such emotional stress was most obvious in treatment wing cultures and prisons with lower security levels, where POs were engaged in helping prisoners prepare for life after prison. In work environments with many stressors, it is crucial that there are opportunities for recovery, chances to ‘sit down’, rest and have relaxed interaction with trustworthy others. How do POs recover?

### *Where do they let off steam?*

Here we will briefly consider whether prison facilities allow ‘backstage’ recovery and support for work-related problems when at work. The alternative solution – to take your work-related problems home to your family or friends – will not be extensively discussed here. However, briefly stated, according to our respondents, this possibility is limited owing to secrecy rules and concerns about family and friends who generally are unaware of prison work conditions.

A ‘backstage’ at work is an important arena for talk with colleagues and for other rituals, creating positive emotional energy in the work group. In prisons lacking

backstage facilities, mostly regular and treatment wings, POs had no place in the wing to 'let off steam' or discuss their prisoner relationships with colleagues. In many treatment wings, and in one low-security prison we studied, the prisoners had access to almost all existing facilities in the daytime. Hence, POs in treatment wings and low-security prisons – those most exposed to different stressors – were often those who lacked somewhere to talk to colleagues. Fewer security wing officers experienced this absence of backstage space. In the studied special security wings, there was a back office and a staff room – frequently used backstage arenas. In addition, the special security wings were more restricted and had a culture in which prisoners spent less time interacting with POs.

The solution we observed in many regular and treatment wings was to create a 'temporary' backstage in the wing office. When prisoners were not immediately present, interaction between colleagues became more relaxed. However, POs were constantly ready to adopt a professional demeanour if prisoners entered. Although 'letting off steam' had to be somewhat controlled, even a temporary backstage seemed to offer the chance of a crucial breather. In the absence of real backstage facilities, this temporary backstage became a substitute to reduce the harm caused by exhaustion – though it had some limitations. As one PO said:

'We are controlling the prisoners and they certainly feel controlled, but the fact is that we are almost just as controlled by them as they are controlled by us.' (Male PO, regular wing)

In the survey, we measured backstage access with the following item:

'We prison officers have nowhere to talk in private with our colleagues' ( $n = 799$ )

Almost 50 percent of our respondents agreed with this item; differences were evident between wing types: in treatment wings 64 percent staff agreed, in regular wings 45 percent agreed, and in special security wings 38 percent agreed ( $\chi^2(4) = 16.5$ ,  $CC = .188$ ,  $p < .005$ ).

To summarize, there were few possibilities for recovery from emotional work stress for POs. Many officers lacked a real backstage to which prisoners had no access. This lack of possibilities for recovery from strain and emotional work stress might negatively affect POs' well-being, family life and job satisfaction.

## Conclusion

Much prison literature regards PO work as homogeneous, but there is reason to doubt that this is so. Because of the specialization and division of labour, apparently to manage the double security/rehabilitation task, PO work has developed differently in different organizational locations. Although there are common formal rules, the informal rules and rituals in different subcultural locations largely shape how POs think, feel and act. Among other matters, this leads to differences in the emotional labour performed in different prisons, wings and roles. Regarding work-related strain, this means differences in the attendant effects to which different groups of POs are exposed.



In everyday emotional labour, POs use different strategies in encountering prisoners. In analysing these, the concepts of deep and surface emotional acting are useful. Relationships with prisoners are closer and more personal in treatment wings, in low-security prisons and, to some extent, in regular wings. In these wings, the emotional labour deployed more likely represents deep acting, compared with the more distant and controlling surface acting work common in special security wings. Even if many prison officers manage their emotional labour adequately, both deep and surface acting can cause emotional strain, in different ways (Hochschild, 1983). Working in treatment wings or low-security prisons often leads to stress and exhaustion. POs working in special security wings, in contrast, risk developing cynicism, detachment and alienation. This distinction should be a key consideration in future research into POs' emotional strain, job satisfaction and health-related problems. Our study found that, especially among POs at risk of emotional exhaustion, there were limited possibilities for recovery, 'letting off steam', having a breather and talking about problems or incidents at work.

One might expect that the security–rehabilitation dilemma is in practice resolved by the labour division between wings and security levels. However, the institution of personal officer guarantees that things are not that simple. There are certainly officers in most wings who are more concerned with control and distance and other officers who are more concerned with rehabilitation and positive relationships with prisoners. Every PO in every kind of wing, however, must relate to and handle the double task dilemma (Bruhn et al., 2010). Different subcultural patterns in groups and wings affect how this unavoidable dilemma is perceived and managed.

Most POs serve as personal officers for several prisoners, being responsible for helping them, counselling them and planning their rehabilitation. This means interaction that comprises not only control but also personal relationships. Although officers in regular and special security wings exhibit more detached interactions with prisoners than do officers in treatment wings, they must balance the dilemma to 'get the job done'. The personal officer role could be seen as inserting a wedge of personal relationship work into the increasingly dominant control/security role in regular and special security wings. This role, emphasizing the importance of interacting and building closer relationships with prisoners, is perhaps to some extent preventive: it might prevent staff from embracing exclusively distanced and objectifying negative attitudes towards prisoners, and prevent wings from developing destructive, confining and controlling cultures.

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## Notes

1. Field notes and interviews were coded thematically using NVivo 8 software.
2. The quantitative data were analysed in SPSS/PASW.
3. Generally, wing and role produced stronger differences in emotional items than did gender.
4.  $\chi^2(4) = 21.4$ ,  $CC = .187$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\chi^2(4) = 18.4$ ,  $CC = .174$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\chi^2(4) = 30.2$ ,  $CC = .221$ ,  $p < .001$ . Reliability test shows a Cronbach's alpha of .66 for these three items as a 'strain dimension'.



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