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“He Ended up Like a Merguez Sausage”. Trauma in a French High Security Prison

Prison officers’(PO) trauma has been addressed by the literature, but little is known about their experience in the French context. As part of a broader study, we were asked to document the experience of the correctional staff working in a historical high security prison set in a 900-year-old former monastery. Using appreciative inquiry, we conducted 27 interviews and found that most of the interviewees had been repeatedly subjected to trauma. There was also a patent intergenerational transmission of trauma, which both increased its impact and served as a coping mechanism. We additionally found that rurality further helped POs cope with trauma by facilitating a cut-off between prison and their normal life in the form of sports or rural activities.

Keywords: correctional officers, high-security prisons, intergenerational transmission of trauma, prison, prison officers, rural prisons, stress, trauma

„Er endete als Grillwürstchen“. Trauma in einem französischen Hochsicherheitsgefängnis

Traumata von Strafvollzugsbediensteten sind mitunter das Thema von Forschung und Literatur, wenig jedoch ist im französischen Kontext über deren tatsächliche Erfahrungen bekannt. Für eine größer angelegte Studie wurden wir gebeten, die Erfahrungen von Vollzugsbeamten in einer historischen Strafvollzugsanstalt in einem 900 Jahre alten ehemaligen Kloster zu dokumentieren. Mithilfe des Appreciative-Inquiry-Ansatzes führten wir 27 Interviews. Aus ihnen ergab sich, dass die meisten wiederholt Traumata erlitten hatten. Offensichtlich wurde auch eine generationsübergreifende Weitergabe von Traumata, die einerseits deren Wirkung verstärkte, andererseits bei der Bewältigung half. Wir fanden auch heraus, dass eine ländliche Umgebung zur Bewältigung beitrug, weil sie eine Trennung von Gefängnis und Alltagsleben ermöglicht, etwa durch Sport oder andere Aktivitäten auf dem Land.

Schlagwörter: Gefängnis; generationsübergreifende Weitergabe von Traumata; Hochsicherheitsgefängnis; Justizvollzugsbeamte; ländliche Gefängnisse; Strafvollzugsbedienstete; Stress; Trauma

1. Introduction

It was noted several decades ago that the job of a correctional officer (hereafter, a prison officer or PO) was among the most stressful of all jobs (Cooper, Cooper & Eaker, 1988; Finn, 1998) and thus qualified as a ‘high strain’ job (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). At that time, there was insufficient evidence regarding the risk factors and the severity of PO professional strain, but since then, the literature regarding stress, burnout and, to a lesser degree, trauma, ranging from observational or interview-based methodologies to quantitative and comparative works

and studies including psychometric measurements, has grown considerably. It has yielded a large amount of information pertaining to individual, contextual and institutional risk factors, manifestation and coping strategies. A good proportion of this literature has worked on classifications and typologies (e. g. Auerbach, Quick & Pegg, 2003; Keinan & Malach-Pines, 2007). The literature has largely covered anglophone jurisdictions, but France, often absent from the international literature, has also been the subject of good quality studies (e. g. Boudoukha et al., 2013).

There are, however, several justifications for adding to this very rich body of research. First, there are good reasons to believe that the prison context is undergoing important changes. Internationally, authors have commented that sources of stress might be increasing. Prisoners may have become more violent, more likely to be mentally ill, and more likely to be substance abusers (Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000). In France, this evolution was already noted more than fifteen years ago by the National Consultative Ethical Committee for Sciences and Health (Comité Consultatif National d'Ethique pour les Sciences de la Vie et de la Santé, 2006). In the case of mental illness, this was the result of the continuing decline in the recognition of not guilty by reason of insanity status, itself caused by the growing belief among psychiatrists that criminal punishment was necessary for offenders with mental health issues (Lafaye, Lancellevée & Protais, 2016). However, it is difficult to measure this phenomenon exactly as it is probably under-reported, the reporting rate may be different in some prisons than in others, and the definition of what constitutes violence may also vary (Liebling, Price & Shefer, 2011). Although there is little reliable data on substance use in French prisons, recent methodologically more robust studies (Rousselet et al., 2019) suggest that a significant proportion of prisoners have an alcohol or drug abuse problem. Other work shows that use continues during detention, although it may partially shift from some illicit drugs to prescribed products (Protais, Milhet & Díaz Gómez, 2019). It is therefore impossible to document, for France, the idea of an increase in consumption by prisoners in recent years. However, it is appropriate to state that it remains a major problem in French prisons (Protais, Morlet d'Arleux & Roustide, 2019).

It also seems probable that the violence by prisoners against POs has significantly increased (Boudoukha et al., 2013) since previous studies (Chauvenet, Orlic & Rostaing, 2008). In France, many prisoners are radicalised, and a number of terrorist attacks have taken place in prison settings and have targeted POs. At the very least, this has created a climate of fear and contributed to a stronger focus on security (Herzog-Evans, 2019). Prior to these recent events, France, like other jurisdictions, had gradually embraced rehabilitative policies, focusing less on security and control, and thereby possibly creating role stress. Currently, rehabilitation and safety are both presented as the main goals of French correction (see Art. 707 of its Procedural Criminal Code), yet when correctional agencies embrace both rehabilitation and safety, role stress is at its highest (Bourbonnais et al., 2007; Kahn et al., 1964). Additionally, prison rules have become more humane and less stringent, with prisoners being allowed to use land lines (Herzog-Evans, 2019), benefitting from conjugal visits (Rambourg, 2005), and gaining access to common law healthcare (Céré, 2017), to education (Berry, 2018) and, in the European context, to legal action and judicial review (Slama & Ferran, 2014), thus transforming prisons into 'prisons of rights' (Daccache et al., 2018). A third reason to revisit the issue of trauma in prisons, in the French context, is to explore lesser-known French high security institutions. The literature has shown so far that high security prisons are usually both more stressful and more traumatic (Tsirigotis, Gruszczyński & Peczkowski, 2015). In the anglophone context (Hensley et al., 2005), it has been reported that maximum security facilities and institutions populated

by a higher percentage of younger offenders are more likely to report higher rates of disruptive inmate behaviour. Conversely, in France, maximum security prisons tend to house older prisoners who have committed very serious crimes. Young and disruptive individuals are typically found in minimum security jails that house detainees on remand and short-term prisoners (*maisons d'arrêt*) (Herzog-Evans, 2019). A rule of thumb is thus that high security prisons are less stressful, but that, when accidents occur, those accidents tend to be much more serious. In 2017, we were asked to study the correctional staff working in a historical high security prison (Heullant-Donat et al., 2011). This institution, 'The Abbey', is set in a 900-year-old former monastery, which was turned into a penal institution in 1814. In 2017, the Ministry of Justice made the contentious decision to close it. Consequently, whereas it had housed hundreds of individuals in the past, at the time of our study in 2017 there were only between 63 to 67 prisoners left. The ratio was therefore very favourable to POs, who at the same time numbered 105. Traditionally, in France, high security prisons are more 'comfortable' than remand and local jails because there is no overcrowding and there is more space to carry out multiple activities. At the time of our research, prison conditions were even more favourable as a result of the very low number of prisoners. In addition, one building had been completely renovated shortly before. However, for the POs, the closure and subsequent disuse of one of the historic buildings was a source of great sadness and symbolic of the announced closure. Rooted in France's great history and literature (Hugo, 1834), The Abbey is additionally charged with trauma related to past events. Most French citizens have heard of a 1971 hostage-taking and double murder committed by two inmates, Buffet and Bontems (both of whom were executed in 1972), and of similar events that regularly took place after that date. The 1971 incident became iconic since the attorney who defended Buffet and Bontems went on to become, in 1981, the minister of justice and abolished the death penalty. Trauma, and notably trauma resulting from past events, affecting the entire community of The Abbey's POs, is thus what characterises this (in)famous prison.

2. The literature

There is a wide range of literature that addresses issues of stress, burnout, and trauma amongst POs. Stress is the consequence of tensions that are experienced by individuals. When stress becomes chronic, burnout, which is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and diminished personal functioning (Maslach, 1993), can ensue, depleting the person's psychological resources (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980).

The prevalence of stress and burnout amongst POs is high (Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000). Auerbach et al. (2003) have listed the following risk factors: physical risk and danger; interactions with peers and supervisors; loss of control; red tape; lack of agency; long hours; and inadequate tools for the job. Others (Allard et al., 2003; Armstrong & Griffin, 2004; Botha & Pienaar, 2006; Garland, 2004; Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000; Schaufeli, Van Der Eijnden & Brouwers, 1994) have highlighted five key factors associated with PO burnout: role problems; work overload; demanding social contacts (see also Moon & Maxwell, 2004) and noting that stressed prisoners make for stressed POs and vice versa (van Ginneken et al., 2020); inferior social status; and lack of procedural justice (Lambert et al., 2019).

The literature has also pointed to individual factors, such as seniority (Lambert, Hogan & Tucker, 2009; Grossi, Keil & Vito, 1996 – but contra: Dial, Downey & Goodling, 2010). Psychologists have, additionally, uncovered individual vulnerabilities such as maladaptive schemas, notably mistrust/abuse (Young et al., 2006), being re-enacted in the workplace (Boudoukha, Przygodzki-Lionet & Hautekeete, 2016).

Moreover, research has pointed to environmental causes such as noise, dirt and clutter (Bierie, 2012; Srinivasan et al., 2003) and to institutional causes such as lack of autonomy or input (Whitehead, 1989). How correctional professions are perceived by the general public and, particularly, their lack of prestige (Vickovic, 2015) likewise has a detrimental effect on practitioners' mental health.

The literature has also attempted to categorise the different consequences of stress and burnout for POs. For instance, Keinan and Malach-Pines (2007) have proposed a three-pronged categorisation, listing psychological (e. g. excessive irritability), physiological (e. g. headaches) and behavioural consequences (e. g. anger outbursts). On this basis, it has been suggested that burnout leads to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and low professional efficiency (Alvares Duarte Bonini Campos et al., 2016).

If stress and burnout have been widely explored, slightly less is known about PO trauma. The American Psychiatric Association's DSM-V and the WHO's ICD-10 are the two most widely used diagnostic manuals in the world. For the present research, we use the definitions of the DSM because at the time our research was conducted, the ICD-10 had not yet been revised (version 11 will be in force on January 1st, 2022), while the DSM-V was the result of a more recent revision in 2013. In any case, the diagnostic criteria of both tools are very similar, if not identical, while it has been argued that the ICD-10 overestimates the prevalence of PTSD (Peters, Slade & Andrews, 1999). It seemed more prudent to rely on a more conservative definition. There are four different diagnostics listed as 'trauma' in the fifth edition of the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 2013): reactive attachment disorder; disinhibited social engagement disorder; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); and acute stress disorder. Only the last two are relevant for POs. According to the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), PTSD occurs when the person has been exposed to death or threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, by direct exposure (witnessing the traumatic event or learning about a close person being exposed to trauma) or indirectly (e. g., for POs, by taking down a prisoner who has committed suicide by hanging). The traumatic event is then persistently re-experienced, either in the form of unwanted upsetting memories, nightmares or flashbacks or by experiencing emotional distress or physical reactions after re-exposition. Acute stress disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) is a milder form of trauma. It shares most of the diagnostic criteria for PTSD but is not as long-lasting and does not alter memory in the same way. Acute stress disorder frequently precedes PTSD, but all forms of PTSD are not necessarily preceded by acute stress disorder.

International research has started to address the prevalence of, and the risk factors for, trauma experienced by POs. In United States statistics from 2005 to 2009, Harrell (2011) found that the rate of non-fatal workplace injuries sustained per 1,000 POs was 33.0, which, among 26 different professions, ranked third only to police officers and security guards. Denhof and Spinaris (2015) found that 25.7 % of US POs suffered from depression, 27 % suffered from PTSD (the figure was 53.4 % in another study by Jaegers et al., 2019), and 44.5 % suffered from psychological issues (depression, PTSD, alcohol abuse and so on) compared with 10.1 % in the general population. Other studies have found frequent suicidal ideation or behaviour (Stanley

et al., 2016) in POs, at a level that is significantly higher than in other law enforcement staff (Carleton et al., 2018). In France, on the basis of a sample of 235 POs (Boudoukha et al., 2016), it was found that 87 % had been victims of various forms of harm and 88 % had been confronted with more serious forms of trauma, such as the suicide, suicide attempt, or other self-harming act of an inmate. The experience of interpersonal violence (Blitz, Wolff & Shi, 2008; Boudoukha et al., 2016; De Conninck & Loodts, 1999), death (Barry, 2017), or suicide (Marzano, Adler & Clichitira, 2015; Wright et al., 2006), is particularly traumatic.

Trauma may have stronger consequences than chronic stress or burnout. Specifically, French academics (Boudoukha et al., 2013) have uncovered the following impacts of trauma on POs: 1) high emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation levels; 2) suspicious and mistrustful guard-to-inmate relationships; and 3) low accomplishment/self-efficacy, which reduces social support. Importantly, both depersonalisation (Ozer et al., 2003) and lack of social support (Guay, Bilette & Marchand, 2006) are strongly associated with PTSD.

The literature suggests that trauma is particularly prevalent in high security prisons (Micieli, 2008). French prisons have, in general, also been described as violent and as becoming increasingly so (Boudoukha et al., 2016; Direction de l'Administration Pénitentiaire, 2009, 2010), to the point where the prison system has recently created so-called special wards for violent detainees (Decree No. 2019-1504).

French (Chauvenet et al., 2008) and international (Nylander, Lindberg & Bruhn, 2011) research has, furthermore, focused on the way in which POs cope with acute stress or trauma. It has, inter alia, highlighted the following elements: drawing on one's personal strengths (Botha & Pienaar, 2006); doing the bare minimum that is required (Marzano et al., 2015; Nylander et al., 2011); listening to prisoners in the midst of a dangerous situation (Nylander et al., 2015); humour (Trounson & Pfeiffer, 2017); asking for the help of a third party (e. g. another PO) to act as a mediator (Nylander et al., 2011); using stress management protocols (Dial & Johnson, 2008; Waters, 1999); talking with colleagues, family members, or friends (Cullen et al., 1990); selectively ignoring negative cues (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978); and comparing oneself with less fortunate people or people in less favourable situations (Triplett, Millings & Scarborough, 1996).

More negative and more detrimental to POs' mental health are the following techniques (Cheek & Miller, 1983; Nylander et al., 2011): rigidly enforcing the rules and becoming authoritarian; absenteeism or leaving the job; substance abuse; and somatising or becoming ill. Another technique, detachment and cynicism regarding inmates (Nylander et al., 2011), is a frequent coping mechanism amongst POs. It is important to distinguish between, on the one hand, dissociative detachment, which is a diagnostic criterion for PTSD, and, on the other hand, professional detachment, which is a coping mechanism. Research suggests that lighter forms of detachment may show that PTSD is improving, whilst severe detachment reveals worsening PTSD (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2011).

Covington (2015) has listed four sets of techniques that can be utilised by prison institutions to help their staff cope with trauma. First, there is security, that is, guaranteeing, protecting, and ensuring the physical and emotional safety of staff. For instance, in French prisons traumatised guards can be placed in protected posts where they no longer have to interact with prisoners. Prison institutions can also take trauma into account by showing respect, care, and attention to their traumatised staff. A second component of trauma-focused institutional policies is trust. This consists in assuring traumatised staff that their need for distance and per-

sonal boundaries will be respected. It also consists more broadly in being clear about the institution's intentions and actions. A third component is choice and collaboration, which are characteristics of transformational leadership, a factor which is particularly protective (Atkin-Plunk & Armstrong, 2013). The fourth component of trauma-informed policy is knowledge. This means that the institution understands what trauma is and what the consequences of trauma are. For instance, when dealing with traumatised staff, the institution is mindful of the risk of other staff becoming secondary victims. Prison services that do not put in place trauma-informed policies run the risk of creating an authoritarian escalation that exacerbates the problem (Miller & Najavits, 2012).

Little is known about how French POs experience and cope with trauma, particularly in the context of high security settings. In 2017, we decided to explore this issue in the context of a larger study that we had been commissioned to conduct by the French Ministry of Justice. The aim of this larger study was to carry out a qualitative exploration of many facets of the PO experience in 'The Abbey', a high security prison set in a remote and rural part of northeast France in a former monastery. The Ministry of Justice was planning to close this prison and wanted to document, for 'one last time', this notoriously tight knit group of POs. Initially, trauma was not one of our intended themes. However, while conducting our interviews it soon became apparent that every single one of our interviewees referred to the direct experience of death, suicide, severe harm or risk of harm, for themselves, the prisoners, or their colleagues. Many had gone through a series of such incidents. Each of them had not only suffered trauma themselves but had also seen others going through it, and heard others talk about it. Additionally, because of their roots and family connections with each other, they had heard of previous traumatic events through their elders.

3. Methodology

We are not licensed psychologists, and our initial purpose was not to measure trauma. Nonetheless, we were compelled to deal with this theme, within the framework of our qualitative methodology, because it was omnipresent in the POs' discourse. What the French Ministry of Justice had asked us to do was, in essence, to 'download' the experience of their local PO staff before The Abbey closed down. In order to do this, we decided, along with a group of MA students, to use the semi-structured interview grid that the first author had developed in a former study pertaining to POs with high seniority (Herzog-Evans, 2015a, 2015b). The interview grid explored the professional values uncovered by Liebling (2004).

We initially encountered reticence from POs, given the sensitivity of the situation in relation to the upcoming closure of The Abbey. The initial interviews with a few volunteers were crucial in the constitution of our sample; the POs interviewed were clearly promoting our research. Many of the interviewees, who had initially come out of curiosity, and who indicated with an eye on the clock that they were pressed for time, ended up doubling the amount of time they had originally planned to speak. One by one, following a 'snowball effect', we ended up with a very diverse and interesting sample. It eventually comprised 20 POs (S1 to S20), two senior officers (G1 and G2), two deputy governors (C1 and C2), two prison governors (one of whom was the governor at the time of the study, and the other who had formerly held that post), and a retired 80-year-old former officer. Of our interviewees, 22 were male, and four were female. They had worked for an average of 19.4 years. The vast majority of them had worked in The

Abbey for the most of their careers. Their background was particularly diverse, ranging from former law students, former police officers or gendarmes, telephone operators, dental paramedics, or plumbers.

Following again in Liebling's footsteps, we used appreciative inquiry (AI), a 'strength-based approach' (Liebling, 2015, p. 252) to qualitative research relying on 'the power of the unconditional positive questions' (Liebling, 2015, p. 253), which focuses on the full range of human experience, thoughts and emotions, and not exclusively, as is frequently the case in prison research, on the negative. Thus, we systematically asked our questions in a positive and encouraging way, asking, for instance, 'what makes you happy to go to work when you take your shift?' or 'tell me about your best memory on the job'.

The majority of the POs who had arranged to spend an hour with us eventually remained for much longer. Methodologically speaking, AI is undeniably a very solid approach for when a researcher is dealing with traumatic material. It creates a particularly secure and intimate environment. Indeed, as Liebling has stated, 'What happens when we ask these questions is that individuals reveal what matters to them, how strongly they feel, what their strengths are' (2015, p. 254). The emotions that were expressed in this context were extremely intense both for the POs, who were able to recount these events and how they had coped with them, and for the researchers and the students.

For the analysis of our data, we opted for the creation of a common codebook, shared continuously, on which we first followed the themes initially selected as the object of the research (e. g. the legal socialisation of supervisors, which will be the subject of another article), and then added the themes that subsequently emerged, in particular the one reported in this article. The interview transcripts were pre-coded according to these themes, this allowing the other themes to emerge. They were then systematically re-exploited to check the relevance of our code book.

4. Findings

We shall now present our findings regarding our sample's experience of trauma. We shall then see that, depending on their personal background, the POs used different coping mechanisms, after which, we shall examine what tools the prison services have put in place and how nature itself was able to provide an unexpected form of trauma management.

It is generally understood, in the French context, that high security prisons house fewer prisoners, and enjoy significantly better conditions, than other prisons. This is even more true in a mediaeval building:

"Pressure, there ain't much of it." (S 1)

"The first thing you do is get your cuppa char, have a chat with your colleagues and ... after that you do your work and everything's just fine." (S 7)

In French high security prisons, violence is less frequent than in jails and medium security facilities, but when it does happen it tends to be significantly more serious. The expectation that further traumatic incidents will inevitably occur creates a permanent sense of uncertainty and unpredictability, and a chronic state of hypervigilance, which can follow POs home.

“Anything can be turned into a weapon ... We’re ‘landing fodder.’” (S 9)

“You must absolutely avoid tunnel vision.” (S 16)

At The Abbey we found two main sources of trauma: inmate on PO violence, and prisoner suicide.

“We check the Judas holes and we always have this apprehension in case we find a hanged man.” (G 2)

In our sample of 27 people, we found that, inter alia: seven of them had encountered a prisoner who had committed suicide by hanging, by bleeding, or by setting fire to themselves; six of them had had to deal with a very serious mutiny; one declared that he had been held hostage for several hours; and two POs were present during a prisoner escape (one being in the midst of this dramatic event, and the other on duty at the watchtower at that time). Another PO had been the subject of an extremely violent attack that was meant to kill him; he was only saved through the intervention of one of his colleagues. Lastly, three other POs had either witnessed or intervened during extremely serious physical fights between inmates. Each of these events had affected the colleagues of the victims who had been witnesses to the hostile situation, and many more who had heard about it.

The persistent signs of trauma were very noticeable at an individual level. In particular, we were struck by the patently dissociative states displayed by several of our traumatised interviewees as they were talking to us. Dissociative states are notably characterised (Frewen & Lanius, 2015; Lanius, 2015) by compartmentalisation (that is, when several aspects of the normal functioning of the individual are no longer coordinated), depersonalisation and detachment (that is, involuntary depersonalisation and derealisation, or the apparent absence of emotion). This must not be confused with healthy detachment, which helps a person to manage stress, and which is voluntarily activated (Kinman et al., 2017). Thanks to AI we were repeatedly in a position to observe the third component of trauma, detachment, in the narratives of exceptionally disturbing events that POs robotically recounted as if they were talking about a trip to the bakery.

“So I show up, and the guy had cut himself. I mean really cut through his arteries, here, here, and here. And he was calling me and asking me to take him to hospital and frankly this guy he’d become all dry [bloodless]. It had been 4 hours and ½... and bam! There he goes and bounces back on the ground and falls! I mean like this and I tell myself ‘what’s he doing?’ Oh no, in fact, he had put some serviettes stuff underneath so that the blood would not inundate the cell.” (S 1)

“He shoved a broomstick up his ass and he cut his fingers with a razor blade. I picked up the finger pieces.” (S 9)

“He ended up like a merguez sausage. His nylon tracksuit glued to his skin... His lungs exploded with the heat; and that’s how he died.” (S 17)

Others resorted to more adaptive voluntary detachment:

“The first time you see a cadaver you do not process it in 30 seconds. Yeah, you must process it, right? You develop a thick skin.” (S 9)

We were also able to detect the second component of trauma, depersonalisation, taking the form of a distancing from the source of trauma:

“Yes, some inmates we don’t pay attention to them. Some of them, they can stay in their cell for ten days and we don’t open their door. We couldn’t care less... Inmates, they’re a little bit like animals.” (S 10)

Removing oneself altogether from the source of trauma is another strategy. Many of our interviewees confessed that they were tempted just to give up. The institution prevented this from happening by appointing fragile POs to protected posts:

“Personally, I can no longer do this job. I could not be on the landings anymore.” (S 7)

Others, however, embraced a ‘pick yourself up and get back in the saddle’ attitude:

“I told myself ‘I fell off the horse. If I don’t get back in the saddle now, I’ll never get back on it.’” (S 12)

Most of them simply could not leave their jobs and neutralised all the effects, notably at home, where they claimed they could cut themselves off completely from everything related to The Abbey.

“I do my job and all that, but once I leave my post, I completely forget my job as a PO.” (S 19)

Indeed, for many of these men (Symkovych, 2018) and women (Murphy et al., 2007), in order to appear both professional and reliable, it was necessary to display hyper-masculine, resilient and emotionless bravado.

“I don’t do emotions. I do action.” (S 18)

A significant number of our interviewees had formerly been either police officers or gendarmes (i. e. members of a military trained police force operating in less densely populated areas). Additionally, other interviewees had wanted to become police officers or gendarmes but had either failed the competitive entry exam or had passed the exam that led to them becoming POs first. Nonetheless, we found a dichotomy between some of our interviewees: we labelled five of them the ‘shrinks’ and four of them the ‘coppers’ (also see in Liebling et al., 2011, p. 53 citing Gilbert, 1997, the ‘reciprocator’ and the ‘enforcer’). There were also three who alternated between the two stances; the rest of our sample was not so easily assigned. The first two categories of individuals managed stress and trauma in a drastically different fashion. The ‘shrinks’ had often become aware of the effectiveness of psychological skills during a critical and traumatic experience. Such was the case of S 12, the survivor of a hostage-taking that lasted for several hours who owed his life to having been able to keep talking to the inmate who was holding him. S 12 also benefited from counselling, which helped with his recovery and newly-found enthusiasm for relational skills. Similarly, S 15, who was seriously assaulted, went on to become a ‘shrink convert’ who encouraged his colleagues to receive counselling, and was now able to use his emotional intelligence (Arnoud, 2016):

“Erm, we use active listening, when they have received bad news from their family, split from their wives, we care about what they could do to themselves.” (S 15)

There was, however, also a dichotomy amongst the ‘shrinks’: the majority pragmatically used relational skills for security purposes, to avoid further trauma, while a minority truly cared.

“ [Inmates] easily reach boiling point. So, erm, you mustn’t boil up with them.... I talk quietly with them. I don’t get all worked up.” (S 19)

As regards the ‘coppers’, most of them had not gone through any serious trauma and, in fact, many were in protected posts. It can therefore be hypothesised that it is easier to have a ‘law and order’ approach to inmates when one does not actually interact with them. Protected posts are also used by prison managers to remove authoritarian POs from the wings because their attitude places them and their colleagues at risk. When, conversely, coppers had gone through trauma, they referred to collective trauma, and their coping style was group-based. None of the coppers referred to counselling as legitimate or useful.

“Hostage-taking has happened and erm, we all stand together, that’s for sure. That’s our strength, here at The Abbey.” (S 7)

Coppers also tended to ‘do masculinity’ by denying that they could be traumatised; trauma was for their colleagues, not them.

“Fear amongst some POs, I am telling you like it is, they are scared.” (S 7)

We also uncovered an intermediate category of POs who were part of both the shrink and the copper categories. Most of them had either been in the military or were former law enforcement officers.

“We’re not social workers, but sort of; we’re not shrinks, but sort of.” (S 16 [former police officer])

What they brought with them from their personal or family background was authority, rather than authoritarianism, that is, a firm but fair stance, with a good amount of relational experience.

“This guy, he was sent to a psychiatric hospital virtually every month because he refused to take his treatment. Then I talked with him, and I told him ‘look, take your treatment, you will be able to work in the workshop, you will get a bit of money, a bit of savings, and you’ll be able to buy provisions and tobacco’. And it’s been six months that this guy has been OK.” (S 18 [former military])

We can also hypothesise that a military experience might have brought its own load of trauma and coping strategies. Thus, rather than the expected disciplinary stance and authoritarian style that are expected from these recruits by policymakers, ex-military or law enforcement officers also bring with them softer skills. This observation, which certainly requires further investigation and may be culturally related, nonetheless echoes emerging research regarding the complexity of this issue (Moran et al., 2019). Since, in France, ex-soldiers voluntarily exit the army and choose to apply to PO positions, and since, in our sample, they had done so because they were ‘fed up’ with army life, it can be hypothesised that these POs may have had precisely enough of the disciplinary dimension of their previous occupation.

Beyond these subtle categorisations, every traumatic incident we were told about reverberated far beyond those immediately concerned. First, they affected the entire PO population inasmuch as they created an uncertain and unsafe environment. At The Abbey, however, the ripple effect was much stronger, because the POs were linked by family ties that went back centuries, and they all lived in the villages nearby. Recent traumatic events thus oddly tended to fuse with more ancient or historical ones. Human memory could in fact go back as far as 1971, that is, to the infamous Buffet and Bontems case. Four more recent events, which had occurred in 1992, February and April 2003 and 2009, were also vividly remembered and were somewhat confused with each other. In 1992, similar to England and Wales (Liebling, 2016), a great number of high-profile escapes took place in a number of prisons, one at The Abbey, which led to the murder of both a PO and an inmate. This event was still very present, in spite of the fact that the majority of our sample had either been too young to work, or had not been working at The Abbey, at the time:

“In 1992... I was a PO in the Paris region and, well, that particular day I remember quite strikingly. Yeah, you know, until now these memories are still very present you see.” (G 1)

We were privileged to see three of the main coping mechanisms mentioned in the literature: institutional, environmental, and social.

Regarding institutional coping mechanisms – none of which are specific to The Abbey – a nationwide decision was made in 2003: an end was put to prisoners’ cell doors being opened during the day. The open doors had allowed prisoners to socialise, but also gave them easier access to their potential victims.

“Before 2003 you used to go to work with a knot in your stomach and I used to wonder how I would be able to come back the next day. Conditions are very different now the doors are closed.” (C 1)

As mentioned above, a second institutional coping mechanism consists of allowing traumatised POs to occupy ‘protected posts’ where they do not have to interact with prisoners. A representative number of our sample’s most experienced POs – in line with the studies that found that seniority is a risk factor – worked in such posts.

A third institutional coping mechanism consists of offering traumatised POs psychological counselling. However, because of the hyper-masculine prisoner culture and the need to present a strong front to their peers, very few POs actually use such services.

“You don't go and see the shrink every 5 seconds just for twaddle.” (S 1)

“So they ask you the following question: ‘do you need to talk so someone?’ You then say ‘no’ and that’s it.” (S 6)

Our main finding, however, is that rurality itself provides POs with the best environmental coping mechanism. The beautiful and largely wild countryside around The Abbey provided ample coping opportunities (Herzog-Evans & Thomas, in press). First, many POs simply enjoyed the peace and quiet and the beauty of nature. Second, nature also offered them a way to operate the vital cut off between prison and home. This echoes the suggestion made in a previous study that the low level of stress amongst North Ontario POs was due to rurality (Pollak & Sigler, 1998). Others have pointed to the ‘potential therapeutic benefits of a sea view’ (Jewkes,

Moran & Turner, 2020, p. 395). Our study similarly reveals, and perhaps makes the point even more strongly, that POs made daily use of woodcutting, fishing, hunting, or working in vineyards as a secondary or leisure activity. Many of these activities also reinforced kinship and friendship since they were done collectively within ‘The Abbey family’, understood in the wider sense of the term and including neighbours, many of whom were also colleagues.

Rurality thus provided them with the pleasant activities that the literature on trauma recommends are embraced by people (Lanius, 2015), and importantly it also contributed to the social support coping mechanisms mentioned equally often in the literature. However, camaraderie and family ties acted both as a trauma transmission agent and as a coping mechanism. Family considerably increased trauma, as the trauma became part of the family as well as the local history, and part of the Nation’s grand historical narrative itself.

“As a matter of fact, very often prisons which have a very heavy past, well, they have a soul. The past talks and is long-lasting.” (C 1)

A lot of our interviewees were nonetheless convinced that their professional and family community had a therapeutic effect, helping them deal with stress and trauma. The Abbey formed a therapeutic community.

“In sum, we’re our own shrinks.” (S 16)

Additionally, the constant reference to past trauma constituted a strong cement for the professional group itself.

“Is it because we went through tragic events, I don't know, but at least we've become very close.” (S 5)

5. Conclusion

Several aspects of our research results are consistent with the literature. First, in the French high security setting in the study, ‘The Abbey’, POs had repeatedly been subjected to direct or indirect life-threatening events. Consequently, they manifested many of the visible diagnostic features of trauma as defined in the DSM-V, such as, inter alia, dissociative state, detachment, neutralisation of affect, and so on.

We also found that this prison, historically (in)famous for having experienced a great number of traumatic events, presented a number of specific features. First, there was indeed an inter-generational transmission of the emotional experience and the memory of trauma. This inter-generational transmission was due to the family ties that many POs shared with each other and with the nearby locals. ‘The Abbey family’, whilst keeping intact the vivid memories of trauma, also helped the POs to cope with it, by acting as a ‘therapeutic community’. The second specific feature was how rurality further helped POs cope with trauma by facilitating a cut off between prison and their normal life, in the form of sports or rural activities.

Another interesting finding from this study is that appreciative inquiry creates an emotionally secure environment, where people rapidly confide very personal and emotionally laden stories and experiences. Therefore, this methodology is particularly indicated when one conducts qualitative studies pertaining to stress and trauma.

Nonetheless, our work suffers from undisputable limitations. First, it has been a one-off study: the prison was set to close imminently. Second, our methodology was qualitative and interview-based: we were not allowed to use any other approach. Because of this qualitative dimension, our sample included 26 POs, senior POs or governors – which nonetheless represented 28 % of the total staff then working at The Abbey. Therefore, our results cannot be generalised. It is, however, rather a moot question whether this is a limitation: in fact, the very aim of this study was to uncover the specificities of a prison housed in a former monastery, rooted in Great History and set in the countryside. The Abbey was very soon to enter history in the true sense of the term: as it was about to close entirely, our work provides a snapshot that can then be used for further historical investigations.

Undeniably, though, the salient points in this unique study would benefit from being compared with results from other types of settings, such as, for instance, medium security or remand facilities. They would also benefit from being compared internationally, in order to obtain a better understanding of how contextual they are. It would be of particular interest to compare older and more recent rural prisons, and rural prisons from different parts of the world. For this reason, we have initiated a comparative study with Rosemary Ricciardielli in several Canadian high security prisons.

Another issue might be the impact on this professional population of the terrorist attacks perpetrated in 2018 and 2019 against French POs in a variety of prisons. What is already clear is the backlash caused by such attacks – which is like the first backlash initiated by 9/11 (Herzog-Evans, 2019). Very recent examples are, in 2019: the revocation of the improvements made to the statutes regulating strip searches; the considerable increase in the severity of disciplinary sanctions; and the creation of radicalised prisoners' and violent prisoners' wings. Prison disciplinary governance is, unfortunately, a known risk factor for further incidents and prisoner/staff violence. French prison institutions and reformers thus run the risk of creating a vicious circle in which the institutions and POs think they are protecting themselves when in actual fact they are making things worse.

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