

“You have to be fluid”. ‘Exploring Prison Officer Types and their Relationship with Staff-prisoner Relationships and Burnout: A Mixed Methods Study.’

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This briefing paper examines the effects of working in the Irish Prison Service (IPS) with a particular focus on prison officer types, perceptions of the working environment, perceived quality of staff-prisoner relationships, and staff burnout. Previous qualitative research suggests that prison officers can be classified into four main prison officer types (e.g. Careerist, Humanitarian, Disciplinary, and Alienated) which shape staff-prisoner relationships and is related to whether prison staff are experiencing burnout. However, there is scarce quantitative research evidence to support these claims. This briefing paper addresses this gap in knowledge by testing this assumption. It is based on the findings of Dr Sinéad Meade’s PhD research conducted at Queen’s University Belfast, Northern Ireland. The research involved semi-structured interviews with Irish prison officers representing various roles (n=24) from five prisons and a national survey of Irish prison officers (n=573). The anonymous survey was designed based on the researcher’s critical review of the relevant literature, as well as the findings from one-to-one interviews and consultation with prison officers from various prisons in the IPS. This briefing paper summarises key findings and recommendations arising from this research.

The main findings of this research suggests that prison officers cannot be solely categorised into distinctly different prison officer types. Instead, prison officers adapt how they approach their work depending on their goals, the company they are in, and the situations they are tasked with managing. In this way, prison officers’ approach to work is fluid. The findings indicate that prison officers’ fluidity is related to how well they adapt to their work environment and their level of work engagement. The findings also suggest that prison officers’ fluidity is related to whether they experience burnout and develop appropriate relationships with people in detention. Importantly, this research suggests that investing in individual and external factors that influence prison officers’ fluidity could help to reduce burnout and further support prison officers to develop appropriate relationships with people in detention.

1 A Snapshot of the Average Prison Officer in the IPS

Of the 573 survey respondents, 79% were male (n=453) and 18% were female (n=103), which closely resembled the gender breakdown of the wider staff population in the IPS. The key findings below present a characterisation of the average prison officer who responded to the survey as being 43.47 years old and having spent, on average, 15.64 years working in the IPS. They mostly worked at the prison officer 'grade' in a closed medium security prison for adult males.

- *The average prison officer was highly adaptable to learning new tasks, technologies, and procedures, as well as dealing with uncertain and unpredictable situations.*
- *On average, prison officers perceived the quality of staff-prisoner relationships as positive.*
- *The average prison officer in the IPS was meticulous, worked hard to achieve their goals and was very understanding of others.*
- *Although the average prison officer is moderately engaged in their work, they are also moderately burnt out, with low feelings of personal accomplishment.*
- *The average prison officer has mixed views on fairness in the organisation. They felt that work-related outcomes were distributed fairly, but the procedures used to reach distributive outcomes (e.g. promotion), and the way in which they were communicated within interactions with the organisation were unfair.*

As this research was focused on prison officers, prisoners were not surveyed. Therefore, these findings should not be taken to indicate prisoners' perceptions of the quality of staff-prisoner relationships.

2 Approaches to and Fluidity in Prison Work in the IPS: A Continuum of Adaptation and Work Engagement

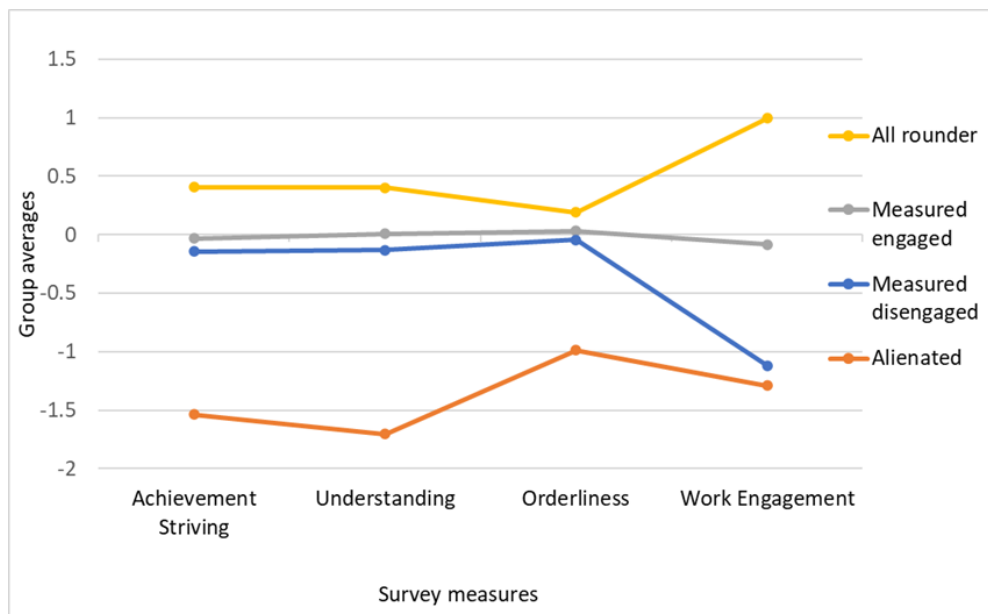
Interviewees recognised the Careerist, Humanitarian, Disciplinarian, and Alienated types in themselves and others. However, they stipulated that prison officers are fluid within the types and do not rigidly behave as one type all the time. Key findings:

- *Participants felt that how prison officers approach their work is based on a continuum of adaptation and engagement in doing prison work, with where they fall on this continuum being related to whether they experience burnout and develop appropriate staff-prisoner relationships.*
- *Fluidity in doing prison work reflects the multidimensional nature of prison officers' jailing expertise which is complex and highly skilled.*
- *Participants see fluidity in prison officer types as a pivotal aspect of a smooth-running prison, where staff are engaged in their work and achieve appropriate staff-prisoner relationships.*
- *Fluidity in prison work is shaped by a combination of individual (e.g. personality, adaptability) and external factors (e.g. perceived fairness in the organisation).*
- *There is a tendency to attribute the causes of burnout to the individual characteristics of prison officers, without taking the role that external factors may play in burnout into account.*

The findings from the interviews contributed to identifying the questions used in the anonymous survey that was distributed nationwide in the IPS. A novel statistical latent profile analysis of the survey data found that survey respondents could be classed into four distinct subgroups based on variation in their individual responses to the survey measures of ‘achievement striving’, ‘understanding’, ‘orderliness’ and ‘work engagement’. Figure 1 visually represents how respondents in these four distinct subgroups scored on average on these survey measures. In Figure 1 the average score is presented as zero, and the standard deviation is one. Figure 1 indicates whether respondents in these subgroups tended to score above or below the average score on these measures.

Figure 1

Estimated Means Plot Comparison of the Average Level of Achievement Striving, Understanding, Orderliness, and Work Engagement per Subgroup



The four subgroups identified in the analysis were given labels that reflect their relative scores on the ‘achievement striving’, ‘understanding’, ‘orderliness’ and ‘work engagement’ measures so that the characteristics of the members of each subgroup could be compared relative to the others. Importantly, the labels were chosen to avoid overstating the qualitative distinctions between the subgroups or providing a misleading representation of the members of each subgroup. The four subgroups can be characterised and compared as follows:

- *The survey respondents could be grouped into four distinct subgroups. However, these only partially correspond to the four main prison officer types described in*

previous research. The general shape of the four subgroups looked more like a continuum, which is consistent with the findings from the interviews.

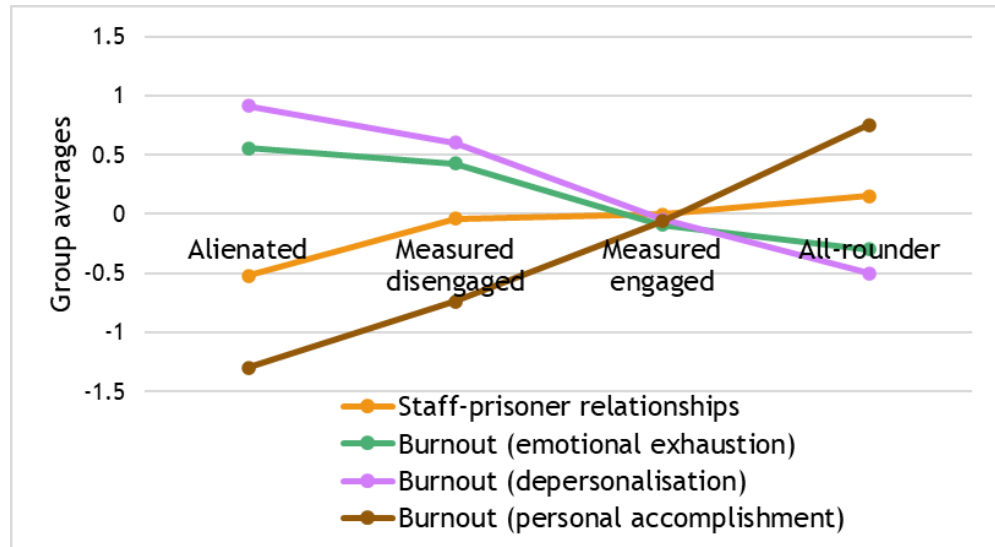
- *Most of the survey respondents can be described as ‘all-rounders’ (n=174) or ‘measured engaged’ (n=139) who strive hard to achieve their goals, are compassionate towards others, organised, and engaged in their work.*
- *The third largest subgroup can be described as ‘measured disengaged’ (n=107) who strive moderately to achieve their goals, are moderately compassionate towards others moderately organised but their level of work engagement was below the sample average and low.*
- *A small minority of survey respondents can be described as ‘alienated’(n=28) who are working the least hard to achieve their goals, are the least compassionate towards others, the least organised, and least engaged on their work.*
- *The ‘measured disengaged’ and ‘alienated’ subgroups scored similarly on ‘work engagement’ but differed on their ‘achievement striving’, ‘understanding’ and ‘orderliness’ scores. The ‘measured engaged’ and ‘measured disengaged’ subgroups score almost identically on these measured but differed on their ‘work engagement’ scores.*
- *Membership to the subgroups represents a snapshot in time. In practise, prison officers could transition between the subgroups at any time depending on a combination of individual and external factors.*

3 Relationship Between Approaches to Prison Work and Staff Burnout and Staff-prisoner Relationships

The analysis of the survey data found statistically significant differences in staff burnout and the perceived quality of staff-prisoner relationships between the four subgroups. Compared to the ‘all-rounder’ subgroup, all the other subgroups had less positive views of the quality of staff-prisoner relationships, with the ‘alienated’ subgroup being the least positive. Compared to the ‘all-rounder’ subgroup, all the other subgroups were more burnt out, with the ‘alienated’ subgroup reporting the highest burnout. In Figure 2, the average score is presented as zero, and the standard deviation as one. Figure 2 indicates whether respondents in these subgroups tended to score above or below the average on staff burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, personal accomplishment) and the perceived quality of staff-prisoner relationships.

Figure 2

Estimated Means Plot Comparison of the Average Staff Burnout and Perceived Quality of Staff-prisoner Relationships per Subgroup



Key findings from this analysis are as follows:

- *There was a relationship between which subgroups respondents tended to belong to and the perceived quality of staff-prisoner relationships and staff burnout, when other variables that could potentially influence these outcomes were controlled for.*
- *Individual adaptability and perceptions of organisational fairness were statistically significant predictors of which subgroups respondents tended to belong to.*
- *Years of service, individual adaptability for learning new tasks, technologies and procedures, distributive justice, and interactional justice were statistically significant predictors of the perceived quality of staff-prisoner relationships and staff burnout, independent of which subgroup respondents tended to belong to.*

Recommendations

The findings could be used to identify individual and external factors that shape prison officers' fluidity, the perceived quality of staff-prisoner relationships, and staff burnout. By investing in these areas, prison services could foster prison officers' fluidity in their work, build resilience, and keep staff moving along the continuum towards the 'all-rounder' end. Making these investments could reduce the social and financial costs associated with staff burnout. Table 1 provides an example of how recommendations arising from this research could be mapped on to the Five Key Drivers of Workplace Wellbeing.

Table 1

Recommendations mapped on to the Five Key Drivers of Workplace Wellbeing.

Key Drivers of Workplace Wellbeing	Recommendations from this Research
Health	<i>The findings could inform targeted policies and interventions to reduce the risk of colleagues experiencing burnout being labelled, emphasising the role external factors may play, supporting staff to move towards the ‘all-rounder’ end of the continuum. Invest in mental health and wellbeing resources, staff rest areas, and healthy activities to build resilience.</i>
Purpose	<i>Staff training could apply the findings to further support prison officers’ individual adaptability and work engagement.</i>
Environment	<i>Organisations could explore ways to address perceived unfairness in the organisation because of the consequences for prison officers’ fluidity and work engagement.</i>
Relationships	<i>The findings could inform investments that create the circumstances that foster prison officers’ fluidity, work engagement, and appropriate relationships with prisoners.</i>
Security	<i>The findings could be used to argue for further resources to support prison officers to adapt to the increasing complexity of their work (e.g.) more frontline staff, more accommodation for prisoners.</i>

Publications and Contact Details

Peer-reviewed journal publications arising from this research are forthcoming shortly. The authors encourage prison services to contact us if they would like to find out more about the research and/ or discuss how the findings may be applied to support staff mental health and wellbeing.

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