

Becoming Fully Human: Occupational Therapy Students Challenge Stereotypes in the Prison

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When I entered the minimum-moderate level security male prison in a rural southwestern town for the first time in 2014 to set up a potential site where I could take some of my graduate students to gain experience, I was intrigued, yet unsure. Despite a few run-ins with the law, the only prison I knew was the one I had seen on television, where every inmate is depicted as a sociopathic, psychologically disturbed beast who will nonchalantly slice your jugular with a plastic spork that has been meticulously whittled into a shank.

It had taken me months to get anyone to reply to my requests to set up a meeting, and when I finally met with program directors, I was asked, "Why do you want to get into the prison when everyone else wants to get out?" "Wow," I thought. "It must *really* be like I have seen on TV!"

In spite of the warnings, and perhaps because of the warnings, I felt an even greater desire to get involved with this population who it seemed was brushed aside and kept very well hidden by society. I persevered until I got approval, and in the spring of 2015, I took my first group of three female Master of Occupational Therapy students into the prison for 3 hours per week as part of their spring coursework. An occupational therapist is a health professional who aims to help people with any illness, injury, or disability, and helps teach them the life skills they need to be more independent or meet their goals. In the prison setting, this means helping to teach offenders the skills they need to have meaningful engagement in their daily "occupations," such as improving social and communication skills, practicing conflict resolution, identifying work and leisure interests, or learning parenting skills or money management.

Prior to entering the prison, the students started with a volunteer orientation. We learned about gangs and prison tattoos, sexual predators and rape, and were left with the impression that no one believed these guys were capable of anything other than stealing, manipulating, fighting, consuming and selling drugs, hurting themselves and others, and being overall worthless. It was shocking, and it strongly reinforced all of the stereotypes that I had ever heard about those who are incarcerated. Yet, this time I challenged the information I was hearing. Before this orientation, I had been spending some time at the prison to get to know the setting and offenders, and I wondered, "Is this the same place I have been going?" It was this moment that I started to question how this stereotype impacted the offenders' potential for success, as well as the staff and volunteers who could potentially help them.

Before the semester began, my students wrote reflections and we talked about their concerns of entering the prison. Each was fearful and hesitant, yet curious. They asked me many questions followed by nervous laughter. Were they going to get hassled? How should they talk to the offenders? Should they make eye contact? How were they going to be perceived as women? How should they handle challenging situations or any lewd behavior? How could they alleviate the concerns of their families and partners?

Our first day at the prison arrived. It was intimidating for the students entering a prison as outsiders for the first time, feeling the starkness, the oppression, the lethargy, and the sadness, seeing the sunlight glinting on the razor wire garden that encloses all boundaries from top to bottom like a picture frame. The first time they crossed the fence, I watched them and their body language closely. They stayed together in a seamless pack and took small shuffling steps, they startled easily, had tense faces, and were unable to make eye contact with offenders who were walking about the yard unfettered.

The students and I interviewed numerous offenders one-on-one. We did not start by asking them about what they had done wrong or what their weaknesses were, but rather about who they were as humans, and what goals and dreams they had for their future relationships, education, hobbies, and work. Many weren't sure because no one had ever asked them about their hopes or dreams.

They all had hopes and dreams.

There is a smothering film of anger, boredom, and punishment in the prison. The staff and officer personalities are primarily void of laughter and hope, and teeming with anger and cynicism. Few smile, many sneer, and most talk about the day they can retire and get the hell out of there. Few believe that there is hope for the offenders, and the idea of rehabilitation is foreign. We began to observe how the men were treated. Their identities were ignored by all but a few. They were called by their last names, and were required to remember their prison number. We were told we could not call them by their first names, and they could not call us by ours. We could not shake their hands, even though this is the socially appropriate way to meet another person.

Sometimes we broke the rules for the sake of humanity and doing the right thing.

We called every offender by his first name, introduced ourselves by ours, and shook their hands to say hello and goodbye.

From our interviews and initial interactions, we all learned that the offenders were human beings, fallible ones, like everyone else. The majority had drug and alcohol problems, a significant amount had other mental health disorders, which are often untreated or poorly managed, and many had learning disabilities or ADHD. Many had anger issues and poor coping skills, low self-esteem and a poor sense of self, and a majority came from challenging family backgrounds of poverty, abuse, or neglect. Most were led through childhood and adolescence by role models who had dysfunctional life patterns. The students began to question if many of these guys should be locked up, why they weren't getting much help to overcome their obstacles, and if their punishments really fit their crimes.

As the semester unfolded, the students' perceptions about who the offenders are as people began to change rapidly as the offenders began to trust us and share their fears, and over the weeks we spent with them, heartfelt and authentic interactions developed. Everyone began to laugh and joke during team building and trust exercises. During self-awareness exercises, the offenders disclosed the realities of their drug and alcohol addiction knowing they had no option but to go back into the same environment upon release. They reflected on their strengths and weaknesses and how they wanted to get their anger, anxiety, and depression under control. During job skills and resume building activities, they worried about their financial burdens they would need to start paying after release, and fretted that they had few job skills and fewer job prospects. During classes on parenting strategies, they disclosed that they missed their children and wanted to be good parents, yet felt guilt for abandoning them. They felt they had been getting little to no help to address their concerns.

Throughout the semester, the students continued to reflect on their perceptions, and on the last day, they addressed their previous fears. Following are some excerpts that demonstrate the evolution into a new way of believing.

"I have become more open to working with a population that I have had reservations about in the past. The offenders have been so welcoming to us and really appreciated the time we invested in them. I care more about marginalized populations experiencing occupational deprivation, due to seeing the hope we have helped to kindle in the offender's minds. I think that sometimes we write off a population as a society because we believe nothing can be done to help them; they are hopeless. When we see the

potential they have we feel hopeful that our efforts can make a difference, even if it is in just one person. Working with the guys has taught me that being present with them and showing someone cares can make a difference.”

“It is so very important to me to never judge an individual from their past, and also to make sure you know their whole story. So many people cast people away just from a label or stereotype, but if people would take time to get the whole picture, their views would be completely changed. I have been reminded of this so much throughout this experience, and just how impactful a caring, genuine heart can be.”

“During my first interactions with the offenders, I remember feeling fearful and very nervous about how they would talk to me, if they would be respectful, or if they were going to do something dangerous. After that first day and overcoming my irrational fears and poorly founded beliefs, I have felt comfortable, safe, appreciated, and respected during every interaction with the offenders. Throughout my time with offenders this semester, I have truly come to realize that offenders are not innately bad people but are individuals just like the rest of us who have simply made poor decisions and/or have mental illnesses affecting their behaviors. I have witnessed firsthand the impact that genuine and respectful interactions can have on offenders’ perceptions of others, of themselves, and of their potential for success.

Since that first experience 4 years ago, I have taken 10 more students inside the prison, each having the same awakening experience. I like to think that each student will share his or her experiences, and convey their stories of hope, success, and compassion. I dream we are helping to build hope in the offenders, transform their negative self-worth into something more positive, and help them build life skills that will help them be successful upon release.

The students and I have learned that the only way to challenge a stereotype is to interact with a stereotyped group first hand, call them by their first names, ask them about their hopes and dreams, encourage them, care about them, and treat them with respect and compassion. Numerous offenders stated that in prison they feel, “less than human.” The students and I learned that people cannot become fully human until they have been treated as fully human, and we often need others to help us recognize our potential.

Each time I take a new class of students in to the prison, what the offenders are most surprised to hear is how much they are helping all of us recognize *our* potential, and that there is reciprocity in how we view and value each other. They spiritedly express their gratitude at the end of the semester when we leave, and then look at me quizzically when we tell them, “Thank you for helping us to become more empathetic, compassionate, and open-minded individuals. Thank *you* for helping *us* become fully human.”