Prison officers’ coping strategies in a high-profile critical situation: Imprisonment after the 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway

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Abstract
The terror attacks in Norway on 22 July 2011 had a significant and lasting impact on Norwegian society. This article discusses a study of the prison officers who worked with the convicted offender Anders Behring Breivik in the days and weeks following the attacks. The prison officers were emotionally affected by the case, to the point where they were concerned that their professional performance might suffer. When not at work, they were constantly reminded of the consequences of the terrorist attacks through media channels and conversations with family, friends and neighbours. To remain professional in a situation that they found personally very challenging, they developed particular coping strategies. These strategies allowed them to avoid conflicts between the work, family and society spheres in the sense of their personal lives affecting their work performance and vice versa. The officers were forced to make concessions in their personal lives, however, which meant that their professional lives as prison officers moved beyond the boundaries of the prison.

Keywords
Prison officer, maximum-security unit, professionalism, coping strategies, work–family–society conflict, emotional labour

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Introduction

The study presented in this article is based on the early days of the imprisonment of Anders Behring Breivik in what is commonly known in Norway as the 22 July case or simply 22/7. On this date in 2011, 77 people were killed in the bombing of the government’s headquarters in Oslo and during the subsequent shooting of participants at the Labour Party’s youth camp on the island of Utøya, several kilometres northwest of Oslo. Breivik, who committed the terror attacks, was arrested at Utøya the same day. The tragic events were reported worldwide. The following day, staff at Ila prison, a high-security prison just outside Oslo, started to prepare for his arrival, working intensively to facilitate Breivik’s safe and secure imprisonment for when he entered Ila 3 days later.

Throughout the first 2 years of his imprisonment, Breivik stayed almost continuously at Ila in a special unit by himself. This unit has what is known in Norway as an ‘especially high-security regime’ (EHSR). Such units, elsewhere typically known as ‘maximum-security units’, are highly restrictive – built to prevent escapes and disturbances, and organized in accordance with detailed work procedures (see Sørensen, under review). Like similar maximum-security units all over the world, the ‘Breivik Unit’ at Ila was strictly segregated from the rest of the prison and there has been little reporting of it outside of the facility.

Breivik represented, and still represents, a problem for Norway’s Correctional Service. In the early days of his imprisonment, the establishment of the EHSR itself represented a challenge. Another issue was the level of attention the 22 July case received from national and global media, and the fact that Breivik is the most high-profile prisoner any Norwegian prison has ever had to manage (Cere et al., 2014). In the weeks and months that followed the attacks, the sheer weight of the broadcasting and reporting was overwhelming, requiring a sensitive media strategy that encompassed the prison leadership and rank and file prison staff (Sørensen, 2017).

The constant reiteration of Breivik-related news created strong emotions in many people. The prison officers working at the maximum-security unit were part of this emotional context when they were off duty, but at work, they were expected to perform detailed procedures and relate to Breivik in a professional and objective manner. As DiIulio (1990) argues, to perform their duties properly, prison officers cannot appear to be affected by the crimes prisoners have committed when they are in their presence.

Our concern in this study is to explore prison officers’ professionalism in a high-profile and morally conflictual situation. More precisely, we are interested in the emotional labour that prison officers are expected to perform in a situation that can be characterized as critical, in the sense that ‘there is a perceived threat against the core values or life-sustaining functions of a social system that requires urgent remedial action in uncertain circumstances’ (Rosenthal et al., 1989: 10). When Breivik was imprisoned in Ila, the Correctional Service’s priorities were to avoid a number of possible negative outcomes, including him committing suicide or taking staff as hostages, or his escape, either by himself or assisted by members of the terrorist cell he claimed to be part of. Such an escape would have had very serious consequences, possibly including new terror attacks and a national political crisis and would likely have led to the resignation of the Minister of Justice and possibly even the Prime Minister. At a crucial moment for the entire country, it was Ila’s task to ensure that nothing could stand in the way of bringing Breivik to justice.

Emotional labour in professional life is demanding (Hochschild, 1983), as confirmed in several studies of different professional groups (see e.g. Gray-Toft and Anderson, 1981; Dowden and Tellier, 2004; Koch et al., 1982; Motowidlo et al., 1986). The types of coping strategies used in
emotional labour for different occupations varies (see e.g. Miculincer et al. (1993) on support-seeking and distancing strategies among Israeli people during the Gulf War; Anshel (2000) on how police officers use approach and avoidance strategies in their duty; Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015) on younger teachers’ use of ‘work hard strategies’ and older colleagues’ use of sick leave for survival). For prison officers, emotional labour has been characterized as exhausting (Dowden and Tellier, 2004; Schaufeli and Peeters, 2000), with some researchers claiming that it can affect personality change (Suliman and Einat, 2018). With regard to prison officers, Crawley (2004a) describes the use of emotional avoidance and depersonalization as a coping strategy, while Nylander et al. (2011) describe prison officers in high security establishments as more detached in their interactions with inmates compared to their colleagues working at regular or treatment wings. However, our concern is to explore coping strategies among prison officers in a very high-profile critical imprisonment. In such a situation, prison officers likely experience highly demanding emotions and may struggle to perform their work in a professional manner.

The object of our study was to examine prison officers who worked with Breivik at the beginning of his time at Ila, as they were under tremendous stress relating to three occupational norms. First, they had to avoid making mistakes by following instructions and procedures to the letter; second, they were expected to not leak any information; and, third, they had to treat Breivik in a fair and humane way and create a ‘right’ relationship with him. Our point of departure is to understand how these prison officers dealt with their emotions in relation to Breivik and how they managed their professional and private lives in this period. A central perspective in our analysis is the officers’ movement between work and home and the struggle to find a balance between the strong feelings concerning Breivik’s crimes that were prevalent in Norwegian society at the time and the unusually high pressures they faced at work.

There is a rich literature on emotional labour in working life. In the next section, we present some central concepts in this literature. We then focus on the study and present the methods used to collect the data. Thereafter, we present the officers’ emotional labour while interacting with Breivik and discuss this labour in relation to coping strategies and the management of the professional and private spheres. As terror attacks and other very serious crimes occur from time to time, we will conclude by indicating how this case study has produced some general knowledge about high-profile critical imprisonments and how prison officers working in such critical situations may be assisted.

**Emotional labour in the prison officer profession**

Hochschild (1983: 7) defines ‘emotional labour’ and ‘emotional management’ synonymously as ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’. This definition adopts Rosenberg’s (1990: 4) understanding of the concept of ‘emotional display’ as ‘the self-regulating of emotional exhibition for the purpose of producing intended effects on others’ minds’. One specific type of emotional display is ‘emotional masking’, which involves the display of emotional neutrality and restraint (Kemper, 1984).

Mann (1998: 260) describes the ‘hiding of emotion that is felt’ and the performance of emotional management as two strategies a person can use in emotionally demanding situations to meet expectations within a work environment. To use such ‘coping strategies’, the individual must first recognize the need for them. This ability relies on the individual’s ‘emotional intelligence’, which Salovey and Mayer (1990: 189) define as ‘the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use
this information to guide one’s thinking and actions’. This ability involves the recognition and use of one’s own and others’ emotional states to solve problems and regulate behaviour. According to Mayer et al. (2001: 234), a person’s emotional intelligence depends on the ability to first ‘perceive and understand emotions’ and, second, to manage emotions in ways that will enhance personal growth and social relationships.

The emotional labour that each person performs happens at an individual or micro level. However, a person’s emotional labour is always contextual and should follow the norms and rules of the occupation that are established in a service or an organization at an institutional (i.e. meso) level. According to the Codes of Conduct in the Norwegian Correctional Service, employees should engage in professional behaviour, treat prisoners with respect and dignity and not treat them in an unjustifiable and discriminatory manner (Codes of Conduct, 2005). A professional orientation among prison officers demands that they are responsible, confident, patient, fair, reliable and trustworthy (Arnold et al., 2012). According to Arnold (2016), they also have to be self-reflexive with regard to their strengths and weaknesses and insightful about the impact of their behaviour on others. Nevertheless, prisoners can pose serious challenges to the sympathy and tolerance of the staff, and emotions can cloud officers’ judgement and undermine their authority (Arnold, 2016; Arnold et al., 2012). According to Arnold et al. (2012), losing sight of a professional orientation may jeopardize the legitimacy of state-sanctioned punishment.

Crawley (2004b) shows how officers customize their work to existing occupational norms and how the prison context influences their emotional labour. A prison may have both formal and informal ‘emotional rules’ that guide officers’ expression of emotions towards prisoners and colleagues. A formal rule is that officers are often expected to appear emotionally unaffected: ‘[...] their job is to forget the crime and work with the prisoner’ (see also Bennett et al., 2008; Crawley, 2004a; Crawley, 2004b: 46; DiIulio, 1990; Liebling et al., 2011; Nylander et al., 2011). However, officers’ display of emotions may also be governed by informally constructed emotional rules, which constitute part of the prison officer culture. Navigating these informal rules is part of a process in which officers learn to act within a set of expectations that constitute a tacitly defined ‘emotional map’ in the prison (Crawley, 2004b). When officers find it difficult to regulate their emotions in accordance with the existing formal and informal rules, they may use coping strategies to keep unwanted emotional expressions under control and remain neutral and detached (Crawley, 2004a; Nylander et al., 2011).

Most discussions of prison officers’ emotional labour are concerned with what happens at work. However, Lambert et al. (2002) and Suliman et al. (2014) found a powerful stress factor in the family–work relation among prison officers that can be characterized as a ‘family–work conflict’, which is ‘the degree to which work and family roles are experienced as conflicting’ (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Lobel, 1991). This is a form of inter-role conflict that occurs when ‘the pressures associated with membership in one organization are in conflict with pressures stemming from membership in other groups’ (Kahn et al., 1964: 20). Role conflict occurs ‘when the feelings a person is called on to express in one setting are contrary to those feelings that are expected in another setting’ (Wharton and Erickson, 1993). Crawley’s (2002) analysis of both the public and private lives of prison officers identified a specific kind of family–work conflict in the ‘spill-over effect’ between officers’ work and home spheres. This conflict occurs when officers bring their behaviour and emotions from work back home and treat their family members in ways that resemble how they treat prisoners. In such circumstances, officers may adopt a demeanour of suspiciousness and control and use communication methods that have been transferred from their
working lives to their family lives and, for example, their child-rearing strategies at home (see also Bosworth, 2018).

Concerning high-profile cases, DiIulio (1990) describes the attention a prison attracts when it receives a prisoner who has committed serious crimes that have been covered in detail by the media and how this attention influences the life of the prison. The imprisonment of such a high-profile inmate challenges the ‘keeper philosophy’ whereby correctional officials search for a humane and non-punitive approach to the prisoner regardless of the well-known serious crime committed. This may result in a conflict between the meso-level and the macro-level societal response to the crimes. A similar situation is described in McEvoy’s (2001) study of the imprisonment of paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland, illustrating the way that media attention regarding a political conflict in the community (macro-level) influenced prison officers’ private lives, specifically their sense of personal safety and security within their local communities (micro level).

Method

The data presented in this article derive from informal talks and qualitative interviews with 11 prison officers and 10 managers who worked at Ila prison at the beginning of Breivik’s imprisonment. Author 1 visited the prison two times a week over a period of 4 months in which also the interviews were carried out. The officers and managers were strategically selected (Lofland et al., 2006), as we wanted to interview those directly involved in work with Breivik. The interviews were undertaken in the managers’ offices, in an office allocated to the author, or in offices or visiting rooms near to the wings where the officers worked. The interviews were semi-structured and were governed by an interview guide, organized around the aim of exploring our participants’ horizon of understanding (Gadamer, 2013; Kvale, 2008). Specific themes we discussed in relation to Breivik’s imprisonment were organizational change, professionalism, culture and security. We wanted the prison officers and managers to present their stories or narratives from this real-life context as freely as possible, so author 1 tried to intervene as little as possible during the interviews. The interview guide constructed for the interviews had no questions directly related to family–work conflicts (Bosworth, 2018; Crawley, 2002), which meant that the officers raised this issue naturally, without our direct input. It is a strength of the study that its inductive approach led to officers providing unprompted descriptions of these circumstances as part of their accounts (Bryman, 2001).

During Breivik’s imprisonment, the leadership at Ila made it clear to all staff that ‘we won’t have any leaks of information in this case’ (Sørensen, 2017: 46), and the staff’s loyalty was demonstrated by the fact that there were no leaks to the media, even though newspapers offered staff large amounts of money for information or pictures of Breivik. Even with approval to talk for the purposes of this research, officers were aware of the delicacy of the case and were initially sceptical and reluctant to share information. Over time, however, our informal discussions gave the informants confidence, and we managed to build sufficient rapport with them to give their consent to be interviewed (Bernard, 2011).

The interviews were conducted in Norwegian and then transcribed by author 1. After several readings and rereadings of the interviews, the coding process identified meaningful themes in the coping strategies that were rooted in the data (Patton, 2002). The quotes in this article have been edited for clarity, but in a way that has not affected their overall meaning.
The imprisonment

The arrival of Breivik – The context

Three days before Breivik arrived at our unit, the atmosphere was tense. I thought, ‘Who the hell is coming now?’ The car with him drove into the prison, and Breivik got out of the car: Oh [pause], it’s only a prisoner... (Prison officer)

Prison officers, like everyone else in Norway, were exposed to intense media coverage of the terror attacks. Many people were both distraught and concerned and found great comfort in seeking information and discussing the situation with each other. According to one officer’s memory of those early days, ‘The terror attacks were covered all over – in newspapers, television, and radio. Neighbours talked about it. Everybody talked about it’. This general atmosphere and the short amount of time available to prepare for the arrival of Breivik created a sense of tension and insecurity among the officers. Given the crimes he had committed and the media’s description of him, they were unsure what kind of person he would be. For some, as the quotation above illustrates, some of this tension vanished when they saw Breivik for the first time. This reaction testifies to the ‘professional gaze’ through which the officers understood the situation when he emerged from the car – a context that was recognizable from other situations of arriving prisoners.

However, the overall context of this imprisonment was different from anything the prison had previously experienced. Breivik’s imprisonment was under intense public scrutiny, not least because Ila was now responsible for a terrorist who had written a list of people he wanted to kill, producing considerable anxiety about new terror attacks:

It was a tacit demand that we had to succeed. This expectation came from society in general and other government services. This put pressure upon us, and if we failed, we could only blame ourselves. (Prison manager)

Because of these expectations and the challenges Breivik represented, the staff who worked with him at the maximum-security unit were carefully selected by the prison management. As Ila is a preventive detention facility, the frontline staff group consists of prison officers, social workers and some untrained staff. Of the specially selected staff, however, all had been educated and trained as prison officers during a 2-year course of study, and the leadership clearly trusted their integrity and loyalty. The ability to ‘see’ Breivik primarily as a prisoner and not a terrorist was also among these qualities:

They understood why they got the job and why they were qualified to work in EHSR. They also understood what we expected of them. (Prison manager)

In addition to relating to the general emotionally loaded atmosphere within wider society, and the social and institutional expectation that they ensured a form of safe and secure imprisonment, the officers were concerned about security in their private lives:

My kids had discussions at school about society, the terror attacks, how it is in a prison and how it is to work with Breivik. In their classes, my kids burned inside with information that their dad was working with Breivik, but they didn’t tell [ ... ]. The subject came up during dinner, and they asked what they
should say – they were loyal, at least on this matter! We had talked about it earlier, that telling others could weaken our family’s security. (Prison officer)

Since, in this case, no one outside the prison was meant to know who was working with Breivik, the secrecy involved whole families. The officers were not primarily afraid of hostility from society but of the fact that if anyone who supported Breivik’s actions were able to access such information, the officers and their families could experience considerable pressure.

No mistakes and no leaks

Officers were expected to perform their role in accordance with a strict security regime, in which no mistakes would be tolerated. This specific form of professionalism left almost no room for individual judgement or critical reflection (Sørensen, under review). In several interviews, officers provided statements such as, ‘We have to be very professional in such a prison regime’, and their stories reflected the adoption of a strong occupational norm of following instructions and performing their work-related tasks in strict accordance with a set of detailed and specified procedures. Although the procedures were not difficult to carry out, they needed to be repeated constantly. The officers knew that following the instructions and procedures was the best way to minimize the risk of errors. In such a regime, the implications of making errors were such that avoiding them had top priority (Sørensen, under review). Yet, at the same time, mistakes were almost inevitable, especially because constant repetition can lead to inattention. This produced considerable anxiety among officers that they would not be regarded as suitable for the job:

I made a mistake and reported myself [. . . ]. I reported it formally in the organization and to my manager. I couldn’t sleep that night [. . . ]. The management was interested in how this could happen. I think this was an alright way to handle the mistake. They wouldn’t kill me. (Prison officer)

Since the lack of tolerance for mistakes was made so clear, officers had to be on constant alert and were under substantial pressure, which they described with statements such as, ‘It was very demanding to be on your toes all the time’. They handled this pressure in different ways, particularly with regard to the degree to which they were able to separate their professional and domestic existences. Some described leaving the job behind when they finished their shift: ‘This is a job, that’s it. It’s a good thing I don’t bring my work home’. These officers did not identify any of work–family conflicts, including spill-over effects. Others, however, carried the pressure into their home lives: ‘I was tired after work. When I came home, I had a big argument with one of my kids, who promptly responded to me, “It’s not a goddamn prisoner you’re arguing with now!”’ Such outbursts were difficult for officers to handle, especially when they experienced a great deal of loyalty from their family members who did not tell anyone about their job.

To cope with the pressure, other officers needed to distance and detach themselves from work when they came home:

I was on alert. The job should be done correctly, and I couldn’t make a fool out of myself. I’ve never before been so careful about mental relaxation when I got home. I said to my wife that I had to take a long walk. I brought along my fishing rod and went out for several hours to collect my thoughts. It was okay that the fish didn’t bite. (Prison officer)
These officers described a specific and insidious kind of stress, which they experienced as a protracted and embodied phenomenon in which recovery was a time-consuming process but was important in terms of making their private lives functional and preparing them for a new shift. While some managed to create a distinct barrier between work and home, for others the distinction was more blurred.

The occupational norm of not leaking information also caused some officers to take precautions in their social contact with other people:

Right after the 22/7 terror attacks, I discussed what had happened with neighbours and friends. But then he was imprisoned at Ila, and I stopped taking part in those discussions. I couldn’t talk about this case with others since I worked with him. I might inadvertenty say something I shouldn’t talk about. (Prison officer)

In addition to being discrete about the fact that they were working with Breivik, the officers were afraid of leaking two types of information. The first concerned security procedures: leaks could put the safety and security of society, and of Breivik himself, in danger. The second concerned information about Breivik, such as his personality and how he was doing, which was the information that primarily interested most people and the media. What the officers feared most was leaking highly classified information, and yet the degree of classification of a certain piece of information was not always clear (Sørensen, 2017). Talking to friends and neighbours about apparently trivial things related to Breivik’s imprisonment could have been interpreted as classified information that outsiders might not know how to handle. To prevent nagging feelings of insecurity (‘Have I said something wrong?’), some officers simply avoided social settings and discussions about the case altogether (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Lobel, 1991; Wharton and Erickson, 1993). These precautions were expressions of awareness, which minimized anxiety and insecurity, and were ways of maintaining professionalism and demonstrating trustworthiness (Arnold et al., 2012; Crawley, 2004a; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). The officers interpreted their adherence and loyalty to the ‘no leaks’ occupational norm as part of being professional – indeed, being considered the ‘chosen ones’ to manage such a high-profile case.

The ceremony of roses and images from Utøya – Dealing with public grief

Approximately 200,000 people in Norway participated in the ceremony of roses, but I don’t know anyone here at Ila who took part in the ceremony. (Prison officer)

Some days after the terror attacks, the government arranged church ceremonies and a concert in memory of the victims. A ‘ceremony of roses’ was also arranged, in which thousands of people gathered in Oslo city centre and carried red roses in memory of the victims and as a symbol of love conquering hate, which became a central societal response to the terror attacks. Engagement in the public grieving processes among the prison officers was sparse, and they tried to stay emotionally unaffected:

I tried to isolate myself from those things. Friends asked if I wanted to join them in the ceremony of roses, but I thought being a part of thousands of people in this ceremony, and the next day being professional with him . . . I had to say, ‘No, thanks’. I prepared myself mentally and tried to focus on him as a human being. (Prison officer)
The officers understood that exposure to public grief and sorrow in their private sphere could make them emotionally vulnerable and affect their professional relationship with Breivik, making it more difficult for them to focus on him as a human being. This ability to self-govern and emotional intelligence related in part to personal confidence but was also influenced by the work culture, as Walsh (2009) found in her study of prison nurses. The fear of being emotionally overwhelmed by public sorrow meant that officers were unable to participate in the collective process of healing in the aftermath of a national trauma.

In the weeks and months following the immediate public rituals of mourning, the terror attacks were never far from the newspaper headlines. To prevent emotional images from influencing their work and challenging their professional approach to Breivik (Fineman, 1993; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Lobel, 1991; Wharton and Erickson, 1993), some prison officers also took precautions in relation to the media:

My strategy was to distance myself from the case. I read as little as possible in the newspapers and looked at media [TV and social media] as little as possible. I thought it would be easier for me to be professional in my job if I didn’t have all the images from Utøya and the church ceremony in my head. (Prison officer)

While some officers avoided the public grieving process and different media sources’ presentations of strong images, others exposed themselves to strong emotional impressions even though doing so was challenging:

At work, I wanted a neutral point of view as I wanted my judgements to be based on my professional role, not affected by the emotions in society […] At home I was as affected as everyone else; I watched television with tears in my eyes and asked myself, ‘What the hell am I doing in such a challenging job?’ (Prison officer)

Officers also described situations at home in which they chose to remove themselves from their family’s social life to avoid being emotionally affected:

My wife wanted to watch the one-year anniversary of the terror attacks on TV. I couldn’t bear to see it and said, ‘If you watch it, I’ll go for a walk’, and I did. No harm done in watching it, but it was my way of maintaining distance with my private emotions of what he had done. And it was him I had to deal with at work. (Prison officer)

As these data show, many, though not all, prison officers arranged their private lives to avoid impressions they feared would result in professionally dangerous forms of emotional dissonance (Crawley, 2004b; Fineman, 1993; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Lobel, 1991; Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Wharton and Erickson, 1993). Both their social and media precautions were expressions of officers navigating their existence in accordance with the prison’s emotional rules.

Yet despite the great effort put into avoiding such challenges, officers were sometimes unexpectedly exposed to them:

I drove to [xx] right after 22 July. Because the tunnel was closed, I had to drive by Utøya. Many cars had stopped, and many people were crying. Then it started to become a bit worse. I started to think of my work. I made up my mind to ‘reset’ myself in order to do my job. There is one image that’s burned into my memory. It’s a line of cars on the side of the road, and we were driving very slowly. Then I saw
grown-up men lying next to the road, crying. This made a huge impression on me. If I’d taken this feeling with me straight to work, things could have gone wrong. Sometimes I had to do some mental work before going to his cell. (Prison officer)

In such circumstances, the projection of strong emotional images of the terror attacks could not be avoided. The prison officer instead made other arrangements to keep his emotions at a distance, through forms of emotional repression, in which he ‘re-set’ his emotions prior to engaging in professional activity (Lyth, 1988). The officers could also experience emotional dissonance when they faced Breivik at the unit. When describing these situations, they often used phrases such as ‘clearing my head’: making effort not to think about the terror attacks or their victims when they directly faced Breivik.

The prison officers working with Breivik had opportunities to participate in debriefings with psychologists, but not all of them were interested in sharing their thoughts in these meetings. Some said that they could ‘let off steam’ in the backroom but, even so, commented on the strain of dealing with their emotions (Dowden and Tellier, 2004; Schaufeli and Peeters, 2000):

The whole world was talking about 22 July, but we didn’t discuss it. We were a country in mourning, but I felt I had to choose to put it away. It became a strict emotional regime that isn’t healthy. (Prison officer)

The officers did not characterize their job at the maximum-security unit as a sacrifice. In the interviews, they presented their efforts in this imprisonment as a natural thing to do when one has responsibility for a prisoner in a high-profile case. Nevertheless, when the Minister of Justice visited Ila and expressed his gratitude on behalf of the whole society for the prison officers’ work in the imprisonment, this was very much appreciated: ‘At the end, when the Minister of Justice shakes your hand and says that you did a great job, it makes an impression on you.’ (Prison officer)

Discussion

Dealing with emotions – ‘Not in my head’ and ‘out of my head’

Because of the damage he had caused, the high death toll and the resulting sorrow, loss and public grief, Breivik posed serious challenges to the sympathy and tolerance of the officers. When facing Breivik or the different impressions that arose from the terror attacks, the officers experienced demanding and exhausting emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Between them, they made different arrangements to manage their emotions, such as avoiding emotionally challenging situations, engaging in mental relaxation, making certain social and media arrangements and ‘clearing their head’ (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Lobel, 1991; Rosenberg, 1990; Wharton and Erickson, 1993). The emotional labour they performed to deal with the macro-level societal response to the terror attacks – both the public grief and the massive media coverage – can be conceptualized as two distinct coping strategies: ‘not in my head’ and ‘out of my head’.

‘Not in my head’ describes the avoidance of impressions that could lead to unwanted emotions, a social phenomenon also known as ‘emotional distancing’ (Crawley, 2004a; Kemper, 1984; Rosenberg, 1990). When off duty, and exposed to the consequences of the terror attacks almost everywhere, officers tried to keep their distance from the case by not taking part in ceremonies, not
reading or watching mass media coverage of the case and avoiding geographical places connected
to the case. Some officers detached themselves from important social processes, such as finding
comfort in talking with other people or seeking information about what had happened during the
massacre. These officers did not want to be familiar with the story of 22 July or take part in
constructing it and did not participate in the public mourning process in which many people found
comfort.

‘Out of my head’ describes the strategy the officers used in situations where they could not
shelter themselves from impressions and affect. In these situations, they recognized a need to
expunge unwanted emotions. This strategy could be used both inside and outside the prison and
involved a switch in their mental state, designed to get rid of emotions that had already infiltrated
their consciousness. This strategy has a parallel to Mann’s (1998: 260) concept of ‘hiding feelings’
or emotional masking to maintain neutrality (Kemper, 1984), yet the officers did work with
themselves mentally to cope with their emotions rather than directly hide or deny them so much
(Hochschild, 1983; Rosenberg, 1990). The officers had difficulty describing how they had actually
managed to get these emotionally strong images ‘out of their heads’, but in exercising this coping
strategy, the prison officers made individual arrangements that worked for them.

Both the ‘not in my head’ and the ‘out of my head’ coping strategies are in line with Mann’s
(1998) notion of the performance of emotional management and indicate a high degree of emo-
tional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2001). Most were used for monitoring and regulating feelings in
relation to the existing formal and informal emotional rules in the unit (Crawley, 2004b; Salovey
and Mayer, 1990) and demonstrated officers’ understanding of the seriousness of their role. For
these officers, creating a professional relationship with Breivik, and establishing a ‘right’, ‘decent’,
or ‘correct’ relationship with him, was a source of professional pride, which was in line with the
Codes of Conduct. In this regard, there were no conflicting ethics between the meso-level and the
micro level.

Managing their professional and private lives – The family, society, work conflict

In this particular case, coping strategies were ways of handling emotions in two different contexts –
family life and working life – that were shaped not just by family–work conflict but by an unusual
intensity of societal interest and reaction that made emotion management, and both personal and
professional life, particularly difficult. In this case, media, neighbours, friends and geographical
places were difficult to ignore because the emotional display linked to brutality of the terror attacks
conflicted with the formal and informal emotional rules in the maximum-security unit and the
occupational norms the officers were supposed to adhere to.

We find several conflicting constellations between family, work and society. The first is the
conflict between work and family/society, where the officers tried to avoid the ‘spill-over effect’
from the latter to the former by using both coping strategies discussed above. This conflict could
threaten their treatment of Breivik in a fair and humane way and the creation of a ‘right’ rela-
tionship with him. The second is the risk of a ‘spill-over effect’ in the opposite direction – from
work to family/society. The conflict is related to the pressure of avoiding making mistakes by
following instructions and procedures to the letter and the need for relaxation after work to not let
the stress influence family life. The third conflict constellation is also between the spheres of work
and family/society and is related to the officers’ fear of leaking information about Breivik when
mingling with friends and family. When not feeling confident in these situations, the officers
simply avoided them. The fourth conflict constellation does not make a separation between work
and family/society: here, the conflict lies between the work/family – society. This conflict is also related to the fear of leaking information but concerns the risk of revealing the family’s affiliation to the prison and Breivik. To stay safe and avoid being blackmailed for information about Breivik, a lot of strain were put on the officers and their families. Situations that originally were meant for comfort, like discussing the 22 July case at school, could for family members be experienced as difficult to handle.

Conclusion

Compared to previous studies of prison officers’ emotional labour focusing on ordinary life in steady-running prisons, our focus has been on the extraordinary, critical situation and the early imprisonment of a very high-profile prisoner. Such situations occur in prisons from time to time, and prison officers are required to act professionally in these situations. Irrespective of a prison officer’s position or wing/unit, the formal emotional rule of appearing unaffected by whatever crimes a prisoner has committed seems to be universal. To comply with this rule is necessary to behave according to the occupational norms specified in official codes of professional conduct. To treat a prisoner humanely, with respect and dignity, irrespective of the crimes he or she has committed has a moral dimension, which was important for respondents in our study. However, according to Hochschild (1983) and Rosenberg (1990), professionals manage their own feelings to create a particular emotional state in other people. In a high-profile critical case, this is of utmost importance as it may lower the risk of unwanted episodes such as self-harm or harm to others, suicide or hostage situations. Display of emotions that are perceived in a negative manner by the prisoner may thus be fatal.

The emotional map regulating informal emotional rules therefore adjusts what feelings should not be displayed, rather than what feelings the prison officer can show, which end up being hardly any feelings at all. The display of emotions is seen as an obstacle for prison officers’ professionalism in high-profile cases, and coping strategies help them to avoid creating and ‘getting rid of’ emotions to appear focused, calm and neutral in front of the prisoner. In this way, the prison promotes a kind of specialized ‘emotional capital’ in such situations. This capital also includes an ability to handle emotions resulting from the structures constructed in the prison to handle a high-profile critical case. Prison officers are trained to work in hierarchical organizations and understand the importance of loyalty embedded in this organizational structure. In critical situations, it is vital that this structure functions well. As it may become extremely rigid, it is important that the prison creates alternatives for officers to direct their emotions, such as the feelings of fear and stress experienced by the officers in this study.

When offering support to officers working in high-profile critical situations, the prison should be aware of the risk of mental exhaustion and the serious health effects these situations may cause (Hochschild, 1983; Nylander et al., 2011; Suliman and Einat, 2018). This may be so even if the officers have opportunities to ‘let off steam’ in emotional ‘free zones’ in the prison. Although the ‘nature’ of a critical situation is uncertain and unpredictable, it is important to prepare officers for the strain that these situations entail and not tacitly expect them to cope with their emotions by themselves. For health reasons, it may be wise to not let officers work continuously in such environments for long periods.

High-profile cases attract media attention because they easily meet the threshold of perceived interest and sensationalism and let the public connect emotionally with the experiences of the victims and their families (Cere et al., 2014). Both McEvoy’s (2001) study and our own show that
the media’s coverage of these cases influences prison officers’ lives, though in different ways. The prison officers’ initiatives to share their experiences of the conflicting constellations between work, family and society have made an important contribution in expanding the understanding of prison officers’ emotional labour. This knowledge is of vital importance in developing social support systems (instrumental, affective and comradely social support) that can safeguard prison officers who have one of the most challenging positions this job can offer.

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