

A discourse community jail inmates and those who visit them

[Government](#), [Corruption](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A Dis Community - jail inmates and those who visit them The dis community of a jail is made up of several groups: the inmates, those who work within the facility as correctional officers and those, such as myself, who visit the inmates. A jail is one of the most interesting spaces to study discourse as it brings together diverse individuals who have little in common other than being convicted of a crime or knowing someone who has been convicted. As John Wideman (1995) put it in his seminal book, a person visiting a prison " is forced to become an inmate . . . subject to the same sorts of humiliation and depersonalization . . . made to feel powerless, intimidated by the power of the state" (p. 52). Yet this process of making visitors feel like prisoners paradoxically brings about a sense of community between visitor and inmate that might not otherwise exist.

I visited my mother's boyfriend in prison for three years. He had been wrongly convicted and was in a state jail that seemed to attempt to make it very difficult for people to visit the prisoners in comfort. First of all, the criminal background of the person visiting needed to be checked before you could be put on the prisoner's visitor list. In an ironic reversal from the normal of role of prisons, to enter on e as a visitor one could not have a criminal record. Yet at the same time, once you had been passed as non-criminal (or at least never having been convicted of a criminal offense) you were then searched quite extensively before being allowed in.

The visitors were forced to wait for more than an hour in a quite depressing and dirty waiting-room. The " discourse" that they took part in was one of silence at this point. Most people carefully ignored each other, as though ashamed of the fact that they were waiting to visit someone in prison. Again,

the prison authorities had made the visitors take on the shame of their family members. Yet as we moved into the actual visiting area - a larger room with a series of tables, prisoners on one side, visitors on the other, there was a sense of community because of a shared experience.

The inmates themselves had an intense form of community that is seldom seen in the outside world. Prisoners would be in close day-to-day contact with one another for more hours than the closest family in free society. My mother's boyfriend shared a cell with another man and for more than twelve hours a day they were cooped up together in a space you couldn't fit a king-size mattress in. Prisoners know a level of 'intimacy' with one another, in the form of a lack of privacy for the most basic human functions and sleeping virtually in the same space, that few on the outside world understand. As Jason Everett, a Texas inmate suggests in his blog (myspaceeverett, 2007), inmates do not even have the chance to cry alone:

Inside was a card my babies had scribbled on for me and new pictures . . . that was the first time I cried . . . I couldn't help it . . . I cried right in front of everyone in my dorm.

This closeness often leads to violence however. Part of the discourse that occurs among prisoners is one of raw and frightening power in which, as my mother's boyfriend said in an interview, " the biggest and toughest rule" (interview, 2007). The men in prison are gathered together often because of their inability to communicate in a non-violent way on the outside, and are forced to communicate in incredibly close proximity with others on the inside. There are strict rules of behavior among inmates and a social hierarchy every bit as complex as that on the outside (Metress, 2001).

Often, as Ross and Richards (2002) have suggested throughout their book, prisoners need to act as if they are capable of perhaps deadly violence in order to simply survive. This tension is palpable within the prison why a person is visiting it. The prisoners seem to regard the prison as an enemy and one another as enemies. In turn, the correctional officers seem to dislike their jobs, regarding the prison, inmates and, to a certain extent at least, the visitors such as myself as enemies. These feelings of interlocking tensions, conflicts and outright hatred make a prison a rather terrifying, but very memorable discourse community.

Works Cited

Interview with Inmate (anonymous for privacy reasons). Undertaken by author, February, 2007.

Metress, Phillips. Prison Etiquette: The Convict's Compendium of Useful Information. Southern Illionois UP, Chicago: 2001.

Ross, Jeffrey. Richards, Stephen. Behind Bars: Surviving Prison. Alpha, New York: 2002.

Wideman, John. Brother and Keepers. Vintage Books, New York: 1995.

www.myspace.com/jason_everett