

Prison Visitation as Kafkaesque: The Experiences of Family Members Navigating Penal Bureaucracy

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Introduction

- Confronting an ever-changing set of rules which compromise adjustment to these bureaucratic apparatus – especially 'prison cycling' in young offenders and caregivers
- Make sense of the ways through which family members experience the often bewildering and alienating infrastructure of prison visitation
- Close affinity between our observations of prisons, with the descriptions of confusion, alienation, bewilderment and hopelessness emphasised throughout Kafka's work.

Kafka on bureaucracy

- Kafka's novel, *The Castle* operates as a removed entity, where decisions are made by officials who are never seen, and where rules are seemingly impenetrable and indecipherable.
- 'What lies beneath the formal bureaucratic structure' (Hodson et al, 2012:259).
- Whilst rules may be opaque, confusing, alienating and fundamentally disorientating for those involved as subjects and/or interpreters of such rules, rules themselves as described in Kafka's works govern precisely *through these ambiguities*.

Method

- Semi-structured interviews with primary caregivers, mostly mothers visiting young male children in prison
- 61 family members, all referred to as pseudonyms
- Fieldwork in two prisons, but accounts also cover experiences when navigating other prisons as well.

Navigating rules and regulations

- [W]hen we first went as a first-time person they didn't really have a support system there, they kind of expected us to get on with the visit, and it was really hard because we didn't know what we was going into. So for someone for the first time I feel like they need some more support and it's explaining kind of just like, "Oh there's the lockers and you go through that door and you'll see it."
(Tamera)

- Well the problem that you've got is that it's very different in each prison. So the visiting routines are different, the way you can get money to them is different. So for this prison, for example, they've got the online, which is great, the online payment thing, so we can do that. The others, you have to send in a money order or a cheque – that takes time, it takes time for them to get settled in. You know, the problem is that when they get arrested and then they get remanded in custody, you know, you don't... For parents that have never been through this before, they don't know what to do. (Lara).

Powerlessness and frustration

- So it's frustrating, certainly, but it's not like dealing with anyone else in normal life, because you're completely powerless, not only to do much, but also to find out what the rules are. They won't tell you, they won't give you a booklet, or a leaflet, or any verbal information hardly, about what he's entitled to, and how the system works. Whereas at other prisons we did get an introductory leaflet and it was clearer (Dorothy)

- When you ring no one picks up the phone. You ring so many times before you get someone. I think maybe the best time to ring is like in the morning or something, I don't know, or... you know. Because I've rung that number forever when I kept on ringing before to get in touch with someone, just to speak to someone, and it just rang and rang and rang and rang, and I tried loads of times. (Michaela)

- I followed him [prison officer], I said, “excuse me, you know, visiting time is quarter past two ‘til four o’clock, isn’t it?” And he said to me, “well you’ll be lucky to get 30 minutes”. And I said, “sorry” ... he said as long as you get the bare minimum that's as much as you can ... you know, as long as you've got 30 minutes you should be happy. And I looked at my daughter and I said, “no, visiting time is until four o’clock, because of the way they book people in, you know, and if you are one of the ones ... we got there at two o’clock and visiting time is quarter past two” (Marjorie)

Ritual humiliation and mortification of visitors

- We have to wait for an officer to be available to take us down to the little cabin, now noting that my mother is frail, it can take us half an hour to walk from visits, and we are already half an hour later than everyone else visiting because of the officer situation, so instead of having a two hour visit we only ever get an hour, which I think is bullshit. (Clare)

Key points

- Family members struggling to learn and navigate prison rules, as well as being treated with extreme contempt in some cases
- We argue that dehumanisation is a consequence of rules, rather than *caused* by the failure of rules to deliver particular ends.
- Dehumanisation can be traced to a combination of emotional distance created between rule makers and rule enforcers (e.g. McCabe, 2015), as well as resource stripped service provision which harbours animosity towards those who seek support from its organisation.
- Kafka invites us to question and challenge the basis for rules and their underlying necessity and rationality.
- Where do we go from here?