

Philosophical debate helps make maximum security prisoners less macho and more tolerant

April 12 2018, by Tony Trueman

Profound Socratic philosophical debate has helped tackle macho inmate culture and aid rehabilitation among prisoners in a maximum security jail, research says.

The British Sociological Association's annual conference in Newcastle heard today [Thursday 12 April] that regular sessions on Descartes, Aristotle, Plato and other thinkers encouraged trust and cooperation, even among the toughest Category A prisoners.

Dr. Kirstine Szifris, of Manchester Metropolitan University, led a series of discussions among inmates of Full Sutton prison in Yorkshire and Grendon prison in Buckinghamshire.

Debating philosophical ideas about morality challenged the hyper-masculine survival behaviour in the prison. Dr. Szifris led them through a series of philosophical problems to illustrate ideas such as Plato's ideal society, the Stoic philosophy of the Greeks and Romans, and the Socratic method of inquiry. One scenario led them to imagine they were shipwrecked on a desert island with other survivors and asked how they would organise their new society.

One of the two 12-week courses she taught at Full Sutton was to 'mainstream' prisoners, including those convicted of serious offences such as terrorism, gang crime and drug dealing.

Dr. Szifris, Research Associate at the Policy Evaluation and Research Unit at Manchester Metropolitan, found that "their interactions were characterised by bravado, one-upmanship and competition. It was evident from the outset that these men did not respect each other and that I would have to earn their respect and trust if I was going to attempt to maintain order in the classroom."

At first the teaching was difficult, she said. "In teaching the mainstream, the first half of the course felt like a battle. They could often be aggressive, accusatory and confrontational. The lack of positivity meant that I left the prison at the end of each day feeling exhausted and emotionally drained. I found these first few weeks difficult.

"I sat in the middle of it, attempting to encourage a group of men – including some hyper-masculine, macho characters alongside some of the more pious, calm, and careful Muslim prisoners – to sit in a circle and discuss Kant's Categorical Imperative and Plato's notion of Philosopher Kings in a calm and sensible manner. There were moments of surrealism in this."

Dr. Szifris, who worked as a maths teacher before going into prison research, said: "I'm not an easily intimidated person – I'd worked in difficult schools as a teacher and had confidence in my ability, but somebody who was quieter might have struggled to carry on."

After a few weeks the classes started to change the prisoners' attitude. "Although there were still issues around people failing to listen to each other and being disrespectful in their contributions, the underlying atmosphere had changed. The classes became much more manageable and enjoyable. Participants seemed to gain a level of respect for each other, and me, and comments and personal attacks disappeared.

"They relaxed, taking the classes for what they were meant to be – a

place to engage in open, philosophical conversation. The negativity had gone, and the lack of trust in me, the process, or each other, dissipated.

"Through emphasis on philosophical conversation and careful facilitating, participants began to appreciate the importance of listening to each other. They learned that working together to understand what Kant, Descartes or Plato were saying was more fruitful than trying to outdo each other."

One of the prisoners said of the course: "I think I'm pragmatically learning through these sessions – learning more tolerance. I have to broaden my horizons even more, understand people more, why, who, how, feelings, all of them stuff which I closed off."

Another said: "I want to turn my life around. The positive things are learning how to treat people properly and what is a just society – the Socrates thing." Another said: "It made us as a group more positive towards each other."

A non-participant prisoner told her: "They used to come back from philosophy separately, but now they come back together, like a unit. You have done something here."

Dr. Szifris said the participants' own assessment of their feelings showed that engaging in philosophy could improve relationships and trust among prisoners as well as encourage more open-minded ways of thinking. There were early indications that this type of education could increase empathy, decrease distress, improve trust and encourage self-reflection.

Dr. Szifris, who describes herself as a prison sociologist and criminologist, also taught successfully another group of vulnerable prisoners at Full Sutton, and [prisoners](#) at Grendon Prison. She carried out the research for her Ph.D. and is continuing her work in prisons.

Provided by British Sociological Association

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