Dissertation Concept Paper

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Context

This dissertation research will be bound within the context of adult correctional facilities in the United States. In addition, it may be further restricted to the State of Michigan given my geographic proximity to several facilities and access to corrections employees as I’m a Michigan Department of Corrections retiree. I served for over 20 years as a practitioner in various capacities ranging from correctional officer to mid-level management positions at central office. In addition, I remain connected to the practitioner community as a criminal justice academic and as a Governor appointed member of the Michigan Correctional Officers’ Training Council of which I currently serve as vice-chairman.

Why Study Prison Leadership?

Prison leadership is a topic that is not discussed frequently by the academe, even within the sub-specialty of corrections. Correctional literature is often nested within the larger subsets of criminal justice and sociology. Tewksbury and Mustaine (2001) conducted a study of all corrections-related research published between 1990-1999 to document where research can be found both by journal title and content. Their findings revealed that only 2% of all (N=1,121) scholarly writings produced during the sample period dealt with issues related to “administration and management/leadership.” The authors also discovered that the corrections literature was widely dispersed throughout many journals and dealt with the following issues:

Thematically, the most common areas of coverage are programs for inmates (56%), general correctional topics (32.9%), and non-correctional topics (17.6%). After that, specific topics occurring most frequently are cross-national corrections/international issues (9.7%), mental health programming and
assessment (9.0%), juvenile justice (8.8%), and alcohol and other substance abuse treatment programming (8.3%) (p. 439).

Given the paucity of attention paid to leadership within the correctional context, I believe my dissertation will shed much-needed light and a renewed interest in correctional leadership. The goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of correctional officers’ lived-experience with regard to paramilitary organizational structure as it relates to leadership. Based on the theory that emerges, perhaps alternative forms of leadership can be offered for consideration as part of my long-range scholarly agenda.

**Dissertation Research Question**

*What is the lived-experience of correctional officers as it relates to the current paramilitary command-and-control organizational structure?*

**Rationale For Inquiry**

It seems that with the professionalization of the corrections field in 1980’s, which required per-service college credits, there is a need to rethink the traditional command-and-control paramilitary governance model (e.g., Musheno, 1986). This type organizational structure was well suited for industrial aged applications but has perhaps outlived its usefulness in today’s knowledge-based economy. This is particularly salient within a profession—such as corrections—that relies predominantly on one’s interpersonal skills to gain inmate compliance. Thus, implying a sense of collaboration among the community of practice.

I’m interested in bringing contemporary leadership theory and practice to the fore by proposing a migration to more adaptive models of leadership as espoused by Heifetz,
et al., (2009) and others. Complexity theory is also an area of interest as I contemplate a possible future-state of professional practice within the correctional setting. Prison environments are perhaps complex adaptive systems as defined in the literature (e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2007). If so, current prison operations are simply too constrained under bureaucratic rule to be responsive to emergent change. Further, the current structure does not allow for adequate officer autonomy and decision-making.

Based on the extant literature, it would appear that there are several benefits to considering more contemporary organizational structures that may address many problematic issues identified in the literature such as role conflict/ambiguity, low autonomy, inadequate race/gender responsiveness, low supervisory support, overly centralized structures, a lack of generational workforce responsiveness, destructive psychosocial factors impacting employee wellness, inadequate officer performance measures, and prison violence.

However, before proposing such radical departures from the status quo, I believe it’s prudent to methodically capture a detailed account of some officers’ lived experiences within the current paradigm. What emergent themes, patterns, and theory will appear following a rigorous exploration into their daily work? This emergent theoretical underpinning is the foundation for exploration into future adaptations of prison leadership schemes.

**Methodology**

I’m struck by the lack of qualitative studies published regarding correctional leadership. The culture of inquiry is firmly rooted in the positivist epistemological perspective relying nearly exclusively on quantitative studies. This seems
counterintuitive for a field that is so reliant on interpersonal relationships, or a “people business” as described by many of my practitioner colleagues. There is an opportunity here to produce a significant contribution simply by looking at some previously asked questions from a more constructivist approach. Tewksbury, Dabney, and Copes (2010) conducted a study of the 15 major criminal justice peer-reviewed scholarly journals from 2004 to 2008 and found a total of 120 articles incorporating a qualitative method of inquiry which comprised only 5.74% of all articles published during the above timeframe (p. 406). This further demonstrates the long-standing practice of using quantitative analysis to explore myriad criminal justice phenomena.

Thus, I intend to explore my research question using Grounded Theory (GT) to figure out “what all is going on” regarding leadership as it relates to organizational structure in prisons. This method uses a constant comparison approach in which data are collected and analyzed concurrently as new insights emerge. The coding of interview data takes place with the assistance of NVivo 9 software to graphically organize data for patterns leading toward theory creation. I’ve recently completed a 6 hour NVivo 9 training webinar and learned many of its basic features.

The literature currently under review concerning this method comes from both contemporary and seminal sources (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1968; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). I’m currently experimenting with grounded theory as part of ILA-B and will begin collecting interview data after March 1, 2011 followed by rigorous coding and analysis. In the tradition of grounded theory coding, this work is taking place with the help of a coresearcher, Annette Cohen, who has agreed to code my data as well. Similarly, I will be
working closely with her and assisting with data coding for her research to gain experience with this method. Interestingly, the team approach is not for purposes of verification as one may immediately conclude. Rather, it’s intended to find additional meaning that may be missed by only one coder as to improve the overall “richness” of the interpreted raw data.

**Conclusion**

The published empirical findings are overwhelming that correctional employees suffer undue stress and reduced productivity due to organizational issues resulting from rigidity and a lack of autonomy. Emerging scholarship focused on alternative structural models has the potential to advance the discourse beyond studies looking at stress, burnout, and job satisfaction that seem more like symptomatic phenomenon. Rather, future research should examine the structural underpinnings of bureaucracy and organizational structure that may be the root cause of stress. To continue relying on an industrial-age organizational scheme in a knowledge-based economy seems destined for failure. Foundational scholarship utilizing the leadership and change literature is needed to bridge the gap toward a post-bureaucratic era in corrections. Further, using more qualitative approach and get to the underlying human impact of the paramilitary structural designs is paramount as more information is needed regarding one’s “lived experience” within the correctional culture. The foundational knowledge for this research ought to begin with a rigorous understanding of how corrections officers experience leadership under the current structure. Clarity regarding this phenomenon will guide recommendations for future alternative leadership models if warranted.
References


