

Dynamics of Staff–Prisoner Relationships: A Narrative Literature Review¹

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Staff–prisoner relationships play a critical role in the success of prison systems. This paper aims to examine the dynamics of these relationships and their impact on the prison environment, focusing on the key factors that influence these interactions and their potential outcomes. A total of 65 studies were analysed in this narrative literature review, covering the years 1961 to 2024. The quality of the relationships between staff and prisoners is associated with perceived prison quality of life and its moral and social climate. Positive relationships foster trust, respect, and compliance, reduce defiance and improve rehabilitation outcomes. Factors influencing these relationships include procedural justice, communication styles, shared values, and organisational factors. Procedural justice, or fair and respectful treatment, enhances perceived legitimacy and reduces negative outcomes. Effective communication between staff and prisoners is essential for positive interactions. Shared values and understanding can foster trust and cooperation. Organisational factors such as prison culture, leadership, and policies also influence staff-prisoner dynamics. Positive staff and prisoner relationships are associated with improved prison safety and the overall prison moral and social climate. Addressing problems or challenges related to these factors is essential for building a more humane and effective prison environment.

Keywords: *Staff–Prisoner Relationships, Prison Environment, Prison Life, Procedural Justice, Rehabilitation*

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Introduction

Much of the current literature on prison life pays particular attention to the importance of staff–prisoner relationships within prisons. The moral and social climate of prison is largely shaped by the attitudes and conduct of prison staff (Gonzales et al., 2023; Liebling, 2011), and in today’s prison culture, staff have significant influence over prisoners’ progress and opportunities within the system (Crewe, 2011). Positive staff–prisoner relationships can contribute to a better quality of life for prisoners (Crewe et al., 2015; Ilijić et al., 2024; Liebling, 2004; Milićević, Ilijić, & Pavićević, 2024). Gonzales et al. (2023) noted that staff who positively view incarcerated people were more likely to create a positive prison social climate. Prisoners attribute their improved behaviour and outlook to feeling valued and respected, fostered by positive relationships with staff and rehabilitation–focused regimes (Bennett & Shuker, 2010). Moreover, positive relationships with prison staff can promote post-traumatic growth in prisoners (Hearn et al., 2021) and are essential for effective treatment (Bobić et al., 2022).

Relationships between staff and prisoners are considered crucial to the overall prison environment and experience or “at the heart of the whole prison system” (Home Office, 1984, para. 16, as cited in Liebling, 2011, p. 485). However, it is important to note that interactions with prisoners can be stressful for prison officers, and violent behaviour from prisoners poses a threat to officers’ psychological well-being (Martinez-Iñigo, 2021). Molleman and van der Broek (2014) focused on the relationship between staff work situations, treatment styles, and prisoner perceptions of prison life and explained how a good work situation for staff is a precondition for practising an active, positive and supportive approach towards prisoners.

Exploring the staff–prisoner relationships is valuable, as these relationships are central to the functioning of the prison system, particularly in long-term maximum security establishments (Liebling et al., 1999). Trust is identified as a fundamental quality in the social environment of a prison, and it plays a key role in the daily lives of incarcerated individuals, especially women in open prison environments (Waite, 2022). Moreover, the nature of staff–prisoner relationships can significantly impact rehabilitation outcomes, as seen in the context of sexual offenders (Blagden & Wilson, 2020).

Taking into account the negative consequences of the neoliberal transformation of the prison system (Pavićević et al., 2023), prioritising staff–prisoner relationships is more essential than ever. The focus on economic efficiency at the expense of quality and rehabilitation has highlighted the need for improved interactions between staff and prisoners.

Given the critical role of staff–prisoner relationships in the success of prison systems, as evidenced by extensive research (Beijersbergen et al., 2016; Crewe, 2011; Crewe et al., 2015; Hearn et al., 2021; Khan, 2022; Liebling et al., 1999; Molleman & Van Ginneken, 2015; Waite, 2022), this literature review aims to examine the dynamics of staff–prisoner relationships and their impact on the prison environment, focusing on the key factors that influence these interactions and their potential outcomes. By examining staff–prisoner interactions, we can gain insights into the power structures, social dynamics, and psychological impacts within prisons. This knowledge can inform the development of effective correctional policies and practices that promote positive outcomes for both staff and prisoners.

Methods

A literature search was performed to identify studies on staff–prisoner relationships, their dynamics, and the factors influencing these interactions within correctional settings. Databases searched included Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, which were chosen for their wide selection of multidisciplinary articles, and search results were expanded using the Connected Papers tool. Keywords included terms related to staff–prisoner relationships, prison dynamics, rehabilitation, procedural justice, and prison cultures, such as *staff–prisoner relationships*, *staff–inmate relationships* and *officer–prisoner relationships* combined with *prison life*, *prison quality of life*, *prison environment*, *correctional institutions*, *rehabilitation*, *prisons*, *power dynamics*, *social dynamics*, *prison safety*, *moral or social climate* and *procedural justice*. The date range was not limited.

Eligible studies met the criteria related to focus (studies that examined the dynamics of staff–prisoner relationships and their impact on prison safety, rehabilitation outcomes, the social and moral climate, and the quality of life within prisons), language (articles published in English) and publication type (original, peer-reviewed articles, theses, and dissertations). The search was completed in August 2024.

A total of 65 studies were analysed in the generation of this narrative literature review. The final article selection included systematic reviews, qualitative studies, theoretical works and cross-sectional surveys. The publication dates span from 1961 to 2024.

The study used a qualitative content analysis approach to review and synthesise existing literature on staff–prisoner relationships. This method allowed for a deeper exploration of themes and patterns within the selected studies. The categories for content analysis were identified through an

inductive process, recognising that a single study could contribute to multiple themes.

The results are categorised into seven themes. The first theme includes 15 studies and explores how interactions between staff and prisoners have changed over time, highlighting key factors that shape these relationships and their effects on both parties. Based on eight studies, the second theme examines how fair treatment and perceived legitimacy within the prison system influence prisoner behaviour, trust, and cooperation. The third theme focuses on how various factors, from personal attributes to broader institutional and environmental conditions, including the built environment, affect the quality of staff–prisoner interactions (seven studies). The fourth theme focuses on 13 studies to summarise how staff experiences, such as conflicting roles and burnout, influence their relationships with prisoners and overall job performance. Next, the fifth theme addresses the complexities and potential risks when professional boundaries between staff and prisoners are violated (seven studies). The sixth theme examines how institutional support mechanisms and well-designed programs contribute to positive staff–prisoner dynamics by presenting findings from three studies. Lastly, the seventh theme includes 18 studies and explores how these interactions shape the overall prison environment, including safety, social climate, and the perceived quality of life for both prisoners and staff.

The Evolving Dynamics of Staff–Prisoner Relationships

The nature and dynamics of the relationship between prisoners and prison staff can significantly impact their overall experience while incarcerated. Establishing a humane environment in prison is crucial; effective relationships can enhance security and order, as noted in the historical context of high-security prisons (Liebling, 2022). Positive staff–prisoner interactions can help reduce negative perceptions and adversarial attitudes that often exist within prisons, with trust and respect as essential characteristics of this relationship (Crewe et al., 2015). When relationships deteriorate, it can lead to exploitation of power by either staff or prisoners (Liebling, 2022). The quality of the interaction between prisoners and the staff who supervise them is important for prisoners’ well-being in prison (Ilijić et al., 2024) and adaptation to prison life (Logan et al., 2022). Fair treatment from prison staff can improve relationships with prisoners, reduce social distance within a prison environment (Meško & Hacin, 2019), and contribute to rehabilitation goals (Bennett & Shuker, 2010). The quality of interactions between staff and prisoners significantly contributes to the

well-being and development of prisoners. Specifically, positive interactions between staff and prisoners are strongly associated with personal growth, a sense of autonomy, self-determination, enhanced overall well-being, and reduced distress levels (Ilijić et al., 2024).

The studies generally utilised established theoretical models to analyse staff–prisoner relationship formation, namely importation, deprivation and normative models. The Importation Model, as presented by Irwin and Cressey (1962), suggests that prisoners bring their pre-prison attitudes and behaviours into the prison environment. On the other hand, the Deprivation Theory, first described in 1958 by Sykes and Messinger (Sykes, 2007), argues that the deprivations experienced in prison, such as loss of freedom and autonomy, lead to negative attitudes towards correctional officers. Studies also refer to the normative model because it proposes that prisoners’ attitudes towards correctional officers and their behaviour in prison are influenced by the norms and values of the prison environment (Felix et al., 2023). These theoretical frameworks lay the groundwork for understanding the staff–prisoner relationship and help us explore how pre-prison experiences and individual characteristics, institutional conditions and deprivations and prison culture and social norms shape the relationship between inmates and prison staff in a prison setting.

A broader perspective on relationships between prison staff and prisoners has been presented by Ben-David (1992) who challenged Goffman’s (1961) traditional description of these relationships as fixed and hostile in total institutions. The study suggests that staff–prisoner relationships are not always fixed or hostile, as Goffman described. Instead, they can vary significantly, ranging from punitive to integrative, based on factors like staff perception of inmates in prison, relationship orientation, relationship model, and social distance. Following this line of research, Ben-David and Silfen (1994) explored the differences in perceptions between staff members and prison inmates regarding the ideal qualities of their relationships. In general, staff members valued involvement, support, prisoner autonomy, an anti-authoritarian position, and friendly, informal relationships with low levels of control. On the other hand, prisoners preferred a more authoritarian style of relationship, with clear rules and expectations, leading the authors to conclude that prisoners had relied on a Goffmanian style of relationship, with definite boundaries and a power imbalance as the main characteristics.

Furthermore, staff–prisoner relationships involve a significant power imbalance, with staff holding the power “in reserve” (Sykes, 1958, as cited in Liebling et al., 1999, p. 72). The right balance of respect, fairness, and appropriate use of authority is the main characteristic of this relationship (Crewe et al., 2015; Liebling et al., 2010). Some of the responsibilities of

prison staff include peacekeeping and the use of discretion, which are both crucial for maintaining order and security. In general, peacekeeping involves preventing conflict and maintaining control, while discretion allows officers to make informed decisions within guidelines, using judgment and flexibility to address varying situations and individuals (Liebling et al., 1999).

Surveys such as that conducted by (Crewe et al., 2015) have shown that while private-sector prisons may have made efforts to improve staff–prisoner relationships, challenges related to staff professionalism remain. For instance, prisoners in private prisons are more likely to report positive interactions with staff, including respect, listening, and less judgment, yet some prisoners experience difficulties with staff knowledge and responsiveness. Further, private prisons often emphasise a service-oriented approach rather than solely punishment, whereas high workloads, understaffing and administrative inefficiencies can hinder staff effectiveness and responsiveness in public-sector prisons (Crewe et al., 2015).

The Role of Procedural Justice and Perceived Legitimacy

One of the primary factors affecting staff–prisoner relationships is the concept of procedural justice. Research indicates that when prison staff engage with prisoners in a fair and respectful manner (respectful treatment), it enhances the perceived legitimacy of their authority. This perception is critical, as a lack of fairness in interactions can lead to negative outcomes such as conflict, noncompliance, and increased misconduct among prisoners (Felix et al., 2023; Ryan & Bergin, 2022). For instance, Felix et al. (2023) examined the relationship between prisoners and correctional officers in Taiwanese prisons, focusing on how prisoners form attitudes towards staff. As reported, over 60% of prisoners reported trusting correctional officers, which was influenced by factors such as social support from staff, procedural justice, distributive justice, age, and gender. Ryan and Bergin (2022) explored the relationship between procedural justice, legitimacy, and normative compliance in prison settings. They argued that perceived unfairness can significantly undermine the legitimacy of prison officers, which can affect normative compliance among prisoners in turn, thereby exacerbating tensions within the facility (Ryan & Bergin, 2022). Furthermore, the way staff treat prisoners can influence the social distance that prisoners maintain from them, complicating compliance and cooperation (Felix et al., 2023; Ryan & Bergin, 2022). This is echoed by findings from Steiner and Wooldredge (2018), who assert that prisons where officers

exercise power with fairness experience less prisoner rule-breaking and violence.

Bickers et al. (2019) focused on the fairness and transparency of the processes involved in risk assessments and interactions with offender supervisors and used a semi-structured interview approach to gather prisoners' perceptions. As presented, prisoners reported a very limited degree of procedural justice in their interactions with offender supervisors and that lack of procedural justice negatively impacted their relationships with these staff members and their overall prison experience.

Meško and Hacin (2019) conducted research on social distance between prisoners and prison staff in Slovenian prisons. Results revealed perceptions of procedural justice as the predominant factor influencing social distance. The presence of a violent subculture can have a significant influence on social distance, particularly in larger prisons with more severe regimes. Age, education and perceptions of the legitimacy of prison staff also influence social distance. It is important to note that results also indicated that social distance is not constant nor static and can change over time due to various factors, such as changes in a prison environment and the emergence of new subcultures (Meško & Hacin, 2019).

Additionally, the prevailing prison culture, which may include subcultures among prisoners and staff, can influence behaviour and attitudes on both sides. Hacin and Meško (2018) examined the relationship between prisoners' perceptions of the legitimacy of prison staff and their compliance with prison rules and used qualitative data from 193 Slovenian prisoners. Overall, while most prisoners had positive views of prison staff and reported having relatively good relationships with them, individual experiences and relationships varied. The quality of interactions between prisoners and staff was influenced by factors such as prisoner behaviour, staff attitude, and adherence to rules. While informal relationships and deviations from rules sometimes existed between prisoners and staff, there was a general understanding of boundaries that neither group crossed. However, prisoners expressed negative opinions about specialised workers, perceiving them as incompetent and manipulative (Hacin & Meško, 2018). They found the declining influence of prison subculture in certain contexts on the quality of relations between prison workers and prisoners, suggesting that changes in institutional culture can have far-reaching implications. For example, the presence of a hierarchy among prisoners, with senior prisoners holding more power, can create a challenging environment for staff to manage. Their findings indicate that prison staff may be aware of the hierarchical structure and the power dynamics among prisoners but often tolerate it until it reaches a critical point (Hacin & Meško, 2018).

The legitimacy of prison staff is shaped by their self-perception and their relationships with colleagues, implying that a supportive work environment, characterised by trust, support, and fair treatment from supervisors, fosters a sense of legitimacy that can positively impact interactions with prisoners (Hacin et al., 2019; Liebling, 2004). Thus, the interpersonal dynamics among staff can significantly influence their effectiveness in managing prisoner behaviour.

Understanding the Influence of Individual, Institutional, Organisational and Situational Factors

Gadon et al. (2006) examined the impact of situational factors on institutional violence in prisons and psychiatric settings. The authors systematically reviewed previous research that measured the relationship between physical, verbal, and sexual violence and various situational factors. They found that environmental factors such as overcrowding and inadequate staffing contribute to institutional violence and tensions between staff and prisoners, but methodological issues limit the confidence in these results. Still, these findings indicate that it is important to consider situational factors in addition to individual factors when trying to manage institutional violence (Gadon et al., 2006). Furthermore, when addressing the issue of prisoner violence in correctional institutions, it should be taken into account that prisoner–prisoner and prisoner–staff violence are two distinct phenomena (Patrick, 1998). While prisoner–prisoner violence is related to structural and interpersonal aspects of the prison environment, prisoner–staff violence is related to prisoners’ involvement in social relationships with other prisoners and their perception of correctional staff as a threat (Patrick, 1998).

On the other hand, Logan et al. (2022) explored the factors that influence prisoners’ negative perceptions of correctional officers. They included 1613 recently released offenders and focused on two main areas: prisoner or individual characteristics (demographic, criminal history factors) and institutional characteristics (victimisation, treatment participation, religious participation, social support). Overall, they found that both individual and institutional factors, that is, imported characteristics and deprivation measures, contributed to prisoners’ negative perceptions of correctional officers. More precisely, younger prisoners, minority prisoners, prisoners with higher levels of education, prisoners serving longer prison sentences and those with a prior criminal record tend to have more negative perceptions of correctional staff. Furthermore, prisoners who have experienced direct victimisation, received less social support, or participated in treatment

programs are also more likely to perceive correctional officers as coercive (Logan et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the orientation of correctional officers, in terms of whether they adopt a custodial or human service approach, also significantly influences staff–prisoner relationships. In general, the orientation of correctional officers encompasses their beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding the role of prisons, the treatment of prisoners, and their own responsibilities as correctional officers. Correctional officers with a custodial orientation prioritise security, control, and punishment, whereas those officers with a human service orientation prioritise rehabilitation, support, and treatment. Based on qualitative fieldwork in one men’s and one women’s prison, Tait (2011) argues that personal and institutional factors shape the quality of care that prison officers provide, including length of experience, gender, work environment, and experience of trauma. As Tait (2011) suggests, officers who prioritise care and rehabilitation tend to foster more positive interactions with prisoners, which can reduce the derivational nature of the prison environment. On the other hand, the use of excessive force or threats to enforce rules and maintain order can lead to resistance and defiance from prisoners. This approach can have negative consequences, such as increased tension and conflict and Reduced trust and cooperation (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2018).

The prison environment itself, including its architecture and culture, also impacts staff–prisoner dynamics. In other words, the design and layout of prison buildings can significantly influence staff–prisoner relationships. Studies have shown that prisoners in older units or those with more double cells tend to have less positive perceptions of their interactions with staff (Beijersbergen et al., 2016). For example, prisoners in panopticon layouts (where officers can observe all prisoners from a central location) and those housed in older units and units with more double cells were less positive about their relationships with officers than those in other layouts (Beijersbergen et al., 2016).

The Impact of Role Conflict, Job Satisfaction, and Burnout

Early examples of research into organisational aspect of prison life that can shape staff–prisoner relationships include Hepburn and Albonetti’s (1980) exploration of role conflict among prison staff. Their study found that the conflicting goals of treatment and custody within correctional institutions often result in ambiguous role expectations and role conflict among staff. Role conflict can contribute to negative attitudes, such as cynicism and punitiveness towards prisoners, which, in turn, can be influenced by higher role conflict and

increased job demand (Hepburn & Albonetti, 1980; Poole & Regoli, 1980; Williams, 1983). More importantly, Hepburn and Albonetti (1980) demonstrated that this conflict is more related to the organisational goals of the institution than to the specific roles of the staff. Later, Lambert and Paoline (2008) reinforced the significance of job stress, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment among correctional staff. Their research revealed that job stress inversely affects job satisfaction, while job satisfaction positively correlates with organisational commitment. Building upon this, Lambert et al. (2009) confirmed the importance of creating a positive and supportive work environment for correctional staff. Accordingly, supervisory consideration, job variety in terms of having a varied job with different tasks and responsibilities, and perceptions of training positively affect job satisfaction and organisational commitment among correctional staff (Lambert et al., 2009). On the other hand, officers who perceive their coworkers engaging in boundary violations with prisoners are more likely to tolerate the mistreatment of prisoners, indicating that role conflicts and boundary issues can deepen negative attitudes towards prisoners (Worley et al., 2021). It is interesting to note that while emotional dissonance, perceived organisational fairness, and feedback regarding job performance are also significant organisational issues that affect staff stress levels of correctional staff and their relationships with prisoners, the percentage of time spent in contact with prisoners is negatively correlated with work stress (Tewksbury & Higgins, 2006). In other words, contact with prisoners can actually reduce work stress for correctional staff and the way they perceive and manage these interactions may be important (Tewksbury & Higgins, 2006). At the same time, the quality of relationships with superiors and colleagues significantly affects the level of depersonalisation, a dimension of burnout, among prison staff (Pane, 2016). Poor communication and cooperation within the organisation lead to higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Pane, 2016), which could, in return, negatively impact staff–prisoner interactions. Depersonalised prison staff may be less effective in achieving the goals of rehabilitation and teaching positive behaviour to prisoners (Higgins et al., 2022; Pane, 2016). As has been argued elsewhere, burnout, particularly the depersonalisation dimension, leads to a dehumanised approach towards prisoners, reducing the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts and negatively impacting prisoner–staff relationships. Specifically, studies suggest that burnout of prison staff negatively affects their relationship with prisoners, leading to decreased ability to recognise and intervene in critical situations (Piccoli et al., 2015), increased emotional exhaustion (Boudoukha et al., 2011), and negative consequences for both officers and prisoners (Liu et al., 2022). Recently, Walters (2022)

demonstrated that a lack of support from other staff members is a stronger source of stress for correctional officers than interactions with prisoners or other prisoner-related stressors. The perceived support from prison officials has a particularly strong effect on correctional officer stress.

Relational Ambiguities and Boundary Violations

As previous works have noticed, relational ambiguities and power dynamics within correctional facilities can significantly shape staff–prisoner relationships. Relational ambiguities in staff–prisoner relationships can arise from unclear boundaries, mixed messages, and inconsistencies in how staff treat prisoners. In particular, prison officers often feel their authority is undermined by the rehabilitative aspects of their job (Rowe, 2016). These ambiguities can contribute to confusion, misunderstandings, and strained relationships within the prison environment. Furthermore, the use of “soft power” and neo-paternalism in prisons can hinder the development of closer relationships between prisoners and uniformed staff, affecting the prison’s interior legitimacy (Crewe, 2011). Women’s prisons have distinct characteristics that challenge traditional models of penal order, authority, and legitimacy. In women’s prisons, the relational dynamics are characterised by blurred boundaries, infantilisation, pettiness, inconsistency, and favouritism (Crewe et al., 2023). These characteristics are influenced by the powerlessness and vulnerability of female prisoners, as well as their past experiences of abuse and trauma (Crewe et al., 2023).

Regarding the relationship between staff–prisoner boundary violations and contraband levels, recent evidence suggests that staff involvement in contraband smuggling most usually originates from three key motivations (Peterson & Kim, 2024). Besides financial gains and a lack of oversight and accountability within prisons, a special focus is on inappropriate staff–prisoner relationships. In other words, personal connections between staff and prisoners can create opportunities for boundary violations and facilitate the smuggling of contraband. An earlier examination of professional boundaries by Cooke et al. (2019) reveals that boundary violations between corrections officers and prisoners can arise from complex interpersonal dynamics within prison environments. The study analysed several high-profile cases to identify factors contributing to these violations, such as the power imbalance between prison officers and prisoners and the development of special relationships. As summarized, these relationships could lead to blackmail, contraband introduction, and other illegal activities. Cooke et al. (2019) also highlighted the importance of professionalism and ethical behaviour in correctional settings. They concluded that understanding these

dynamics is crucial for preventing misconduct while fostering healthy interactions that can benefit both officers and prisoners, drawing parallels to the doctor–patient relationship (Cooke et al., 2019).

From the perspective of the prisoners involved in such relationships, the benefits of manipulating staff can outweigh the risks, especially when prisoners feel powerless or exploited within the prison system (Worley et al., 2010). However, prisoners can also have the role of informants in detecting and reporting inappropriate relationships between prisoners and guards (Worley, 2011). As explained, prisoners may be willing to violate the subcultural norm of silence within the prison environment if they believe that other prisoners are behaving inappropriately.

The Role of Staff Support and Program Design

Kendall et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review of qualitative evaluations of community re-entry programs designed to help recently released adult prison inmates with substance use issues or mental health disorders. The authors reviewed 2373 potential papers and included eight in their analysis. They identified key social and structural factors that contribute to the success of these programs. The findings suggest that community re-entry programs should prioritise the development of strong interpersonal skills for caseworkers in prisons, provide access to social support and housing, and ensure continuity of care and better communication between staff and prisoners during reintegration into society (Kendall et al., 2018).

In a recent study by Little et al. (2023), the acceptability of depot buprenorphine treatment among health and prison staff was assessed. Through focus groups with health and correctional staff, the study indicated strong support for this drug treatment option among both groups due to its potential to enhance patient care while improving safety within prison settings. More precisely, key benefits identified include increased patient safety, improved health outcomes, expanded treatment coverage, and more efficient service delivery. Such insights reflect the implication of staff support in implementing new treatment programs (Little et al., 2023).

The study, designed and conducted as a systematic review of the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of prison staff regarding self-harm among adult prisoners, found that staff frequently witnessed self-harm and identified various risk factors and causes (Hewson et al., 2022). Negative perceptions of self-harm as manipulative or attention-seeking were associated with hostility towards prisoners and lower quality of care. Challenges in preventing and managing self-harm included insufficient training, poor staff confidence, and limited resources. This systematic review

involved a substantial sample size (6389 participants from 32 studies) across five countries but noted that most included studies were rated as moderate to poor quality. Overall, findings underscore the need for better training for staff to enhance their understanding of prisoners' mental health issues and improve interpersonal relationships (Hewson et al., 2022).

Understanding the Impact on Prison Climate and Quality of Life

Current evidence suggests that the staff–prisoner relationship has a mediating role between cell sharing and the quality of prison life (Molleman & Van Ginneken, 2015). According to the findings of this study conducted in Dutch prisons, cell sharing is associated with lower perceived prison quality, partially due to its negative impact on staff–prisoner relationships, suggesting that improving staff–prisoner relationships could be one of the strategies to mitigate the negative effects of cell sharing.

Van Ginneken et al. (2020) aimed to understand how different aspects of prison officers' work climate are related to how prisoners perceive the prison climate in the Netherlands. As reported, a higher workload for prison officers was associated with a more negative prison climate as perceived by inmates, while positive relationships and support among prison officers were linked to a more positive prison climate. Overall, the study found that the perceptions of prison officers and prisoners are connected and that investing in a positive work climate for prison officers is important for both staff well-being and the overall prison environment. Conversely, a negative work climate for prison officers (e.g., excessive workload, and lack of support) can contribute to a more negative prison climate for inmates, potentially leading to increased tension, conflict, and decreased prisoner well-being (Van Ginneken et al., 2020).

Staff–prisoner relationships are valued positively by female convicts in Serbian prisons, and these relationships significantly contribute to their overall well-being and positive experiences within the prison environment. Female prisoners prioritise respect, humanity, and support from staff, and perceive these qualities as essential for a positive prison experience. Additionally, they appreciate a fair and consistent approach from prison staff, which contributes to a sense of legitimacy and trust (Batrićević et al., 2023). Preliminary work on the factors influencing the quality of prison life among Serbian prisoners, using the Serbian version of the *Measuring the Quality of Prison Life* (MQPL) survey (Liebling et al., 2012; Međedović et al., 2024; Milićević, Ilijić, & Vujičić, 2024) has shown that staff–prisoner relationships are its most influential predictor. Accordingly,

fostering trust, fairness, and support between staff and prisoners is important for enhancing the quality of prison life (Milićević, Ilijić, & Pavićević, 2024). Prisoners also perceive their circumstances and prison conditions more positively when staff have a supportive orientation towards them (Molleman & Leeuw, 2012).

Recently, considerable evidence has accumulated to show that specific thresholds for MQPL dimensions related to safety and security can be identified (Auty & Liebling, 2024). Prisons with staff–prisoner relationship scores below 3.05, on a scale from 1 to 5, were significantly more likely to experience various forms of violence, including assaults, self-harm, and self-inflicted deaths. In other words, prioritising the quality of prison life, particularly staff–prisoner relationships, is important to create a safer and more secure prison environment.

Research indicates that positive interactions between staff and prisoners can facilitate the rehabilitation process. For instance, Dugdale and Hean (2021) highlight that in Norway, the shift in prison officer roles from mere guards to facilitators of rehabilitation has been instrumental in promoting humane treatment and successful reintegration of prisoners into society. Professional development for prison staff requires careful and ongoing consideration, as inadequate training can undermine both staff effectiveness and prisoner well-being (Dugdale & Hean, 2021). Crewe et al. (2011) noted that the attitudes and behaviours of prison staff affect the quality of life for prisoners and that a supportive staff culture can lead to better outcomes for both parties. Conversely, punitive or rigid institutional philosophies or perspectives often disregard the idea of rehabilitation or treating prisoners and their families with respect, which can exacerbate tensions and hinder the development of constructive relationships (Hart-Johnson & Johnson, 2020). In addition, the psychological impact of staff–prisoner interactions cannot be overlooked. Negative interactions can lead to a cycle of mistrust and hostility, which can further deteriorate the relationship between staff and prisoners (Gredecki & Ireland, 2012; Hart-Johnson & Johnson, 2020).

Moreover, the quality of staff–prisoner relationships is closely linked to prison safety and the overall social climate within correctional facilities. Johnston and Holt (2021) found that representative bureaucracy among prison staff correlates with decreased violence, suggesting that when staff reflect the demographics of the prison population, it can lead to improved relationships and reduced conflict. Similarly, Gonzales et al. (2023) argue that the beliefs of non-uniformed staff about incarcerated individuals significantly influence the prison’s social climate, affecting perceptions of safety and well-being among staff and prisoners. Prisoners generally look

for constructive and positive relationships with staff, which are characterised by support, affirmation, fairness, and respect, and such relationships have been linked to better outcomes in rehabilitation programs, as prisoners are more likely to engage in constructive activities when they feel respected and valued by staff (Bennett & Shuker, 2010; Blagden & Wilson, 2020; Crewe, 2011; Crewe et al., 2011).

Tait (2011) suggests that active listening and responsiveness from prison officers can help reduce feelings of frustration and powerlessness among prisoners. This, in turn, can contribute to a more stable and secure prison environment. Similarly, Ross et al. (2011) noted that high staff involvement in treatment programs contributed to better relationships between staff and prisoners, which in turn fostered a more positive prison climate. Similarly, Nylander et al. (2021) found a positive correlation between high staff involvement in treatment programs and improved staff–prisoner relationships, which ultimately leads to a more positive prison climate and confirms the importance of active participation and engagement from staff in treatment wings.

Limitations

The reviewed studies provide valuable insights into staff–prisoner relationships but are limited by their focus on specific contexts (e.g., high-security facilities, Western countries), over-reliance on quantitative data, and biases from self-reporting. Additionally, the predominance of English-language research leaves a gap in understanding these dynamics in non-Western settings.

However, the present study has some limitations to be considered. The review is limited by its focus on English-language studies and lacks longitudinal data to track evolving staff–prisoner relationships. Remaining challenges include addressing cultural and regional differences in staff–prisoner relationships, overcoming structural inequalities, and enhancing staff training for rehabilitative approaches. Future research should focus on non-English literature, longitudinal studies, qualitative methods, and broader theoretical frameworks to gain deeper insights and develop more inclusive prison reform strategies.

Conclusion

Contradictions arise when considering the influence of interpersonal styles of prison officers on their ability to work with prisoners (Gredecki & Ireland, 2012), and the impact of prison architecture on prisoners’

perceptions of their relationships with officers (Beijersbergen et al., 2016). Additionally, the quality of prison life and staff–prisoner relationships are negatively affected by cell sharing (Molleman & Van Ginneken, 2015). The potential for boundary violations between correctional employees and prisoners further complicates these relationships, with inmate informants playing a role in detecting inappropriate relationships (Cooke et al., 2019; Peterson & Kim, 2024; Worley, 2011; Worley et al., 2010, 2021). The distinction between prisoner–prisoner and prisoner–staff violence also underscores the complexity of these interactions (Patrick, 1998). Lastly, correctional officer stress is more strongly correlated with weak staff support than with prisoner-related stressors, highlighting the importance of staff relationships in the prison context (Walters, 2022).

Overall, there is a growing body of literature that recognises the importance of the dynamics of staff–prisoner relationships for the effective functioning of correctional institutions. By narratively reviewing a total of 65 studies, the paper aimed to synthesise existing knowledge and identify key factors influencing staff–prisoner interactions and their potential outcomes. As presented, these relationships significantly influence the prison environment, impacting factors such as order, legitimacy, and the well-being of staff and prisoners. To summarise, positive staff–prisoner interactions can foster trust, respect, and compliance among prisoners, leading to improved rehabilitation outcomes and reduced defiance. Conversely, negative relationships can contribute to tension, conflict, and decreased prisoner well-being.

The dynamics of staff–prisoner relationships in correctional facilities are complex and closely related to various psychological, situational, and organisational factors. Namely, these relationships are shaped by staff perceptions of prisoners, for instance, regarding self-harm behaviours, as well as institutional factors such as the physical layout of the prison and the prevailing prison culture. To understand these dynamics, the individual characteristics of prisoners, such as age, education, and criminal history, alongside the organisational environment, including role conflicts, job satisfaction, and communication within the institution, must be considered. Ultimately, the quality of staff–prisoner relationships is associated with perceived prison quality and its moral and social climate.

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