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MANAGING EMOTIONS IN PENITENTIARY CENTRES

NEWSLETTER DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH

INVESBREU

Presentation

One of the aims of the Centre for Legal Studies and Specialised Training (CEJFE) is to publicise and disseminate topical scientific issues in the fields of justice and criminality, which it does through a number of media outlets, notably *Invesbreu*, its research bulletin. In issue 70, we present two studies that were given financial funding by the CEJFE through its annual public call for applications for research grants in 2014. By promoting these studies, the CEJFE is working to support areas of research and action aimed at introducing improvements into the working processes of professionals employed in the field of sentence enforcement.

The first research study we present, *The Practice of Yoga in Penitentiary Centres in Catalonia. Case Study of the Men's Penitentiary Centre in Barcelona*, describes and evaluates this relaxation technique in Catalan penitentiary environments. The report explains how yoga has helped to improve inmates' quality of life and describes how it has reduced the level of incidents due to antisocial behaviour. The results lead the authors to conclude that yoga offers tools for improving the physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing of inmates in penitentiary centres.

The second study, *Risk Factors for Serious Self-directed Violent Behaviour in the Penitentiary Environment*, seeks to detail and evaluate the risk factors associated with severe self-directed violence. The factors that best predict this type of behaviour are "length of sentence", "marijuana consumption", "diagnosis of a Cluster B personality disorder", "death of a loved one", "break-up with partner" and "family history of suicide".

Both these research projects consider inmates' physical and psychological wellbeing, promote good practices in the realm of health and focus on those risk and protection factors that penitentiary centres and the staff working in them can have an impact on and propose measures to improve.



First investigation

The Practice of Yoga in Penitentiary Centres in Catalonia. Case Study of the Men's Penitentiary Centre in Barcelona

Authors: Mar Grieria Llonch, Anna Clot Garrell and Marta Puig Ruiz

Introduction: yoga in the penitentiary environment

At 9.30 am every Friday, more than 20 inmates of various ages and backgrounds from different cellblocks meet in the theatre at the Men's Penitentiary Centre in Barcelona for a yoga session. When they arrive, they remove the benches and chairs and put them in a corner and they roll out their yoga mats on the ground, take off their shoes, sit down and wait for the volunteer teacher who runs the class to enter. Some inmates have been doing yoga every week for over two years; others have only just begun. Most take the class very seriously and often applaud at the end.

The Men's Penitentiary Centre is not an exception in the Catalan prison context, as it is becoming increasingly common for regular yoga classes to be held in penitentiary institutions. Much of this growing popularity is due to the work of World Prem, a not-for-profit organisation that signed an agreement with the Catalan government Ministry of Justice to promote yoga. In addition, there are volunteers who, on an individual basis or through other organisations, are running yoga activities in other penitentiary centres.

Catalonia is not alone in having yoga courses in its prisons, as classes have been proving increasingly popular in Europe and elsewhere around the globe. To a certain extent, the use of yoga in prisons and among vulnerable and/or underprivileged groups as a tool to improve individuals' wellbeing and quality of life is becoming more and more widespread and increasingly seen as legitimate. A number of programmes are being run internationally, among them the Yoga Behind Bars project in the United States, the work of the Parinaama Foundation in Mexico and the Prison Phoenix Trust in British prisons. Coinciding with the spread of this kind of programme, there has been an increase in the research studies that examine the impact of yoga, meditation and Tai Chi – 'holistic therapies and/or activities', as they are known – to promote the quality of life and wellbeing of people who regularly engage in them. Numerous studies have found a positive correlation between yoga and improved state of mind, reduced anxiety or anger and lower perceived stress.

Objectives

The main aim of the research was to understand the spread and increasing popularity of yoga in prison institutions by taking a two-pronged approach: firstly, by placing the emphasis on the individual – in this case, the inmate – and their phenomenological experience of practising yoga; and secondly, by looking at the penitentiary institution, the conditions in this environment that make the existence and popularity of yoga possible as an activity that supports the rehabilitation function of sentences that deprive people of their freedom.

Methodology

Taking as our basis the projects conducted in Europe and elsewhere at an international level on the same subject, we adopted the strategy of an instrumental qualitative case study and selected a yoga course run three days a week over two months in the Men's Penitentiary Centre in Barcelona. The choice was determined by the criteria of accessibility and availability. The group of inmates who participated in the course was mixed and consisted of people of very diverse ages and nationalities.

Table 1. Distribution of participants by age

Age	Number of inmates
20-30 years old	5
31-40 years old	7
41-50 years old	6
over 50 years old	6
Total	24

For most of the participants in this intensive yoga course, this was the first time they had been in prison (N=22), as just two of them had a previous criminal record.

All the inmates taking part in the course were in preventive detention. The average time spent in prison was eleven and a half months. Consequently, this group had largely been through the initial adaptation phase and were familiar with the usual workings of the prison.

The reasons given at the outset by the inmates about why they had signed up for the course were very varied and we have organised them into three categories.

Table 2. Initial reason for signing up for the intensive yoga course

Reason	Number of inmates
Pragmatic reasons to do with use of time and opportunities	6
Reasons to do with looking after their body	2
Reasons to do with mental and spiritual wellbeing	7
Other	4
NR/DK	5

Only half of the participants had prior knowledge of yoga, while the other half had never done any before.

The research methodology combined various techniques for collecting the data. As well as active observation of the yoga classes, two types of questionnaires were designed and implemented. Firstly, inmates were surveyed using open and closed questions; and secondly, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with prison staff, volunteer yoga teachers and inmates who regularly participated in the activity. The purpose of these surveys and interviews was to gather not just different views and assessments of the implementation and effects of yoga in the prison environment but also the narratives of the actors involved.

In keeping with the qualitative nature of the research, transverse data analysis was carried out during the research process.

Results

The analysis of the surveys and interviews shows that there is a very high degree of satisfaction with the activity among participants and prison staff. The interviewees state that they can perceive the benefits of the activity on three different and interrelated levels: improved physical wellbeing, relational wellbeing and psychological and emotional wellbeing.

The analysis also reveals that the popularity of yoga in the penitentiary environment is largely due to its ability to provide a channel for the ideal of rehabilitation without impeding the objectives of control and security on which the prison places importance. Yoga is an activity that has a potential impact on a number of levels. Firstly, it is a physical exercise that requires participants to engage in bodywork and as such it offers an outlet for physical energy and an opportunity for personal improvement in this ambit. The yoga class is a space for paying attention to the body and, as the researchers Baarts and Pedersen say, practising yoga makes people view their bodies as a 'conscious object' and more mindful of their corporeality. This increased awareness often represents the first step in encouraging inmates to take better care of their body and to adopt healthier behaviours.

Secondly, through yoga's breathing techniques and meditation, it facilitates inmates' emotional self-control and contributes to the management of day-to-day life. The serenity and mental calmness offered by the space in which yoga is practised, combined with the learning of models of self-restraint, develop into mechanisms for behavioural and emotional control. In line with the existing scientific evidence, the participants perceive that yoga contributes to their emotional wellbeing and this is the main reason why virtually all the inmates say that they would join another intensive yoga course if they were offered the opportunity.

The existential angst potentially caused by prison stays – especially preventive detention and hence during the first period spent in prison – can be countered by yoga, which can offer new resources and a space in which inmates are able to find answers and construct meaningful narratives for themselves. The sociologist Eva Illouz says that ours is a society in which therapeutic discourses – part psychology and part holistic spiritualities – have come to constitute one of the main codes through which subjectivity is expressed, transformed and directed. The rise of yoga in the prison environment – but also in other spaces midway between therapy, leisure and education - is indicative of the growing success of therapeutic culture in modern-day society. A therapeutic culture that shuns traditional spaces and emerges through practices such as yoga, tai chi and Reiki. The rapid spread of these activities in the prison environment is to a large extent due to the fact that they are perceived as practices in keeping with the concept of the subject that underpins the rehabilitating ideal of the contemporary penitentiary model.

In institutional terms, yoga's affinity with the principles of education and security, given its dual function as a pacifying tool and because it fills inmates' time, is an essential element in understanding and explaining the acceptance and promotion of this practice in the prison environment. In addition, the social affinities between educators and yoga volunteers make its presence even more feasible. Moreover, the financial costs involved are extremely low and hence it is an easily exportable activity.

In short, the case study of the intensive yoga course at the Men’s Penitentiary Centre in Barcelona demonstrates that yoga enjoys a high level of legitimacy in the eyes of both the participants and the staff at the prison. Moreover, it also shows the possibility of considering yoga as a way to improve the physical, relational and emotional wellbeing of prison inmates. It is reasonable to think that the ongoing practice of yoga and immersion in its philosophical and spiritual universe offer inmates tools for giving new meaning to their lives, for rebuilding private spaces and for planning new futures.

This early step in research into yoga in prisons in Catalonia is in keeping with the international scientific evidence mentioned earlier in that it demonstrates the potential of this activity in the penitentiary environment. We hope that this research is not the end but the first of many other studies that will discuss, refute and compare this initial evidence.

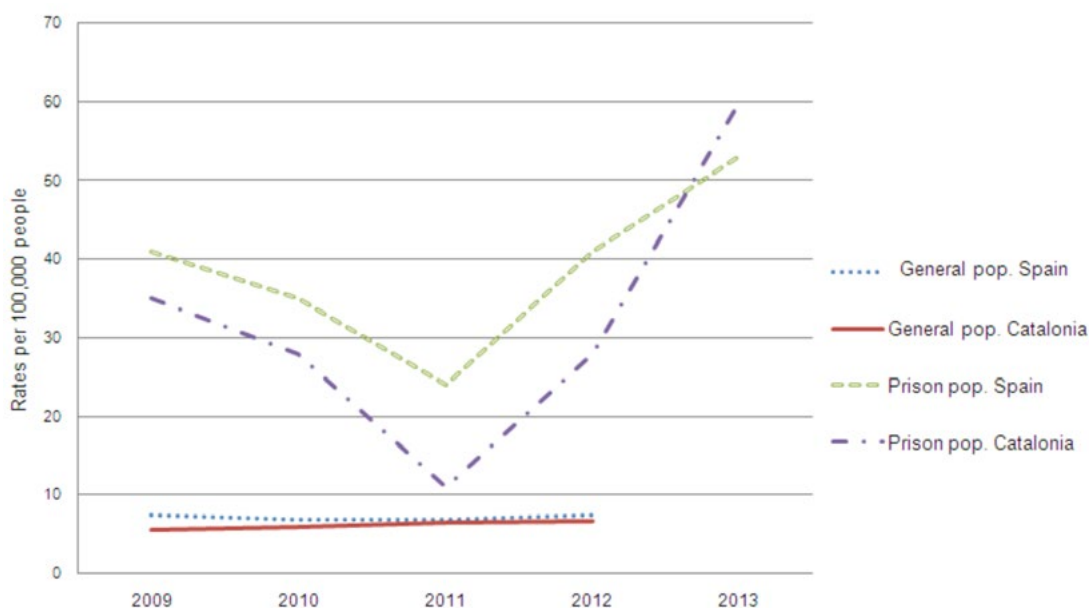
Second investigation

Risk Factors for Serious Self-directed Violent Behaviour in the Penitentiary Environment

Authors: María del Mar Rey Lede and Joan Manuel López Capdevila

Introduction

Self-directed violence has always been a serious health problem and, as a result, various countries and researchers throughout history have studied this kind of behaviour. Within the general population, there are certain groups who present greater vulnerability, as is the case of the prison population. In Spain, the *Guía Práctica Clínica de Prevención y Tratamiento de la Conducta Suicida* (Practical Clinical Guide to Preventing and Treating Suicidal Behaviour) talks of a rate of self-directed violence among inmates in preventive detention that is 7.5 times higher than that found among the general population and 6 times higher among sentenced inmates.



Graphic 1. Suicide rates in the general population and the prison population

Given article 3.4 of the Prison Regulations, which states “It is the duty of the Penitentiary Institution to safeguard the life, safety and health of inmates”, there is a need to implement strategies to prevent and act in response to self-directed violent behaviour, since it is not only a serious health problem but also a responsibility of the institutions concerned. For this reason, research must be carried out in order to determine paths towards prevention and action.

Objectives

The *overall objective* was to identify the risk factors associated with serious self-directed violence in the prison environment. The *specific objectives* were to: 1) discover whether the factors described as a risk in the literature were also present in a sample of the Catalan prison population; 2) analyse whether there were differences between the *study group* and the *control group*; 3) identify which of the risk factors analysed are the most influential in relation to this kind of behaviour; and 4) analyse the most common characteristics of this type of behaviour in the prison environment.

Methodology

A total of one hundred inmates were enrolled in the study: 50 in the *study group* and 50 in the *control group*. Each inmate was selected by means of random sampling in four penitentiary centres in the province of Barcelona. All the inmates were part of the Catalan penitentiary system, were Spanish males aged over 25 and had already been sentenced. Subjects in the *study group* had at least one episode of self-directed violence (which includes attempted suicide) registered in their prison records between 1.1.1990 and 1.3.2014. Inmates in the *control group* had no recorded episode of self-directed violence during their prison stay. All the inmates were informed of the purpose of the research and gave their consent to participate in a completely voluntary manner and to the use of the information gathered. Data of a personal nature was protected at all times.

The information was gathered using the Sistema Informàtic Penitenciari Català (SIPC; Catalan Penitentiary Computer System) and RisCanvi (a tool for evaluating risk) and by interviewing the inmates themselves. A personality test (NEO Five-Factor Inventory, a reduced version of Costa & McCrae's Revised Neo Personality Inventory) was conducted, as was a semi-structured interview designed expressly to pick up the risk factors being studied. The interview was the same for both groups, though it was slightly extended for the *study group* in order to evaluate the target behaviour.

A total of 20 risk factors were studied plus another ten factors related to the characteristics of the self-directed violence committed by inmates in the *study group*. These factors made reference to demographic traits and were related to the crime committed and the inmate's personal and family history. With regard to the characteristics of the self-directed violence, the factors taken into account were place, method, time and the views of the interviewees.

Firstly, the variables for both groups were studied in order to assess their ability to distinguish between the two types of inmates. This analysis was carried out separately: on the one hand the NEO-FFI scores, and on the other the rest of the common variables. Secondly, the specific variables of the *study group* were studied in order to determine the possible existence of different types of self-directed violent behaviour depending on the frequency with which they were committed.

Results

The results obtained show that there are significant differences between the two groups. We can state that people deprived of their freedom who have committed serious self-directed violence and/or attempted suicide have specific characteristics that distinguish them from other inmates.

A total of 14 variables showed significant differences between the *study group* and the *control group*: inmates in the *study group* obtained a significantly higher average score than those in the *control group* for the variables "Total sentence length", "Criminal record" and "Record of self-directed violence" (an average sentence length of 16.9 years as opposed to 9.26 for the *control group*; an average criminal record going back 3.84 years compared with 1.48 for the *control group*; and an average of 1.28 previous acts of self-directed violence versus 0.16 in the *control group*). With regard to the categorical variables, inmates in the *study group* showed significant differences in the variables "Physical health problems" (mainly Hepatitis C), "History/Presence of severe mental disorder" (mainly schizophrenia), "Personality disorder" (mainly Cluster B), "Family history of suicide", "Consultation with a mental health professional", "Substance abuse/consumption" (mainly hash, marijuana and heroin), "Death of a loved one", "Break-up with partner" and "Frequent cellblock changes".

Once the variables associated with the group variable had been identified, they were included as predictors in a binary logistic regression analysis. The final model concluded with six variables as the main predictors, as they were capable of predicting membership of the group with 90.9% success.

With regard to the personality factors, significant differences were again found between the two groups. Inmates in the *study group* scored significantly higher in the "Neuroticism" variable and significantly lower in the "Extraversion" and "Responsibility" factors. By extracting these differences, a binary logistic regression analysis was done in order to determine the possibility of predicting which group inmates fall into by using personality traits. This model concluded with two of the five personality factors as the main predictors, "Neuroticism" and "Extraversion", with the first of these being the most influential.

To sum up, people deprived of their freedom and who committed an act of self-directed violence and/or attempted suicide are generally the youngest inmates, have no stable partner or spouse, are marked by their life of crime and in many instances already have a prior record of self-directed violence. It is very likely that they have already been diagnosed with some mental health disorder (particularly schizophrenia) or personality disorder (especially those that belong to the Cluster B group). The possible abuse of substances, notably the consumption of marijuana and heroin, must also be added. It is highly likely that they have suffered significant trauma in their lives (such as the death by suicide of a close relative or the death of a loved one while they have been in prison) and they may also present difficulties in adapting to the penitentiary centre (difficulties evidenced in frequent changes in cellblock).

This study found that the variables best able to predict serious self-directed violence and attempted suicide in the prison environment are: the length of the sentence (the longer the sentence, the greater

the risk); the consumption of marijuana (the consumption of depressants leads to a higher risk); Cluster B personality disorder (characterised by greater emotional instability, which raises the risk that the individual may engage in this type of behaviour); break-up with their partner (the end of a relationship while the inmate is in prison raises the risk); and lastly a family history of suicide (those people with a close relative who has committed suicide are more likely to do the same). With regard to personality factors, those inmates who scored highly for “Neuroticism” and “Extraversion” generally also present a higher risk of committing serious acts of self-directed violence.

The second phase of the study focused on identifying whether there is some kind of common pattern depending on the number of episodes of self-directed violence but no conclusive results could be drawn. Even so, it was possible to detect various tendencies in relation to the number of episodes and the “age”, “sentence length” and “heroin consumption” variables. Those inmates with a record of *multiple* acts (>10) were notably younger and had longer sentences. Inmates with a record of *several* acts (2-9) were characterised by being older and having a higher level of heroin consumption. Lastly, those inmates with a *single* recorded episode of self-directed violence were in between the other two groups in terms of their age, had served significantly less of their sentence and did not take heroin.

In this second phase, multiple correspondence analysis was done in order to maximise the differences between the three groups. It was found that there was an overlap between the groups even though possible tendencies depending on the number of attempts were seen: those who had committed a *single* act of self-directed violence had generally used more lethal methods such as “throat cutting” and their main motive was to “get attention”. Those inmates who had committed *several* acts carried them out at the “weekend” and their common reason for doing so was a “wish to die”. Lastly, the inmates with a record of *multiple* acts used “ingesting objects” and “cutting” as their main methods, generally committed their self-directed violence during “working days” and their principal motives were the “deviance of violence” and to make “claims”.

Invesbreu newsletters published

- 1 Inmigrantes y criminalidad en Europa. Los ejemplos de Alemania y España. Enero 1995.
- 2 La cárcel pública de Barcelona durante la etapa isabelina / La casa de corrección de Barcelona (1836-1856). Enero 1998.
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