

Emotional labour and the culture of care in prison libraries

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Instrumental Values: Professional ethics in collaborative cultural work

- Empirical research conducted as part of Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Leadership Fellowship 2017-19.
- Part of research programme at [Institute of Cultural Capital](#), concerned with the practice and value of cultural work in public policy contexts, including health and social care and criminal justice system(s).
- Designed to explore **professional ethics** in sites of multidisciplinary cultural work, including museums working in health and social care settings and **prison library** services.

Using a [communities of practice](#) research framework, core research questions included:

- The extent of **work assimilation** across professional boundaries;
- Identification of **shared repertoires**, artefacts and symbols of collaborative professional learning;
- The **social construction of embodied professional knowledge** and skills;
- The articulation and representation of **unique professional identities** in creating collaborative 'added value';
- The **reciprocal value of defined codes of ethics** to collaborating professional communities;
- Each set within the context of **public policy agendas and their influence** upon developing cross-sector professional communities.

Research methods and fieldwork

- Ethnographic site visits to reputable case study prison library services in England, including category B HMPS and privately-run men's prisons and closed category women's prison.
- Interviews with prison library staff and volunteers; collaborating services and organisations; regional and national representative bodies – rich qualitative dataset.
- Site visits included active participation in library activities and events, where possible (e.g. reading groups).
- Fieldwork supplemented by participation in extended network events and professional fora, to enable contextual understanding of developments within and across the sector.



Understanding the complex practice of collaboration

- Numerous collaborative actors in the field, including for example:
 - Range of collaborating organisations across public, private and charitable sectors;
 - Substantive role of volunteers;
 - Sub-contracted private services in HMPS prisons.
- Some difficulties managing service priorities, roles and responsibilities both *with* and *as* volunteers.
- Navigation of [professional] codes of practice across numerous different boundaries requires **emotional resources**:
 - Enhanced **trust** in and **dependence** on 'successful' collaborative relationships.
 - Equally, enhanced **disappointment** and **guilt** when collaborative projects fail, in "letting the lads down".



“Trust is the anticipation that something will be forthcoming in return for the efforts that are put into the collaboration – a faith in the partner’s will and ability to help materialize the sought after collaborative advantage.”

([Huxham and Vangen, 2005](#))

Navigating the prison regime

- The most regularly discussed ‘**ethical challenges**’ relate to establishing a valued place for the library in the ‘prison system’.
- Considerable evidence of **work assimilation** to achieve this, including:
 - Mundane practices such as vernacular appropriation of prison life (“prison speak”);
 - More demanding additional professional responsibilities within the prison system (e.g. acting as key-holders and moving groups of prisoners around the estate; identifying and safeguarding prisoners vulnerable to self-harm and suicide as part of ACCT process)
- Those most effective in negotiating their way through prison system remain motivated by belief in library’s capacity to “make a difference”.



Kerry Wilson @KWilson... · 09/06/2017 ▾

Jacqui Harvey: quality integrated services depend on library staff going "above & beyond" standard requirements of role [#ReadinginPrison](#)



Kerry Wilson @KWilson... · 09/06/2017 ▾

[@NickPoole1](#): the core values of literacy and learning should apply to all prison libraries as the "soul of the prison" [#ReadinginPrison](#)



The emotional medium of books and reading

- Professional practices that are unique to library staff include high levels of **emotional labour**:
 - Books and reading (particularly in group settings) used as a medium through which to encourage prisoners to express themselves and potentially explore challenging themes.
 - At the same time, acknowledged that library services act as a short-term distraction to “stop them fighting or self-harming for half an hour”.
- Library staff working to support a continuum of rehabilitative prison objectives with range of deeply situated ethical considerations and **risk management** implications.
- In this context therefore, the situatedness of integrated cultural work is important, linked to enhanced experiences of **emotional labour** in the criminal justice system and the ‘**morality**’ of prison life ([Liebling, 2005](#); [Knight, 2014](#)).

“If prison is the site of masculinity in practice, then ‘what is a man?’ is a question that wants thrashing out in a more productive way than the frequent violent flashpoints on the wings provide. Communication is key here. The literature – our engagement with it, responses to it, responses to each other in relation to it – offers a different model.”

([McNay et al, 2019](#))

Abiding by (individual and collective) professional ethics

- Knowledge of, but **little reference to, codes of ethics/practice** as determined by relevant professional body in day-to-day prison library practice.
- Some **conflict between what are regarded as core professional values and regulations enforced locally** e.g. principles of intellectual freedom and equality of access to information for librarians versus censorship of reading materials in prison.
- Work much more **intuitively informed** by personally held moral values; political ideology and orientation; other professional training and development; faith and religious beliefs; and life-course social and cultural experiences.
- As such, research steered towards a '**virtues-based approach**' to understanding ethics in integrated professional environments, including a focus on shared moral qualities and key virtues amongst practitioners ([Oakley and Cocking, 2001](#); [Banks and Gallagher, 2009](#)).



“Our ethics, skills and knowledge are crucial to establishing and maintaining trust in us as ethical information professionals. The people and organisations that use and rely on our services need to know that they can trust us to behave ethically.”
([Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, 2018](#))

Care in the virtuous community of cultural practice

- Care is an abiding principle of collaborative prison library work, including:
 - Practices of **self-care** in relation to how library staff reconcile (or not) their professional experiences 'through the gate' with family, friends and wellbeing activities;
 - Strategies to **support one another** in the collaborative community of practice, including group 'debrief' meetings/conversations and social activities;
 - Access to **professional support services** (e.g. psychologists and other therapists) if required.
- In a care context, it is worth noting gendered elements of prison library work amongst mostly female research sample:
 - Examples of 'casual' sexism that would be considered contrived and in some cases wholly inappropriate in other professional settings;
 - Enhanced **empathic connections** to women in prison through shared experience (e.g. motherhood; menopause);
 - Heightened consciousness of **risk, safety and moral compromise** when working with vulnerable prisoners that has to be 'controlled' on site.

"...shifting the terms of the debate about gendered morality requires that we look more closely at the boundaries around contemporary moral life to see how they function to preserve the positions of the powerful."

(Tronto, 1994)

Towards a values-based approach to cultural value research

- I am indebted to research participants for their time, generosity, wisdom and care.
- Reflecting now on own **ethical responsibilities in the cultural policy research field**, as a (previously?) unapologetic instrumentalist, with reference to how the (true) value of this important work is narrated.
- More conscious of how **investment, cost and value** is articulated, in relation to the personal investments and commitments made by people delivering cultural projects that may have a high social return on a minimal (financial) cost.
- Needs balance between ‘independent’ academic evaluation research with necessary objective, critical distance and more connected, empirically engaged research to understand the practice-based nuances of cultural work that has real (social) value.

“... ethnographers as social scientists need to recognize that they are workers, and that the concepts and theories that they have applied to other domains of labour apply within the scholarly workforce.”

(Wellin and Fine, 2007)

Next steps for the project...

- Developing an international online training programme* on professional ethics in multidisciplinary cultural work, based on research data, for GLAM (gallery, library, archive and museum) sectors, covering:
 - *Navigating ethical boundaries across sectors;*
 - *Organisational culture and values;*
 - *Emotional labour and the ethics of self-care.*
- Writing up of full findings to be published in 2021 (book).
- Happy to chat more about any of above: k.m.Wilson@ljmu.ac.uk

*subject to funding 😊