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Published online: 29 May 2025.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Restorative practices and relational prison leadership in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The quality of relationships and levels of conflict are both critical elements of prison life, with consequences for people in custody, and for prison staff and leaders alike. This article presents findings from new research in which the Irish Prison Service's senior leadership team received training in restorative practices: a set of principles and skills that aim to help professionals build relationships and address conflicts. We interviewed 22 leaders 3–5 months after their training to examine its self-reported effects on their thinking and practices. Respondents described adopting more relational communication approaches, using the principles and skills they had learned to de-escalate conflicts and to preserve or rebuild relationships with and among people in custody and colleagues. Arguing that a concept of *relational prison leadership* can help us develop and understand the connections between restorative practices, prison leadership practice, and prison social climates, the article makes both theoretical and empirical contributions to the nascent literatures on prison leadership and on restorative practices in prison settings.

1. Introduction

As places of residence and as organisations, prisons and prison services are characterised by the relationships and conflicts that emerge as humans interact. From the people confined to prisons under extreme restrictions on their liberty and agency, to frontline staff and operational and non-operational management alike, the extent to which their exposure to prison harms them depends on how they and those around them communicate and connect, in the intense pressure of the prison environment. A substantial body of research exists regarding the discretionary behaviours of frontline prison officers (Liebling et al., 2011) and the implications for prison social climates (Auty & Liebling, 2020) and 'right relationships' in prisons (Auty & Liebling, 2024). Yet, few have investigated empirically the role of prison leaders in shaping relationships and responding to conflicts; their communication practices, cultural norms, or ways of working with other

leaders, staff, and people in prison; or their (limited) training relating to the leadership function (Bennett, 2016; Coyle, 2009; Dubois, 2018).

In this context, some observers theorise that restorative practices can enable relationship building and conflict resolution in prisons (Butler & Maruna, 2016; Edgar, 2018). Restorative practices are a set of principles and skills that help professionals with 'building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, preventing and resolving conflict, and responding to harm where it occurs' (O'Dwyer, 2021a, p. vii). Whereas restorative justice refers to such processes when they take place within the criminal procedure, restorative practices address relationships and conflict that emerge in the course of public bodies' administrative and operational work, including, but not limited to, in criminal justice organisations (Ciesielska et al., 2025). Prison services in some countries have previously trained subsets of officers and people in custody to utilise restorative practices to address prison conflicts in projects of varying sizes and independently empirically analysed to different extents (Calkin, 2021; Eagleson, 2022; Fair & Jacobson, 2018). Although these projects generally report positive outcomes, none seem to have involved leadership across entire prison services, nor engendered a service-wide implementation of restorative practices.

This article presents findings from a novel project and study in Ireland, whereby the Irish Prison Service (IPS) provided restorative practices training to operational and non-operational senior leaders. Following a strategic commitment to explore the implementation of restorative practices, the IPS developed training for newly recruited officers and for the officers and lecturers who train those recruits (Irish Prison Service, 2019; Marder et al., 2024). It also developed an internal implementation strategy, proposing to train senior leaders in restorative practices. In so doing, the IPS appears to be the first national prison service to organise restorative practices training for all its senior leaders. The IPS engaged the first author to research the senior leaders' training, involving 25 hours of observation and 22 interviews (on which this article draws) with the trainees 3–5 months following the training. The aim of these interviews was to investigate the extent to which the leaders reported that the training influenced their thinking and practices.

The article begins by delineating the research on relationships in the IPS, considering evidence of inconsistent relationships between staff and people in prison and among staff, and especially poor relations between staff and management. Next, literature on prison leadership is used to illustrate leaders' discretion and influence over the lives of staff and people in prison. A brief review of projects using restorative practices in prisons follows, finding optimism about their potential to improve safety, as well as challenges with scale and sustainability.

The next section explains the project's methods, dataset, and analysis, before the findings explore the training's reported effects on participants' thinking and practices. Conscious of the limits to what we can glean from such self-report data, we present an appreciative analysis of interviewees' explanations of practices that they portrayed as new, effective, and connected to their training. Many interviewees provided detailed descriptions of how they used restorative practices to positive effect and asserted that the training helped them reflect on the role of their communication practices in shaping their relationships with others. These respondents depicted restorative practices as methods for communicating and making decisions differently and for de-escalating conflict in ways that preserved or rebuilt relationships, applying this to disciplinary

hearings for people in custody, staff-on-staff conflict, and dialogue and problem-solving among leaders. This article focuses on these aspects of the data to contend that restorative practices could inform a new concept of *relational prison leadership*, in which prison leaders consistently and intentionally act to build, maintain, and repair relationships, with and between all those whose quality of life they shape in the course of their work.

2. Relationships and conflicts in Irish prisons

In Ireland, 12 adult prisons held 4,612 people in September 2023 (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023). In keeping with Ireland's other criminal justice agencies (Hamilton, 2022), the publication of prisons data and academic penological research are at a relatively nascent stage. The information that is available indicates mixed relationships between people in custody and staff, and among prison officers, as well as profound fissures between staff and management.

On its latest visit, the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (Council of Europe, 2020) observed generally positive relationships between people in prison and prison staff, with most people in custody reporting that staff treated them correctly. Yet, their report also outlined allegations of racial abuse, and that 'a small number of officers' were 'inclined to use more force than is necessary and to verbally abuse prisoners' (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 22), resulting in unrecorded injuries. They argued that progress had been made to reduce violence and intimidation, but that many remained isolated on protective regimes. Butler (2015, p. 344), too, observes that staff-prisoner relations in Ireland vary, with some analyses concluding that relationships are 'largely positive', and others voicing serious unease 'about harassment, bullying, intimidation and discrimination' (see also, Garrihy et al., 2023, for comparable reports by immunocompromised people held in isolation in prisons during COVID-19 lockdowns). This is problematic as people in prison are dependent on staff for their safety and access to information, rights, and services (Crewe, 2011; Edgar, 2018; Van der Valk et al., 2022). Their vulnerability is compounded by low trust in the prison authorities: Van der Valk and Rogan (2023) found that many people in Irish prisons are reluctant to discuss their treatment for fear of retribution from the authorities and others.

Recent studies in Ireland with prison staff indicate that relationships among them mirror the mixed picture of staff–prisoner relationships: neither uniformly positive nor negative, but with a high risk of serious harm when relationships break down. Examples of altruism among staff reflect the importance of solidarity in uniformed occupational cultures – as do the repercussions for non-conformity which Garrihy (2020, p. 137) identified, including ostracism and 'apathetic responses in coming to the aid of that officer [when] in distress'. Staff relationships are closer than those among colleagues in other types of organisation, but 'disputes and petty grievances', 'gossip or ridicule' and 'abuse or bullying' (Garrihy, 2024, p. 177) remain common.

The existing research also suggests poor relationships between staff and both operational managers, and managers in IPS Headquarters. Butler (2015) contends that industrial relations issues are common in the IPS, with union statements consistently depicting staff alienation from, and dissatisfaction with, management. This is consistent with Garrihy's later research, involving ethnography and interviews in four prisons and a nationwide survey of prison officers (Garrihy, 2020, 2022). Garrihy (2020, p. 134) found that officers felt

'under threat from all sides: from IPS Headquarters, local management, prisoners, the media, and the public' and that they felt 'undervalued [and] unappreciated [. . .] misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned by these multiple sources'. The perceptions of their poor relations with prison and Headquarters management were so universal that officers 'with diametrically opposed perspectives on their role shared the view that developments (or lack thereof) in organisational policy and practice undermine the legitimacy of the prison' (Garrihy, 2020, pp. 142–143). Staff reported constant threats of disciplinary action and a 'blame culture', causing stress, anger, fear, and uncertainty – a view that Curristan and Rogan (2022) found prison managers in Ireland to share.

Without quantitative data, we cannot tell whether relationships in Irish prisons are more or less positive than those in other countries, nor whether they meet thresholds that generate a legitimate 'order' that is characterised by 'good' or 'right relationships' (Auty & Liebling, 2024; Liebling, 2011). Still, there is sufficient evidence of problematic relationships and harmful conflicts to necessitate urgent action. Research is yet to illuminate IPS leaders' practices in this regard, although international literature suggests that leaders' approaches can affect the quality of life of people who are detained or who work in prisons.

3. Prison leadership: an influential and neglected profession

There is limited empirical research on topics including prison leaders' uses of discretion in leadership practices, leadership training, and prison service policymaking and administration. Research which has been conducted implies that there is insufficient focus on prison leadership as a profession, despite their choices representing a key influence on institutional stability, and deeply affecting the quality of life of those who live or work under their authority.

For our purposes, 'prison leaders' occupy both senior operational positions – in Ireland, those of 'governor grades' – and senior administrative or policy positions. The Irish Prison Service (2023) lists 46 such senior leaders, including 20 at governor grades across its 12 prisons, 4 people at these grades working in various 'support units' (e.g. IPS College), and 22 senior leaders in 'Headquarters and Directorates' (e.g. the Director General and Directors of Corporate Services and Care and Rehabilitation). Although Curristan and Rogan (2022) interviewed IPS managers about their views and experiences of prison oversight, no published academic research directly addresses their discretionary practices through the collection and analysis of primary data.

Internationally, the role of prison leadership (whether operational or non-operational) has been subject to little attention and empirical analysis. Operationally, prison governors and their equivalents sit at the pinnacle of a well-defined hierarchy and chain of command. For Coyle (2009, p. 21), they are 'the key person in setting the tone throughout the whole prison [. . .] determin[ing] whether or not the prison is a place of decency, humanity and justice'. While this role requires specific skills, Coyle continues in a somewhat dated report, most jurisdictions have 'little concept of prison management as a profession or even a skill which requires specific training and development' (Coyle, 2009, p. 21). Meanwhile, those persons who have responsibility for *leading* a non-operational or non-uniformed function across prison organisations are virtually absent from the literature (Gonzales et al., 2023; Penrod et al., 2014), even

though finance, procurement, IT, and human resources are essential corporate services, while training, psychology, and healthcare are among the services that shape prison operations and cultures.

Operational prison leadership comes with a variety of responsibilities: from technical and managerial matters, to leading continuous change and improvement, and providing a vision to inspire and reassure staff (Coyle, 2009). Choudhary (2020) categorises their duties as 'general', 'incident' and 'stakeholder management', involving overseeing everything from budgeting and human resources, to critical incident response and rehabilitation services. Of relevance to the current study is any aspect of their daily roles involving interactions with colleagues, staff, and people in prison, as it is from these interactions that relationships emerge (Liebling et al., 2011). Choudhary (2020) interviewed 15 prison leaders to inform a framework for prison leadership. 'The human side of prison leadership', Choudhary (2020, p. 93) deduced, involves the 'ability to engage with people' via interactions that provide support, recognition, reward, feedback, and inspiration, hold people to account, encourage trust, communicate expectations, and address conflicts. Crewe and Liebling (2015) argue that the qualities of 'good' leadership may not align with the goals or promotion criteria of prison organisations, and can also depend on institution type and other contextual factors.

In practice, prison governors have considerable discretion to determine how to manage prisons. Carlen (2002) considers their varying possible orientations: aligning with Rutherford's 'working credos' (Rutherford, 1994), they can focus more on security, rehabilitation, or adherence to policy and procedures. Bryans (2007) and Bennett (2016) both observed an ideological heterogeneity among prison managers that makes them difficult to classify. In Ireland, Curristan and Rogan (2022) found that prison managers differed in their views on the merits of inspection. External influences can cause leadership styles to vary over time, as leaders come and leave or perceive changes in the risks of, and the level of political and public support for, different approaches (Camp & Useem, 2012; Stojkovic, 2010). Their job is to sit on a 'razor's edge', causing grievances among either people in custody or officers, depending on whether they are perceived to be 'excessively security-based [or] too lax' (Dubois, 2018, p. 368). Prison leaders' occupational cultures may reflect degrees of personability, adaptability, and authoritarianism.

The consequences of the decisions that governors make when interacting with staff and people in custody and balancing different pressures are vast. Choudhary (2020, p. 10), drawing on organisational leadership research, concludes that prison leadership is a 'critical factor in determining organisational success or failure'. The limited evidence that can contribute to the validation of this hypothesis focuses on operational, rather than organisational, leadership. For example, Davies and Burgess (1988) analysed 7 years of discipline reports in a UK prison. They found that report frequency changed with governor, indicating that leadership practices affected either the prevalence or the documentation of rule breaking. The former is most likely, they believe, because one governor during whose leadership rule breaking reports declined was commended for reducing violence at a previous institution. Wortley (2002) also contends that leadership practices contribute to conflict, while Boin and Rattray state that reports after prison riots usually note that conflicts between prison leaders and staff and between prisons and policy sections were 'indicators of administrative vulnerability' that fostered conditions in which riots were more likely (Boin & Rattray, 2004, p. 60).

Bennett (2016), in the only ethnography of its kind, studied the working lives of prison managers in two England and Wales prisons. The working environment was heavily shaped by 'managerialism' – targets, audits, 'league tables', and external performance management – and populist punitiveness. Despite this rigid bureaucratic and political context, Bennett's research (Bennett, 2016) found that governors exerted agency and retained and used discretion liberally. Their low visibility gives them the power to circumvent attempts from external actors to control their daily decisions which remain consequential for the people in custody and staff over whom they have authority. Governors believed that their practices had a role-modelling function for both staff and people in custody, while negotiating prison culture by overlooking sexism and the denigration of prisoners, and using 'outlandish' language, humour, and explanations in complex ways to build trust and legitimacy with people in custody (Bennett, 2016, p. 136). They also circulated on the landings to challenge behaviour, respond to conflicts, and build relationships with staff and people in custody, meaning that the ways governors choose to interact can affect others' lives daily. Governors recognised that their communication styles were discretionary and based on their personal preferences, and that this affected their relationships with others.

The context in Ireland contrasts with that in England and Wales in important ways. For example, while the phenomena of managerialism and populist punitiveness are not fully absent from the justice landscape, they far from define it to the same degree (Hamilton, 2019, 2022). 'Historically', argue the Office of the Inspector of Prisons and Coyle (2015, p. 24), Irish 'governors had high levels of autonomy, regarding the prison as their "personal fiefdom"'. Despite more centralised regulation by the 'IPS Headquarters' now (Garrihy, 2020), recording requirements and practices remain looser in Ireland's criminal justice system than in the UK, while management and frontline discretion remain largely intact (Hamilton, 2019, 2022). Consequently, their communication practices are potentially even more discretionary than those in the UK. In Germany, too, prison leaders retain considerable discretion in practice, despite a relatively strict legal framework regulating their work (Morgenstern & Rogan, 2023). Dubois (2018, p. 374) detected this in Belgium: governors are, theoretically, increasingly constrained, but 'deploy no less practical wisdom in going about their work'. Significantly, all governors in Ireland begin as frontline prison officers, suggesting that this occupational culture likely shapes their orientations (Garrihy, 2020, 2024).

This is important to understand given that, as in England and Wales, prison governors in Ireland play a critical operational role by leading or contributing to numerous aspects of daily engagement with people in custody. For example, prisoner disciplinary proceedings in Ireland (called P19s) are heard by the governors, who have considerable discretion to allocate formal and informal sanctions and otherwise to exert authority within or outside of formal procedures. Governors meet people in prison within 24 hours of their committal, provide permission for privileges (e.g. obtaining personal property, sending money to families, and temporary release) and hold 'Governors' Parades' on weekday mornings during which time people in custody can approach them (Irish Prison Service, 2020). They also oversee elements of human resources administration, contributing to frequent contact (and conflict) with prison staff. It follows that leaders' approaches to communicating and making decisions can drastically affect the quality of life of people in prison and staff, and, according to the existing research, prison stability. It is worth exploring

whether training affects the extent to which leaders use relational, conflict-centred practices in their day-to-day work.

4. Restorative practices in prison settings

We draw three broad conclusions from the (limited) research on restorative practices in prison settings. First, although a Council of Europe legal framework explicitly supports using restorative practices to build relationships in prisons (Council of Europe, 2018; Marder, 2020), the documented projects to-date almost all focus only on conflict resolution. Respondents to a EUROPRIS survey (2021) imply that prison services in Catalonia, Latvia, Spain, and Scotland offer restorative practices to resolve conflict, and those in France, Finland, Italy, and Lithuania can or intend to do so. However, none report proactive applications nor seem to have published research (at least, not in English) about their work. Other English-language sources also focus on resolving conflict between, or disciplinary responses to, people in prison (Calkin, 2021; Fair & Jacobson, 2018; Gray et al., 2020; Nowotny & Carrara, 2018) or officers (Pranis, 2006). In Ireland, case studies of projects in the early 2010s by Kelleher (2022) and Stack (2022) likewise focus on 'reactive' applications. Only Eagleson's (2022) reflections on Northern Ireland appear to report using restorative practices both to build relationships and resolve conflict in prisons.

Second, these documents note positive outcomes, expressing optimism that restorative practices could improve prison safety. Fair and Jacobson (2018) evaluated their implementation in three English prisons, finding that the training was well received, dozens of (more and less formal) restorative meetings occurred, and a variety of conflict types could be addressed in this way. In Northern Ireland, the number of people kept apart for their own protection reportedly fell by 27% as restorative practices were used to resolve conflicts (Eagleson, 2022). Reflecting on her time implementing restorative practices among staff with the Minnesota Department of Corrections, Pranis (2006, p. 671) notes that, 'at times, we were surprised how quickly serious conflict was resolved'. Another qualitative study in Brazil saw violence decline, as restorative processes were used among warring gangs (Nowotny & Carrara, 2018).

Third, however, optimism must be tempered because of the low generalisability of this research and the limited evidence of programme sustainability. In relation to the former, the abovementioned sources are all either small-scale studies that lack baseline data with which to compare violence before and after, or descriptive reports based solely or largely on the author's experience. In relation to the latter, there is no or limited evidence that the projects documented were scaled up or sustained. In the project subjected to the most rigorous independent study, a prison discontinued the pilot early on because of staff shortages and limited staff understanding of restorative practices (Fair & Jacobson, 2018). Other researchers found obstacles including low levels of staff understanding and commitment, and tensions between restorative principles and prison cultures (Calkin, 2021; Gray et al., 2020; Nowotny & Carrara, 2018). In Ireland, the aforementioned projects were discontinued by 2015, the reasons for which were not published. While projects in Europe have not all been researched (EUROPRIS, 2021; Restorative Justice Council, 2023), it appears that they usually struggle to achieve scale and sustainability. This is common,

management scholars argue, when organisational change projects fail to engage with, and draw on, senior leaders (Oreg & Berson, 2019; Øygarden & Mikkelsen, 2020).

5. Current project and research methodology

5.1. Irish Prison Service senior leaders' training programme

An internal 'Restorative Practices Strategy' stated that the first action should be to train senior leaders. The tendering document to engage a training provider said that this must enable participants to understand and describe restorative practices, to help decide which applications the IPS will prioritise, and to use restorative skills in their own work. Childhood Development Initiative (CDI), an NGO, co-facilitated the training with a trainer from the IPS College. The Director General invited around 40 people to attend, including each of the 12 IPS prisons' most senior governors, assistant governors at those prisons that were soon to pilot a new governance model, and leaders in the IPS Headquarters and support units.

In January 2023, two groups of senior leaders ($n = 14$, $n = 21$) received 2 days' training each. According to the observational data, these trainees included at least 12 persons who were working in prisons and 20 who were not; three participants' roles were unclear. The training incorporated theory, principles and skills, such as restorative language (language and questions used to challenge another person, and avoid damaging their relationship), restorative meetings (facilitated processes to resolve low-level conflicts involving multiple people), and restorative circles (where a group sits in a circle and takes turns to contribute views or answer a question) (O'Dwyer, 2021a; IPS, 2023). Trainees were also invited to an implementation workshop later that month, facilitated by the first author and attended by 77% of the 35 trainees ($n = 27$).

5.2. Participant recruitment and dataset

The dataset consists of 25 hours of observation and 22 interviews (on which this article mostly draws). The observation was non-participatory across the four days of training and half-day workshop. The researcher sat in the back of the room taking verbatim notes. As per our ethical approval, provided by the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee, participants were informed in advance about the research and that they may attend the training without their data being collected. Trainees universally consented to the research on their first training day. Notably, however, several participants indicated in their interviews that they did not experience the invitation to attend the training as voluntary. Understanding the hierarchical nature of the prison service, participants received research consent forms on the day so that the observer could explain that they need not agree to the research just because they attended the training. In addition, consent for the interviews was separate, sought individually and privately from each prospective participant in advance of the interviews some months later.

Three months following the workshop, the first author emailed trainees to invite them to participate in an interview. This gap was left intentionally to give participants time to reflect on the training and use the skills they learned. Ultimately, 22 interviews took place online over Microsoft Teams 3–5 months following the workshop. Two trainees retired

before April, one declined to be interviewed, three who agreed to an interview did not arrange a time, and seven did not respond at all. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes and were semi-structured, enabling the interviewer to clarify and probe short or interesting answers. Fifteen of the interviewees were male and seven, female. Seven interviewees worked in prisons and 15 did not, providing a spread of operational and non-operational viewpoints.

A limit of these data is that we cannot know if participants' views were representative of all 35 trainees. Potentially, persons with the strongest opinions (whether positive or negative) about restorative practices were more likely to be interviewed. Still, interviews were conducted with almost two-thirds of trainees, and were representative of trainees in terms of their roles. By qualitative standards, the number and proportion of trainees participating in an interview is adequate to investigate their reported experiences of using restorative practices, and to theorise the implications of these data.

5.3. *Analytical logic and process*

This article draws on the principles of appreciative inquiry to analyse the findings and consider their conceptual implications. Appreciative inquiry is a methodological process that has been adapted by criminologists and by action researchers in other social sciences (Robinson et al., 2012). It is concerned with the idea that we can learn about people and organisations by considering their 'best experiences' (Liebling & Arnold, 2004, p. 132). It can be applied either as a methodological process to follow throughout a study (Liebling & Arnold, 2004), or as a 'lens' through which to identify strengths and positive experiences in datasets (Robinson et al., 2012, p. 5). This article is concerned with reports of changed practices that interviewees attributed to their training and described as positive experiences that improved outcomes. As Liebling and Arnold (2004) and Garrihy (2022) argue, prisons cause harm by concentrating on weaknesses; research conducted in pursuit of reducing harm can provide a vision of the positive and possible. This aligns with Irish prison managers' beliefs that focusing solely on negatives, to the exclusion of positives, can discourage their engagement with change processes (Curristan & Rogan, 2022).

Our analysis for this article took an appreciative slant, identifying where respondents provided examples of how the training affected their thinking and when they used it in their work. Indeed, most interviewees reported that the training changed their thinking and practices for the better and detailed how, meriting an exploration of these data. This does not negate the need to examine implementation barriers and evidence of inertia within the dataset, but such discussions are beyond the scope and purpose of this article.

The second author undertook the observations, and the third author, the interviews. The first author then used NVivo to conduct a reflexive thematic analysis, combining deductive and inductive approaches to identify patterns in the data regarding how participants described the impact of the training on their thinking and practices, and permitting an inductive approach to identifying additional codes and themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). When quoted below, interviewees are allocated a random number (e.g. IPS17).

6. Findings

6.1. The purpose of restorative practices

The majority of interviewees described applying restorative practices at the intersection of relationships and conflict. Operational and non-operational leaders alike reported being responsible for addressing disagreements, conflicts and problems – involving colleagues, staff, and people in custody – in situations where there was a risk of relationship breakdown. There was near-consensus that the major potential of restorative practices lay in giving them skills to de-escalate these situations, preserving or rebuilding relationships by enabling people to speak honestly, feel heard, understand each other's views, and solve problems together. This aligns roughly with concepts of procedural justice (e.g. Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Henderson et al., 2010), and indicates further study on its relationship with restorative practices may be merited (see, e.g. Tyler, 2006 on procedural justice and restorative justice).

As other studies exploring restorative practices training have also found (O'Dwyer, 2021b; Williams et al., 2018), interviewees reported having used the 'restorative questions'. This set of six questions was designed to help a person in an authority position facilitate other people to express their views and feelings about a specific situation (see Figure 1).

Respondents described these questions as providing a structure and a rationale for how they communicated with other people when problems arose. Many interviewees described changing the way they communicated with people around them, such as asking 'what happened' when something went wrong, rather than asking why someone had acted in a certain way. The stated reasoning was to give the person an opportunity to speak without feeling judged or defensive. Participants received a small card outlining the restorative questions, with several reporting that they kept the card on their desk, stuck to their computer, or otherwise to hand. For IPS2, the card was perceived to 'reinforce that concept in my mind by having it there – just give somebody time to talk and for me to

RESTORATIVE QUESTIONS

- What happened?
- What were you thinking of at the time?
- What have you thought about it since?
- Who has been affected and in what way?
- How could things have been done differently?
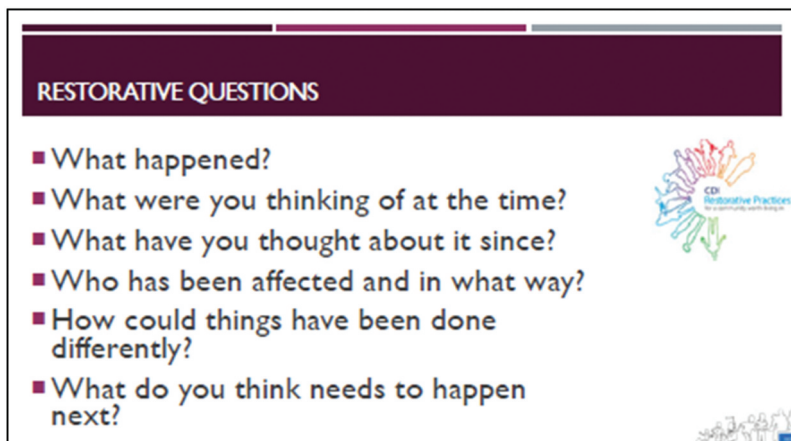- What do you think needs to happen next?

Figure 1. Restorative questions (source: CDI training materials).

listen'. This contrasted, many participants said, with the 'normal' practice of rapidly identifying who was to blame for an issue, and unilaterally deciding on a suitable (informal or formal) sanction.

Many interviewees provided detailed case studies of these practices. Most others, still, reported that the training had influenced their thinking and approaches to communication. For some, it brought to the fore the role of listening, avoiding judgment, and remaining calm in ensuring that their response would not cause lasting harm to relationships. IPS16 said that their training 'opened my eyes again to another facet of how I can use language, empathy, and listening to maybe improve how I do things' with people in custody. IPS4 mentioned recalling the lessons from their training during a phone call from an 'irate' colleague:

> In my head I was like: 'try and understand where [they're] coming from. What's happened to make [them] like this today?' That all just came flashing, that I didn't actually mirror what I was receiving. I actually took a breath and stopped, and I think that's what I got from [the training]. [. . .] I do think the fact that I had those questions and I was able to stop and think and kind of take a break myself, I thought it was very important that way, that I didn't create conflict, because I could have created conflict if I didn't have that tool.

It was not always clear from the data if the training taught interviewees to select language in order to build (or not damage) relationships, or if they already did this and the training reminded them and/or provided them with specific tools to do so. It seems likely that some people described using the training in ways that did not deviate significantly from their previous methods. It is also possible that descriptions of practices do not indicate a consistent sea change in approach, but represent only those limited times when they employed their training (i.e. in a minority of interactions). However, interviewees mostly said that their practices had changed in ways that improved their relationships with people exposed to their 'new' behaviours. Detailed examples emerged from the data, focusing on prison disciplinary processes for people in custody, and on conflict resolution among staff.

6.2. Disciplinary hearings and relationships with people in custody

The disciplinary hearing lies at the 'sharp end' of governor interactions with people in prison. Bennett (2016) found that governors' approaches to these can be highly consequential for their future relationships with the people who are subject to the hearing. It is thus significant that interviewees reported using restorative questions during their 'P19' hearings in ways that they perceived had the consequence of strengthening those relationships.

For IPS22, using restorative questions 'was much more beneficial' than their normal approach, because this language 'de-escalated a lot of the tension on the prisoner side':

> When I asked the prisoner 'what happened?', straight away – and I'm not exaggerating on this, and the reason it sticks in my mind is because it was the first time I used it – the prisoner, if I was to describe it, [they] sighed and then started to talk. For me, it was a clear physical indicator that the [person] had relaxed by using just those words.

This reportedly strengthened their relationship, which the incident had damaged:

> There is definitely a rapport after that disciplinary report. [They] feel more comfortable to come in on the governor's parade. There's not as much hostility. [. . .] That definitely subdued [and] there is a better level of dialogue and discussion between us. I would safely say to you I will put that down to the restorative practice and that particular disciplinary because in [their] world and my own world, it was a significant departure from the norm.

IPS8 described using the restorative questions to structure a P19, and then to address another issue with the same person that had affected their relationship:

> I could just see this whole P19 being a disaster and this person, you know, having a strop over the whole thing, but [they] didn't. It worked out really well and it actually improved our relationship. We had a little bit of confrontation [recently]. When we finished dealing with the P19, finished dealing with the restorative end of it, I broached the whole thing about the [other] incident [and] it kind of passed off as if our relationship was back on track again, which I kind of thought was going to be damaged for a while. [. . .] Having a set structure for dealing with it makes it probably easier for me because I have a better understanding of what it is that I'm trying to get to.

We know little about how respondents approached P19s beforehand, but they reported that the training affected their usual practices in ways that foregrounded and improved their relationships with the person in custody. Were governors to use such an approach consistently, it might expose people to a fairer process and to a relational side of the prison's administration that they may not otherwise see, at a time when they expect an adversarial and punitive experience. To explore this further, experimental research can be used to consider how participants in restorative disciplinary hearings experience and perceive this process (Butler & Maruna, 2016), measuring gaps between intentions and experiences, and any connections between such an approach and people in prison's cumulative evaluation of their treatment (Liebling, 2011).

6.3. Resolving conflict among staff

Some interviewees reported using restorative questions with staff in circumstances where there was more than one person involved in a conflict that they aimed to de-escalate and resolve. For example, IPS12 described working with another colleague to facilitate a restorative meeting between two staff members to help them understand each other's perspectives:

> There was a difficult situation to be managed within [a team] and myself and a colleague reviewed the questions used in restorative practice. They were particularly helpful in managing the difficult situation [and] helping people understand each other's experiences in a really effective way, without maybe people feeling so defensive. [. . .] It actually allowed for a depth of conversation and understanding that wouldn't necessarily have been there if we had gone down another route.

IPS18 similarly reported collaborating with another leader – not IPS12 – who had attended the training to resolve a conflict between members of their respective teams:

> Because myself and this other [person] had attended the training session, we were able to pick up the phone to each other and say: 'look, our two staff members, they're really good people. There's no need for this to explode. What about if we try this: bring them into a room?' And the two of them ended up sorting it out. [. . .] It's just the mutual understanding now between the two of them. Now, chances are the two of them will pick up the phone and

ring each other, rather than letting something like that happen again. [. . .] It has changed my mindset, in that us doing little things like that will go a long way to staff in the prison service feeling more supported by management and HQ and the prison.

In both cases, leaders described collaborating to facilitate dialogue between staff members in a way that helped participants understand each other, de-escalating the conflict. In the second, the respondent connected this to their improved communications with another leader following the training, and to the notion that a consensual approach might improve relationships between staff and leaders – which, as Garrihy (2020) showed, are badly damaged. Drawing on management studies, Benefiel's exploration of US data (Benefiel, 2019, p. 706) found an indirect connection between violence and management–staff relations, as 'staff perceptions of managerial leadership has an impact on staff – inmate relationships and reduces misconduct'. Our data appear to suggest that these mindsets and facilitation skills informed respondents' practices in ways that they believed meant that staff experienced them differently. Still, it will require a substantial and consistent use of restorative practices (including by leaders who are usually experienced negatively) before this contributes to the cumulative staff experience of IPS leadership in ways that can detectably affect staff behaviour and improve prison safety overall.

6.4. Dialogue and problem solving among senior leaders

At the end of the implementation workshop, attendees concluded that the leadership team should use restorative practices to structure their work with each other. Interviewees described the training, one of few times they came together as an entire leadership team, as helping them connect and discuss shared challenges and opportunities. In a sense, their training – facilitated using restorative circles, dedicating time to relational work, and affording participants an equal opportunity to speak and reflect – was a uniquely relational experience:

> The actual training itself gave me a greater insight into people that I deal with. There is a tendency [. . .] when you're dealing with people, you only see them through the prism of the problem they present. Whereas perhaps RP and that method of thinking gives you that ability to kind of be more nuanced and understand that's not actually the relationship. IPS5

> There's probably a little bit of better camaraderie arising from the training and I think maybe a better sense of mutual understanding in recognising that we've got different needs and different dependencies, but ultimately if we don't work together, we're never going to be in a position where we can achieve personal and team objectives. IPS1

Many interviewees referenced the paradoxical situation whereby their work affected virtually all other senior leaders, but they seldom approached shared challenges collectively. This siloed working was widely recognised as conducive to confrontation, misunderstanding, and anxiety, and inhibited relationship building and open dialogue. Dubois (2018) observed that governors and administrators are almost always waiting for each other for some form of authorisation or information, representing a constant source of tension in their relationships. Without engaging in regular dialogue about their work, operational and non-operational leaders may be unlikely to understand each other's pressures, the exact nature of their interdependence, or the emotional impact on others of the choices they make when communicating and making decisions. In this context,

some interviewees stated that restorative circles, as experienced in the training, would be valuable in structuring further conversations among the leadership.

Several interviewees also mentioned that, soon after their training, the Director General organised a problem-solving circle to discuss the growing issue of overcrowding. The circle is a structured process: the organiser explains the problem to a group, who can then ask questions for clarification or understanding, and propose solutions in the format 'try . . . '. Participants are prohibited from providing opinions or engaging in a discussion about suggestions. Finally, the organiser selects ideas to try and says if they need support from others (O'Dwyer, 2021a).

Interviewees noted that using this process to structure their discussions on overcrowding deviated from the norm in two ways. First, it represented a dialogic and inclusive approach to making decisions that are otherwise made centrally. It involved various stakeholders, including – unusually, according to some of our respondents – people from external organisations like the Probation Service and the Department of Justice, with the goal of ideating solutions collectively:

> We brought out prison governors and all the directors and a couple of the other external people who have an input into policy and stuff like that into a room. Previously, we wouldn't have done that. We'd have just said: 'here's our position: we're in trouble for numbers', and we'd be writing out a scatter shot of letters to these people to try to get some support. [. . .] I think that's something that we've learned through the restorative practices approach: if you bring everybody into the room, sit them in a circle and use the rules of the circle engagement, you actually get very close to the nitty gritty very quickly. IPS6

Boin and Rattray (2004) discussed the relationship between the administrative and operational leadership in prison organisations. They say that reforms are often designed by the former, but require the cooperation of the latter to implement. Tensions can emerge when operational leaders disagree with reforms that they have not been consulted on, when there is a clash between 'new blueprints' and the 'ancient structures' on which they are superimposed, and when operational leaders feel that they lack the resources to make changes effectively (Boin & Rattray, 2004, p. 52). A practice model that reduces siloed working could foster more inclusive decision-making processes and improved teamwork on the implementation of change (Gonzales et al., 2023). In addition, the involvement of external parties, such as the Probation Service, might give light to different ideas that would not have emerged had only one organisation been involved in the discussion.

Second, this practice (re)directed conversations away from blame and towards solutions. IPS9 recalled that the circle provided a 'non-judgmental' and 'non-opinionated environment' in which to ideate and discuss the issue constructively. Others gave comparable assessments:

> It was a really powerful meeting. People aired what was wrong, but because of the way the meeting is structured, when it's all, you know, 'try this, try that' rather than the kind of opinionated, judgmental stuff, we actually got an awful lot more views aired through that mechanism. IPS6

> I think the language around limiting people to just suggestions and not debate is very useful in our organisation, where everybody has an opinion and an idea. The use of the word 'try' and the lack of placing blame. [. . .] There wasn't a kind of a diktat that emerged from it, and

> I think all of that is very positive in terms of working relationships. [...] I think that valuable recommendations emerged from it that may not have emerged if people didn't feel as safe in the space because of the [restorative] principles. IPS11

It is significant that overcrowding was selected for discussion in a restorative circle, as this was (and remains) a defining operational issue (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023, 2024). That such a process took place has not previously been made public. Our data also do not illuminate how the decision was made to use a circle, what participants suggested during it, or what the Director General proposed to try afterwards. Shortly thereafter, however, the Director General, several senior prison governors and administrators, and representatives of the Probation Service and Department of Justice, were part of a Prison Overcrowding Response Group that proposed a broad range of progressive measures to reduce overcrowding, including the making of a Ministerial Order to reduce the sentences of people in prison across the board, the introduction of new legislation and a programme of judicial engagement that would discourage the use of imprisonment as a sanction, and the establishment of new structures and broader eligibility parameters to facilitate further early releases (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2024). Predictably, the most radical proposals were not accepted by government (though some decarceratory proposals, such as judicial engagement on community sentencing, were), and investments in new prison places were among the proposals adopted (Department of Justice, 2024). Although our data do not allow us to attribute either the progressive or expansionist proposals to the restorative approach, it is still worth considering the possibility that the use of restorative practices among criminal justice policymakers and leaders could have an influence on penality. Whether restorative structures allow for the emergence of more radical ideas that align with restorative principles, or whether they enable the exacerbation of harm =by more efficiently helping policymakers agree to expand the use of imprisonment, is yet to be seen. Another distinct possibility is that the use of restorative practices within a criminal justice organisation has some effect on how people relate to each other internally without making a difference to levels of penality or the prominence of retributive mentalities and punitive practices across the wider criminal justice system. At the same time, given the ever-present difficulties in building sector-wide alignment on the need for decarceration, it is worth considering that such conversations might benefit from being facilitated restoratively.

Whatever the consequences, implicit in the data is a sense that typical working practices could not resolve problems effectively, and even risked damaging relationships by focusing on allocating blame. Prison services, characterised by hierarchy, acute displays of extreme power, and high levels of risk, can struggle to facilitate open conversations on crisis resolution without an undercurrent of fear. As Kay Pranis (2006, p. 670) remarked, 'frankness is not characteristic within fear-based, hierarchical structures'. To the extent that those in power in a prison service are motivated to enable participatory decision making and reduce the fear of blame, restorative practices could provide practical tools to achieve this.

It is not certain that people at the pinnacle of hierarchical organisations always hope to devolve control and ease apprehensions in this manner. In Ireland, however, research indicates that people in custody (Van der Valk & Rogan, 2023), prison staff (Garrihy, 2020), and prison leaders (Curristan & Rogan, 2022) all lament residing or working in an

environment characterised by fear. Having undertaken this training, leaders could be well-placed to model the accountability that Curristan and Rogan (2022) deem essential for cultural change in prison services.

7. Discussion

7.1. Restorative practices and prison social climates

Prisons are 'conflict-generating environments': poor infrastructure, resource scarcity, and other structural features create tensions and stresses that lead to conflict (Edgar, 2018). Beyond this, prison officers and management directly influence the quality of prison life by exercising discretion. Their behaviour affects how dehumanising and painful it is to serve a custodial sentence. Applying procedural justice to prison climates and sanctions, respectively, Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) and Henderson et al. (2010) contend that a person's experience of prison is contingent to some degree on the extent to which they perceive that the staff treat them fairly.

Penological research has examined the nature and implications of prison social climates, defined as one's subjective experience of how material, social, and emotional conditions interact (Auty & Liebling, 2020). As a professional skillset, restorative practices cannot affect a prison's material conditions. However, to the extent that social and emotional conditions are a product of interpersonal relationships, prison leaders' ability and inclination to build positive relationships and prevent and resolve conflict has consequences for all persons with whom they interact, and whose quality of life they affect – and thus, for the prison social climate.

Our data indicate that many respondents adopted elements of the restorative practices training in their work. They provided accounts of applying restorative language and questions in ways which they perceived to support a relative improvement in relationships, helping them minimise, avoid, or reverse relationship deterioration by communicating differently.

These findings diverge from the majority of studies exploring restorative practices in prisons that focus on formal, mediation-style approaches. Here, participants mostly reported using restorative skills one-to-one (section 6.1 and 6.2), and to facilitate restorative meetings as disagreements emerged (section 6.3). Given the much greater frequency of these interactions than those in which leaders respond to serious conflict (Edgar, 2018), the potential to influence social climates positively through this training may be significant. For people in custody, living in a prison in which leadership consistently acts to strengthen relationships would be a different experience to living in one where relationships are not a concern nor a driver of discretionary practices. For staff, research finds that mediation can help resolve conflict in large, public-sector bodies (e.g. McKenzie, 2015), but a gap remains for leaders who detect many low-level intra-staff tensions in their daily work that may not be suitable for formal mediation processes. People working in the IPS may access mediation as public servants, the process for which states that managers can refer people to mediation if 'direct engagement' does not resolve a dispute (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2017, p. 3). Yet, it omits to say how managers should facilitate 'direct engagement', nor if they receive training to do so. If, as Coyle (2009) and Benefiel (2019) contend, how leaders treat staff affects how staff treat people in custody,

giving leaders skills to resolve staff issues consensually may have a knock-on effect that further improves social climates. In light of Garrihy's findings (Garrihy, 2020) that relations between staff and leaders are especially poor, and our findings that leaders applied the training to enable dialogue on the most acute organisational challenges (section 6.4), circles could also be used to address the 'blame culture' that IPS staff and leadership all seem to fear and lament in equal measure. For Ciesielska et al. (2025), using restorative practices internally in organisations should foster a model of accountability which encourages everyone to raise concerns, knowing that they can give their account of a problem and contribute to its resolution without the risk of being subject to scapegoating and punitive actions.

Prison leaders must be consistent in their actions to be perceived as fair and gain respect from people in custody, but also remain flexible to adapt to situational needs (Benefiel, 2019). Our findings suggest that restorative practices could fill some of these gaps in leadership skills, enabling flexible, consistently humane, uses of discretion, and providing a practical model for working relationally. This can respond to Liebling's challenge (Liebling, 2011) to clarify what 'building relationships' means for prison work in practice. To the extent that restorative practices 'crowd out' those behaviours that reflect the more harmful features of prison culture, they could reduce harm by informing a more pro-social and relational practice model for prison leaders.

7.2. Building a model of relational prison leadership

We contend that notions of *relational leadership* are of value in formulating a theory of prison leadership practice that captures this. The literature using this concept does so in different ways. Given that we seek to advance an applied theory of relational prison leadership, we adopt a definition posed by Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) of relational leadership as an ideal in which those in authority positions see themselves 'as always in relation with, and therefore morally accountable to, others' (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1425). In line with work by Uhl-Bien (2006) on relational leadership theory, leadership, they continue, cannot be understood beyond 'the realm of everyday experience', or as a function of 'discrete individuality' (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1429). Rather, leaders must situate their work in the day-to-day interactions through which people experience their chosen 'way of being-in-the-world' in relation to others: their 'character' (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1433). 'Relational leaders' recognise the role of communication in leadership, and the opportunity it provides for dialogue. Communication is thus a 'way of working out what is meaningful and possible' with others, not 'an expression of something pre-conceived' that one imposes monologically (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1434).

This concept of relational leadership reflects the benefits of restorative practices, as expressed by interviewees. Senior leaders felt that the restorative practices training encouraged them, and taught them how, to listen before making decisions and to involve people in understanding how to move relationships forward. It provided them with skills and confidence to help those in conflict understand each other's perspectives. Kligman and Begum (2023) published one of the first analyses of restorative practices as a methodology for leadership. They argue that having a toolkit that a leader can apply intentionally in volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous environments helps them recognise their own level of control over what they contribute to their relationships with others,

and how others experience them. Drawing on the experiences of social service leaders who used restorative circles, they concluded that restorative skills can help leaders build relationships, facilitate dialogue, and make decisions in participatory ways, flattening and democratising organisational hierarchies. In our case, it is possible that training provided these types of skills, but it is also possible that a key mechanism in changing thinking and behaviour was the opportunity that the training provided to reflect on how the participants interacted and communicated with others.

Democratic values may be anathema to prisons, in which power is centralised and wielded in authoritarian, militaristic ways. Yet, the prisons literature has long proposed normative ideals that align with restorative practices, from the centrality of relationships to prison practices (Liebling et al., 2011), to the dialogic, relational character of legitimacy (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). Previous research with leaders in Belgian (Dubois, 2018), German (Morgenstern & Rogan, 2023) and English (Bennett, 2016) prisons found that leaders' extensive discretion means they can exercise agency in humane ways when working with people in custody. In so doing, Morgenstern and Rogan (2023) propose, leaders aim for 'flexible consistency', applying practical knowledge according to situational factors and deviating from regulations when perceived to be necessary. If formal rules have a limited effect on leaders' behaviour, training that enables and encourages prison leaders to use discretion intentionally and consistently to build, maintain, and repair relationships with and between all persons whose quality of life their work affects – what we are calling *relational prison leadership* – could add positive value to prison leaders' occupational cultures. With reference to a suicide prevention programme, Auty and Liebling (2024) contend that we should invest in prison management in ways that improve the quality of prison life. This project and research provides some evidence that restorative practices training can nudge prison leaders in this direction.

8. Conclusion

The irony of prison governance, Byrne and Hummer (2007), Edgar (2018) and others have observed, is that the more coercive and punitive the regime, the more violence we should expect to see. Prison leaders are thus responsible for overseeing the stability of institutions which are inherently unstable. For Edgar (2018), the solution lies partly in developing 'conflict-centred strategies' through which staff are trained and encouraged to use conflict prevention and resolution skills. The aim is to foster early – but not adversarial nor antagonistic – intervention in conflict before it escalates. Liebling (2011, p. 488) similarly contends that the 'peacekeeping labour often constitutes the best aspect of [prison officers'] work'. In line with broader trends in policymaking and research, however, the role of operational and non-operational prison leaders in forming positive relationships and in preventing and resolving conflict, in prisons and across prison organisations, receives little attention. Few prison services invest significantly in restorative practices, despite their apparent suitability in this context.

A relational leadership model, in which prison leaders' training in restorative practices enables them to build, maintain, and repair relationships with and between other people, could represent a part of the prison leadership training that has been sorely lacking (Coyle, 2009). At least in Ireland (Garrihy, 2020, p. 139), frontline officers argue that their practice is 'learned and honed [...] on the floor', with resistance to the idea that the

training is important. However, Dubois (2018) and Coyle (2009) assert that prison leaders are open to training, where time and resources were invested in providing a high quality, bespoke experience. Leaders in Ireland's only youth detention centre, separate from the IPS, received a bespoke training course as part of a substantial (and, reportedly, relatively successful) programme of cultural change (Kilkelly & Bergin, 2022). We found that many leaders were open to receiving this training and to using it in a range of settings, from in the 'small details of conversations' that are crucial in forming relationships (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1443), to addressing institutional crises. Prison services (Allen, 2015), and particularly the IPS (Rogan, 2011), have long histories of aversion to change. Working with senior leaders will not guarantee that change succeeds, but omitting them is likely to ensure it fails (Fair & Jacobson, 2018; Oreg & Berson, 2019).

Without observations of practice and before-and-after statistics on conflicts, it is not possible to study the hypothesised effects of the training quantitatively, nor for us to triangulate the descriptions of practice or claims of changes in practice. Inferences based on our data must remain tentative, and the potential that any change was transient, remembered. Still, these data include views from a large proportion of IPS leaders, with our respondents among the largest cohorts of prison leaders to participate in a study globally. This analysis provides novel insights into how members of this professional group – at this time and place – articulated their views, practices, and relationships with people around them, and the role of restorative practices therein. A relational leadership model could have the potential to inform prison leadership policy and practice in the years to come.

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