

Communication Challenges Between Foreign Inmates and Norwegian Prison Officers

Richard Thripp

Oct. 10, 2013

Communication Problems and Language Barriers Between Foreign Inmates and Prison Officers

VALENTINA C. IVERSEN

St. Olav's Hospital, Department of Psychiatry, Trondheim, Norway

WENCHE L. MANGERUD

The Regional Centre for Child and Adolescent Mental Health (RBUP) Mid-Norway,
Department of Neuroscience, Faculty of Medicine, Norwegian University of Science and
Technology (NTNU Norway), Trondheim, Norway

TRINE TETLIE EIK-NES

Levanger Hospital, Levanger, Norway

ELLEN KJELSBERG

Centre for Forensic Psychiatry, Psychiatric Division Ullevaal, Oslo University Hospital,
Oslo, Norway

Introduction

- Article was published March 12, 2013 online.
- Appeared in the **Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies**
- Citation: Valentina C. Iversen, Wenche L. Mangerud, Trine Tetlie Eik-Nes & Ellen Kjelsberg (2013) Communication Problems and Language Barriers Between Foreign Inmates and Prison Officers, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 11:1, 65-77, DOI: 10.1080/15562948.2013.759042
- Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2013.759042>

Introduction

- 19 foreign inmates in a Norwegian prison
- Study of their communication strategies toward prison officers
- One-to-one, semi-structured interviews used

Demographics

- 7 African, 7 European, 5 Asian
- 18 males, 1 female
- Mean age was 36
- Mean sentence was about 6 years (71.7 months)
- Sentences ranged from 8½ months to 17 years
- 9 were married before being incarcerated
- 10 were separated, divorced, or living alone
- 8 with no children
- 10 with one child or more
- 1 would not say if he or she had children

Demographics

- 15 in prison for use or sale of narcotics
 - 2 in prison for murder
 - 1 in prison for robbery
 - 1 would not disclose
-
- 2 with college or university educations
 - 1 high school graduate
 - 9 with some secondary education
 - 4 with some primary education
 - 3 with no formal education



Methods



- Researchers chose qualitative study due to a lack of research reports in the field
- They felt this gave them more individual insight
- Data collected in November and December of 2009
- Only prisoners from one prison were studied, which was selected from six prisons that participated in a quantitative survey
- Prison officers were **NOT** interviewed—only foreign inmates

Methods

- Study was approved by Norwegian Correctional Services
- All informants were recruited through the prison administrators
- The lead researcher visited the prison and interviewed all the inmates
- **Recruitment was on a voluntary basis**

Methods

- All 19 interviews were conducted by the 1st author, Valentina C. Iversen, and were each about 1 hour.
- 17 were taped and transcribed.
- 2 prisoners declined to be recorded on tape, expressing fear that prison staff might obtain the recordings, so notes were taken instead.

Methods

- Participants were asked to verbally reconstruct one or more episodes involving aggression and communication problems
- A set of questions was used, but the researcher modified the scheme based on each participant's responses, to probe interesting and important areas
- Participants were asked to discuss how everyday communication worked, especially in situations where prison officers were involved

Methods



- Data was analyzed using thematic analysis
- Iversen and Mangerud separately coded the data, then compared their results and reached a consensus
- All stages were checked by an outside researcher
- Lists of keywords and notes were made from each transcript, and these were compared between participants for differences and similarities
- **Data analysis was then suspended for 2 weeks to allow for emotional distance and see if the researchers' analyses changed**
- Finally, the text was condensed into 3 major themes



- Many prisoners in the study felt there was nothing they could do to stay on the good side of the prison staff, so they chose **silence and isolation** instead.

Quotes from Inmates

- The following 6 slides are actual quotes from the participants that were included in the “Outcomes” section of the article.
- The quotes show what appears to be a systemic lack of communication between prison staff and foreign prisoners in this sample. Language barriers and lack of interpreters contribute to this divide, which may be compounded by racial and cultural discrimination.

Quotes from Inmates

- “Here there are big problems, I mean discrimination of foreigners. **There are no open doors for foreigners**, they are like a second class people ... and if inmates ask for help, I mean foreign inmates, it’s always a ‘no, we don’t have time, or no, it’s not like that,’ and that’s how they answer.” (Male, age 42) [p. 70]

Quotes from Inmates

- “They spoke to me in Norwegian, I said ‘I don’t understand Norwegian,’ but they continued to speak Norwegian, even though I could not understand. A guy (a prison officer) once came to me and said: ‘**Of course you speak Norwegian, but you don’t want to speak.**’” (Male, age 35) [p. 71]

Quotes from Inmates

- “It was really impossible to explain what I felt without having translators. They could not understand me. I **waited months for a translator**. I was irritated and angry. They didn’t believe me, as they thought that I was not seriously ill.” (Man, age 20) [p. 72]

Quotes from Inmates



- “During 4 years in prison, I have been **two years in solitary confinement**, and for no reason. They just took me out of the bed when I was asleep. It doesn’t matter if you’re born and raised in Norway ... you’re considered to be a foreigner, and there’s always problems when one applies for a permission leave or a visit. A foreigner inmate is allowed to have a visitor **once every eight weeks**, while a Norwegian can have a visit **two to three hours several days a week**.” (Male, age 36) [p. 73]

Quotes from Inmates

- “I don’t talk to them, because if I try to explain something to them, sometimes they don’t listen. Other things are more important than the language! I don’t really care about language. Maybe if I spoke Norwegian, I would have been more relaxed. I don’t think it is only about language. **Isolation is the way to avoid frustration and fighting.**” (Female, age 25) [p. 74]

Quotes from Inmates

- **“I speak Norwegian well.** If a prison officer misunderstands what I say, they don’t give me the possibility to explain again before they write a report and send it to the leader. They don’t understand what I really want to say. These situations happen often, and I get aggressive and angry each time this happens. **To avoid these situations, I prefer to stay on my own.** (Male, age 25) [p. 74]



Results

- The intention was to “explore how participants experienced their communication with prison staff.”
- By analyzing the transcripts, 3 themes were identified:
 - *Social and cultural differences*
 - *Emotional and psychological burdens*
 - *Withdrawing from others*
- **Foreign inmates chose isolation instead of confrontation. They perceived prison officers as discriminatory and dismissive of their cultures.**

Results

- Immigrants in the study had interpreters only at meetings with the district Court Judge or Criminal Division, but never in day-to-day life
- They communicated with gestures and body language, with almost no words
- Body language often reflected **anger and frustration**
- Many participants **felt mentally ill**, with some experiencing physical or psychological problems

Results



- Some communication problems were due to a lack of language skills
- Others stemmed from a lack of interest in the prisoner's point of view
- Most participants attributed communication problems primarily to their **background as immigrants**, rather than absence of communication skills
- They perceived **discriminatory attitudes** from prison officers as more of an impedance to communication than not speaking the same language!

Results

- Immigrant inmates in the study felt humiliated, being subjected to severe prison regulations and staff who do not care about their well-being.
- Making inferences, understanding metaphors, and deciphering ambiguity are quite difficult for migrants who did not grow up learning the language.
- Participants seemed to live in constant stress, fearing being misunderstood.

Results

- The inmates had emotional and psychological burdens relating to their status as foreign prisoners and felt out-of-control, especially when being placed in solitary confinement or otherwise punished without reason.
- Many chose withdrawal and isolation, refusing to interact with prison officers and sometimes fellow prisoners.
- Prisoners who have been cut off from family, friends, and their social network by being transferred from distant prisons are more likely to isolate themselves and suffer from declining mental health.



Implications

- Isolation and withdrawal are not acceptable solutions. They are psychologically detrimental, leading to anger, depression, lost of self-control, and self-destruction.
- Verbal and nonverbal communication between foreign prisoners and officers should be strengthened, perhaps through training programs and hiring prison staff who speak common foreign languages, such as Spanish in the United States.
- **More interpreters are needed.** Foreign prisoners should not be afforded interpretation only at criminal proceedings!

Implications

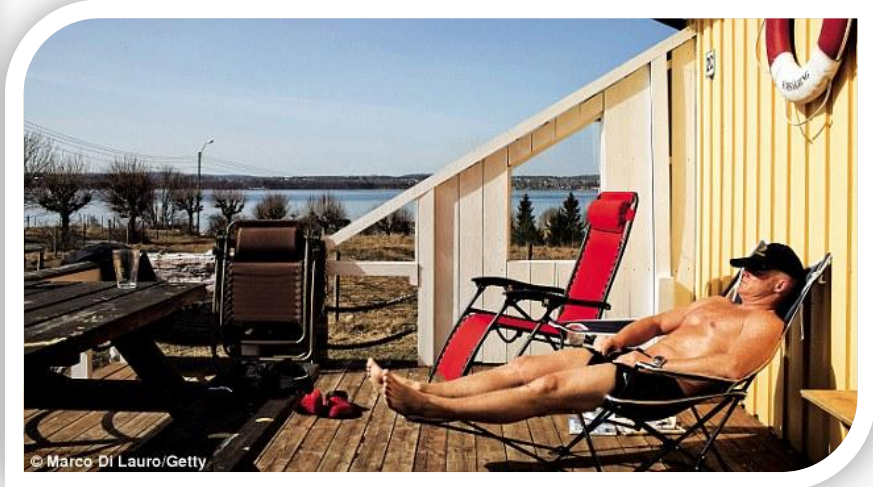
- Prison officers are at risk for being discriminatory, since they have the power to control the situation. If they dislike an inmate, communication becomes difficult.
- Most prison systems have a stated goal of rehabilitating their inmates. **Effective communication is essential to this goal.** Solitary confinement can be torturous and should be reserved as a punishment of last resort.
- Since the maximum prison sentence is 21 years in Norway, most inmates will survive to be released. Treating them humanely may reduce recidivism.

Implications

- Halden Prison is an experimental ecological prison on Bastøy Island, Norway offering unprecedented amenities. It was built over 10 years at a cost of £15 million and houses 252 prisoners including rapists and murderers.



Implications



- What if some of this money went to employ interpreters for nonviolent offenders such as the 15 inmates convicted of drug crimes in this study? Would that be a more worthwhile cause?

Implications



- Several participants said they react aggressively due to a **“culture crash”** rather than language problems. Perhaps prison staff should receive sensitivity training to help them understand what their prisoners are feeling?
- The treatment of prisoners may be a reflection of public opinion. If the people believe prisoners are sub-human criminals who do not even deserve 3 meals per day, how will this be reflected in the behavior of prison guards?
- Even native citizens can be discriminated against if they are not part of the majority group. What implications does this have for minorities in American prisons?