**Reflecting Dialogues in a Norwegian Prison:**

**A qualitative study**

Reflecting Dialogues

**Key words:**

**Reflecting Talks, Reflecting Dialogues, Reflecting Conversation, Reflecting Process,** **Inmate,** **Prison**

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**Abstract:**

Reflecting Dialogues have been used in a high security prison in Trondheim, Norway since 2004, offering conversations on the inmates’ own terms. Important elements in Reflecting Dialogues are attentively listening and reflecting on what is being said, in order to open up for new meaning and understanding. In this study, prisoners, released prisoners and prison staff are interviewed about their experiences with Reflecting Dialogues. Applying Reflecting Dialogues in prisons seems to cover a need that many prisoners have; to be able to talk freely, about their feelings and thoughts, which easily builds up during imprisonment. We find that Reflecting Dialogues can contribute to reducing the level of conflict, and subsequently create a better prison environment. The prisoners express that they are more at ease, more in contact with their own needs, and find it easier to communicate with other people.

**Introduction**

Imprisonment is widely considered to be an extraordinary situation and way of living. This article focuses on the use of and experience with Reflecting Dialogues, as a conversational approach to inmates, in a Norwegian high security prison. The population of Norwegian prisons is a complex variety of prisoners, with regard to ethnicity, age and background (The Norwegian Correctional Service 2010). Internationally, it is known that Norwegian prison conditions are generally good. However, research on the living conditions of inmates reveals that a large number of Norwegian prisoners miss to have someone to talk to: 40 % of the inmates report that they do not have the opportunity to share their thoughts with someone during imprisonment (Friestad and Hanssen 2004). A project focusing on young Somali and Pakistani prisoners concludes that what these youths valued most, was to be met by trust and respect (Gotaas and Højdahl 2006). This is also underscored in the Norwegian White Paper no. 37 (2007-2008), where prisoners express that one of the most important issues of probation care is to be seen, heard and respected.

Detailed research shows that an accumulation of life condition challenges is a common feature among prisoners. Three out of four in the Norwegian prison population have experienced challenges related to at least two of the following categories: Difficult childhood conditions, educational drop out, weak ties to the labor market, low income, poor health conditions, insecure residential situations, and drug problems (Friestad and Hanssen 2004). Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that many prisoners are in need of support on multiple levels. The current Norwegian probation care is increasingly focused on the rehabilitation of inmates. A range of services is provided, such as education, occupational training and different types of conversational treatment methods. A recent change is making the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Organization (NAV) available inside the prison (NAV, 2012). This has expanded this rehabilitation approach. The purpose is to prepare the inmates for their release, and offer better opportunities for establishing a normal life after leaving prison. However, social workers in Trondheim Prison held the assumption that the inmates’ possibility of making proper use of the services, would increase if they were more in touch with themselves.

***Reflecting Dialogues in Prison***

In Reflecting Dialogues there are three participants who talk one at a time (Figure 1). This kind of conversation started with “Reflecting Team”, which was as a method in family therapy discovered by Tom Andersen and his group at the University of Tromsø, Norway in the 80s (Andersen 1987). The alternation between listening and reflecting became one of the key elements in this kind of conversation. With time, they simplified the method and moved the

*Figure no 1. The Reflecting Dialogues*



conversations out of the constructed environment of the therapy rooms (Cox, Banez, Hawley & Mostade, 2003). They could now take place in any location (Andersen 2006). Another step forward took place when Tom Andersen together with Judith Wagner and Lill Forsberg initiated Reflecting Dialogues with prisoners in Kalmar Prison in Sweden in 1994 (Wagner 1998, 2006a, 2006b, 2009). This enabled the method to be tested in a completely new context. In 2003, Herstedvester Prison in Denmark started offering Reflecting Dialogues, and due to the positive feedback from the prisoners and staff, they have continued practicing it ever since (Grossen 2010). Trondheim Prison introduced Reflecting Dialogues in 2004 (Viggen & Landrø, 2012 b).

The Reflecting Dialogues are conducted according to a certain structure, with the prisoner and two staff members sitting in a triangular formation. Every Reflecting Dialogue starts with the question “what would you like to talk about today?” One of the staff members holds a conversation with the inmate, while the third person listens in silence. Only one person can talk at a time and disruptions are not allowed. After a while, the conversation stops, and the third person shares his observations and thoughts with the other prison guard, while the inmate listens. This is done by recognizing and repeating what the inmate has said, as well as raising reflective questions. Thereafter, the conversation can continue with new elements and subjects. It is the attention and reflection of the third person, together with the clear shifts, that make Reflecting Dialogues different from other kinds of conversations (Andersen 1987; Viggen & Landrø, 2012 b).

There are few studies on the practice of Reflecting Dialogues in general, and no scientific studies have focused on the use of Reflecting Dialogues in prison, although a considerable number of texts have been written in Kalmar Prison in Sweden (Wagner 1998, 2006a, 2006b, 2009). It became important for the staff of Trondheim Prison to get the activity of Reflecting Dialogues documented and evaluated. They wanted to find out why they experienced that these dialogues had a positive impact on those prisoners taking part in them, and initiated a research project in 2009 (Viggen & Landrø, 2012a). In this article, we present some of the findings from the study, by addressing the following research questions:

*What are the essential aspects that the inmates emphasize in this approach?*

*What do the Reflecting Dialogues mean for:*

* *The conditions during imprisonment?*
* *The motivation for rehabilitation among the inmates?*

***Theoretical Framework***

The theoretical framework of this project is built on Tom Andersen´s work. Andersen was an eclectic researcher, inspired by approaches such as family therapy, physiotherapy, linguistics, hermeneutics, as well as the social constructivist way of creating understanding through interaction (Cox et al., 2003; Sundet, 2006).

The systemic notion of “a difference that makes a difference” (Bateson, 1979), which is concerned with the importance of distinctions – how these can be explored and create new ways of understanding (Sundet, 2006), is an important basic point in the approach.

Further, Andersen learned from the physiotherapist’s way of treating muscle contractions, that “a suitable touch” – not too soft and not too hard – was the most effective muscle release technique (Ianssen, 1997; Øvreberg & Andersen, 1986). This understanding was transferred to the communication process, where Andersen was concerned with good questions that create “a suitable difference”, while stressing the importance of “not talking about the untellable” (Andersen and Seikkula 2005).

The term “touch” is central. When one listens, it is also important to be open and transparent to receive the other´s feelings and then afterwards express what you have received (Sundet 2006). Andersen (2006) would say it is important “to feel it in your body”.

The meaning of words and language, and the importance of “paying attention to what is actually said and heard”*,* is emphasized (Wittgenstein, 1953; Andersen, 2006). Being able to “express oneself through words” is important, whereas a lack of words can lead to aggression and unrestrained behavior (Wagner, 1998, 2006b).

Another principle is to take on a “not-knowing position” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Anderson, 1997). Andersen (2006) emphasized the importance of “being heard and acknowledged”, and that presumptions should not overshadow the attention to the present moment.

The method stresses the importance of the “inner and outer dialogue”, that happen simultaneously when two people talk to each other. It is very important to give space for the inner dialogue, where reflection and evolvement take place (Wittgenstein, 1953; Ianssen, 1997; Andersen, 2006).

The underlying view is that inner dialogue creates an open space, where we are able to get in touch with ourselves and reflect. It creates an opening between past and future; the more a person understands their past, the more they are able to plan their future (Arendt, 1978). When we reflect, we create a distance to the present, which enables us to understand the world from other people’s perspectives (Øverenget, 2001, p. 239).

**Methods**

The current study is a qualitative evaluation of the practice of Reflecting Dialogues in prison, and a collaborative between the prison and the Faculty of Health Education and Social Work at the Sør-Trøndelag University College in Trondheim. The prison’s ownership of the project was advantageous, giving access to valid information while ensuring appropriate security precautions. The prison provided a selection of interviewees among inmates who took part in the Reflecting Dialogues.

The research approach was chosen to get qualitative descriptions on the use of the conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The methods applied included 12 individual interviews, one focus group interview, and 118 registration forms that were filled in after the conversations. This enabled us to explore aspects of the Reflecting Dialogues from different perspectives; the inmates, the prison staff, and the released prisoners. Before the interviews two observations were used in order to get an impression of how Reflecting Dialogues in prison are practiced.

***Sample and data collection***

The individual interviews consist of 10 informants, where five informants were interviewed in prison, three were interviewed after their release, and two informants were interviewed both in and outside prison. The released prisoners were interviewed at a location of their own choice. The prisoners and the released prisoners are the key informants in the study, and include nine men and one woman, aged between 25 and 45. One person was not Norwegian and spoke English. Only one of the informants had completed formal education, while three of them had continued school during their imprisonment. The majority had alcohol or drug addiction problems. Four out of ten had been imprisoned before, whereas six served their first prison sentence. A variety of crimes are represented in the sample, including drug violations, sexual abuse violations, general violence and murder. The sample is strategic, given the informants’ experiences with Reflecting Dialogues and their willingness to contribute to the study. The nature of their convictions did to some extent match the general pattern of criminality (The Norwegian Correctional Service 2010).

The interview guide was semi-structured, which contributed to making the situation predictable and did not encourage disclosure of personal information (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The questions were about the inmates’ experience with the Reflecting Dialogues, and whether these had contributed to changes in their daily life in prison (or in the open society, for the released prisoners), as well as their use of language, or relations to other people. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, producing a total 216 written pages.

A focus group interview was conducted with six members of the prison staff, in order to register the experiences and discussions, concerning the use and impact of Reflecting Dialogues (Halkier 2010). For the most part they were trained as prison guards, except one nurse and one social worker. They all had long experience from the prison, and four of them had been working there for more than 25 years. The focus group was concerned with five different topics: The impact of Reflective Dialogues on the prison institution, on society, on the inmates, on the relationship between prison staff and inmates, and between the staff members themselves.

The forms were filled out after each Reflecting Dialogue, asking: “How did you experience today’s conversation?” at which point the inmate either wrote down the answer or was assisted by the staff to do so. A sample of 118 forms from a one-year period was included in the study, as a valuable supplement to the data material.

***Analysis***

To analyze the data, we used the phenomenological method systematic text reduction (Malterud, 2011). This approach is suitable for analyses of information from different parallel perspectives, and to extract relevant and meaningful descriptions. First, we read through the complete material, identifying all significant topics. During this explorative process, we identified and labeled a list of categories (Malterud, 2011). This was the most interesting part of the analysis, generating new insights, ideas and knowledge. Later, all significant factors were sorted into the selected code groups, using the qualitative data analysis program N-Vivo. Through this process, the text reduction was completed and the material condensed.

***Research ethics***

The Norwegian Social Science Data Services and the Norwegian Correctional Services approved the project beforehand. Informed consent was collected before each interview, and inmates and released prisoners gave their written consent.

**Findings**

In this article we focus on the distinctiveness of Reflecting Dialogues, and what they mean for the prisoners during imprisonment and in their process of rehabilitation.

***Structural aspects of Reflecting Dialogues***

The most striking finding from this study is the importance of the third person’s role in the conversation, where he or she reflects on what has been said. This method of communication is highly appreciated, and many of the prisoners underscore the experience of being respected.

Many of the respondents expressed that they have never been listened to in this way. When they hear the third person reflecting what they have said, they hear their own words and they feel that their words are meaningful, has importance and are worth repeating. This experience makes them feel more relaxed, because they feel understood and taken seriously.

All of the inmates describe Reflecting Dialogues as a *unique communication method.* To be allowed to talk freely while someone listens, as well as listening to two other people while they are having a conversation about them, is described as a very distinct experience. The inmates expressed that the reflecting dialogue situations are very positive, because they are not attacked or confronted, but they are accepted as they are. Many of them described it as a good and very caring situation, when the observer and the prison guard were talking nice about them.

***Conversations that empower***

Inmates express that they appreciate having prison guards and other members of the prison staff initiating these conversations. They describe these talks as “ordinary”, “normal” and “equal”, and they appreciate that their conversation partners have knowledge about their situation as prisoners. During the interviews, the Reflecting Dialogues were compared to earlier conversations with the staff members. Many of the inmates express that they are often expected to behave in a particular manner and talk in a particular way when interacting with the staff. They rarely get an opportunity to have a conversation entirely on their own terms.

Some of the prisoners told that they had had conservations with too many different professional helpers that had tried to set diagnoses on them, and they did not like to be observed as objects and categorized. They experienced the reflecting dialogues as different because the helpers were interested in what they actually were saying, not on what they were supposed to say. The words “common” and “normal” were often used to describe these dialogues. For instance, respondents could describe earlier experiences with talking to professionals like psychologist etc., where they felt that there was too much pressure on them. Some felt they were being observed during the sessions, or they did not understand the purpose with the questions, and used a lot of energy trying to understand, instead of being in contact with the helpers. Because of such difficulties in conversations, many of them expressed that they preferred Reflecting Dialogues instead of manual based methods and other kinds of therapy. For the inmates it was important to master the process. The decision of change has to be their own. The inmates appreciate the lack of prejudice that they experience in the Reflecting Dialogues.

***Opening up for self-reflection***

Many prisoners have previous experience of insult, which is re-experienced through imprisonment. Reflecting Dialogues add a new and different experience to prison life. The inmates describe that it is good to experience support, comfort and care. It seems like this experience strengthens their ability to trust other people. They feel that people care for them and wish them well, they feel love from other people, and they are coming in contact with different sides of themselves, sides that are not usually activated in prison. Some of them had not been in contact with such feelings since they were kids. In the interviews it was explained how the Reflecting Dialogues could awake these kinds of feelings.

The Reflecting Dialogues is often described as some kind of escape from the daily life challenges “inside the walls”. In everyday life in prison, there is not much time for individual and undisturbed conversation. The prisoners appreciate having the complete attention from two staff members in a separate room for a full hour, without interruptions.

During the interviews, several different expressions of bodily unease – or metaphors relating to this – were referred to. The inmates described how they felt the frustration and the pressure as pain in different parts of the body, like the head or the stomach. Some also expressed that they had been so depressed that they wouldn’t still be alive if it wasn´t for the Reflecting Dialogues. It had been so hard for them to cope with their own situation.

The state of being locked up gives the prisoner limited possibilities for action and power to influence their surroundings. Many prisoners point out this experience of powerlessness, which makes some angry, others depressed. Using Reflecting Dialogues, the inmates get a possibility to come in contact with their feelings and express themselves through words. Many of them emphasizes the value of being able to let the feelings of frustration, worries and aggression out. It is expressed that these kind of feelings decreases as a result of Reflecting Dialogues, and can prevent conflicts between inmates and with the staff.

***Experiences with the reflection process***

Several of the participants in this study stressed that being in prison is difficult, and struggling with tough and sad experiences makes it hard to cope. For some prisoners, the Reflecting Dialogues have represented a turning point. The Reflecting Dialogues have affected the inmates´ thoughts and behavior. They start to think differently about themselves and others, which can lead to changed reaction patterns, like using words instead of aggressive behavior.

Released prisoners described how their way of thinking have changed as a result of the Reflecting Dialogues. Many of the informants described how the Reflecting Dialogues make them view themselves from a different perspective. They can realize that what they are doing inside the prison, like schoolwork, have a value that means something for their future, and that represent a change for them. They do express that the Reflecting Dialogues can make them learn from the past and make new successful decisions for the future.

The impact of the Reflecting Dialogues has been important for how they experience their opportunities in life. There are several examples that the Reflecting Dialogues strengthens the inmates´ confidence, and helped them to believe that they could become normal citizens. Most of the released prisoners in this study told that they had kept on with studies and done success as employees, even if they did not study or work before imprisonment.

Inmates and released prisoners also explained how the Reflecting Dialogues have affected their personal relations. After they had learned this new way of communicating; talking one at the time, asking questions, giving positive response, and reflecting over what has been said, most of them explained that they had experienced using this kind of dialogues with family, friends and cellmates. They could better express their meanings with words, when talking to others. There were also examples of that the inmates had learned to be more self-protective in challenging social situations, both inside and outside prison. Some of the respondents underscore the importance of creating boundaries and making themselves better understood. They became able to tell what kind of behavior they accepted and not, instead of getting angry. Some also said that they became better listeners, in situations where they earlier could have created conflicts.

Furthermore, some of the informants had decided to address their problems, seeking help with things like violent behavior, mental problems, unresolved family issues or drug addiction. The Reflecting Dialogues had made them aware of what problems they could present to a therapist, and they had found a way of telling about their problems. Some described the importance of owning their own problems.

**Discussion**

The findings of the present research suggest that Reflecting Dialogues can prevent conflicts, violence and aggression in the prison. Through Reflecting Dialogues the guards can discover the inmates´ needs, for instance when it comes to mental issues. Both the prisoners and the guards express that Reflecting Dialogues improves the relationship between them. The prison staff members that were interviewed described Reflecting Dialogues as “the best thing that has happened in this prison”.

Our findings suggest that Reflecting Dialogues is different from other communication models, because of the three-party structure. The calm and respectful dialogues make the inmates feel safe, and enable them to express their thoughts and feelings in words. Through the experience of Reflecting Dialogues, the inmates can also learn how to reflect in other situations. Further, it is important for the prisoners to feel that they are more in control and influence their own process. We will suggest that the level of empowerment in these dialogues can facilitate change.

***The three-party structure***

The three-party structure with the third person reflecting and repeating is a new communication form for the prisoners. This “suitable difference” (Andersen, 2005) can make the inmate to go out of the automatic track, which it is easy to fall into, if they have repeated their story multiple times to police and different helpers. The structure of the conversations creates different opportunities than the traditional ways of interaction, both in ordinary life and in therapy. First, it is significant that the third person actually listens to the conversation, without interruption or confrontation. Second, when the third person repeats exactly what the prisoner has said, it seems to have an influence on the inmate. Finally, when the third person reflects and shares their thoughts in a recognizable manner, it represents an extraordinary experience. Also, the Reflecting Dialogues are not too foreign and different; in which case could make the prisoners close themselves up. This difference can “make a difference” (Bateson, 1979), and make the prisoner more open and curious. Something new is happening to them.

The structure of the Reflecting Dialogues, where one person talks at a time, makes room for the inmates to develop their linguistic form. An important aspect is the ability to rest during the conversation, which is helped by a clear distinction between speaking and listening (Wagner, 2006a). There is time and space for the inmates to listen to their inner voice, as well as developing their ability to listen. The inner and outer dialogues are reflected upon (Andersen, 2006).

When the third person repeats what they have heard, they are paying attention to what is actually said and heard (Wittgenstein, 1953; Andersen, 2006 b). The inmate understands that what he or she said is worth repeating. The guards take on a “not-knowing”-position, they do not evaluate or change what the prisoner said. By this they show that they hear and acknowledge the prisoner (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992). The inmate has been seen and heard, as the person he or she is, as one of them said. When the prisoner listens to the reflection, between the guard and the third one in the triad, the meaning and value of his statements become clearer. Together with the positive attitude the helpers emphasize, the inmate can receive a positive experience, which can boost their self-esteem.

***Control over the changing process***

The prisoners and released prisoners conceived the conversations with the prison staff differently than interaction with other professionals, like psychologists and psychiatric nurses. This could be understood as frustration over the objectification that is taking place, when they are diagnosed, or when someone attempts to steer them in a certain direction. If one does not know the intention or purpose of the conversation, it may cause particular insecurity or suspiciousness. In Reflecting Dialogues this is turned upside down – it is the professional that takes on the “not-knowing”-position (Anderson, 1992).

Health and social workers are in their positions for helping people. Even though they have learned to facilitate so that clients can help themselves, they very often know what is the best way to reach improvement. Many professionals have prepared specific models and objectives before meeting the client. And if a client speaks to different professionals, they can meet the same systems or even the same questions, due to certain trends in models that are applied across institutions. Prisoners express that they do not like to be met with a method; they want to be met as a normal person (Uggerhøj, 1996). This is what most of the informants emphasize in this research. Also, when the helper eyes an opportunity for change, they often start to push in a way that often becomes more than “a suitable touch”, as Ianssen (1997) and Øverberg and Andersen (1986) call it. That will not make a suitable difference (Andersen, 2005) and the client will not join the professional´s process.

The topics addressed in the Reflecting Dialogue rely on the initiative of the client, who is free to decide possible issues of improvement, as well as factors that should be excluded, at their own speed. As Tom Andersen indicates, you should “not talk about the untellable” (Andersen, 2005). In cases where the client determines the path forward, they often tend to emphasize the importance of professional assistance. A number of prisoners found it easier to speak to the prison staff, who did not have high expectations of the prisoners or themselves. To feel the equality, in what Baktin in Schotter and A Katz (2008) calls “to talk without rank”, is important for the prisoner in order to come in contact with himself or herself. He or she can be able to put words and terms on what he thinks, feel and means (Wagner, 1998, 2009). With the help of peaceful, free conversation, the inmate is able to identify and describe what he conceives to be the problem. When he decides to respond to it and approach the relevant service provider, he will be able to articulate the challenge he wishes to address – he owns his own changing process. And he can have more influence on the cooperation with the therapist, and feel more equal (Baktin in Shotter & Katz, 2008). In this way the reflecting Dialogues may be considered pre-therapeutic conversations.

***Coming in contact with oneself***

As we mentioned in the beginning of this article, the social workers in the prison held the assumption that the prisoners´ possibility to make proper use of rehabilitation elements after release, would increase if they got to know themselves better.

Imprisonment involves deprivation of liberty, identity breakdown and personal violation for the subject (Goffman, 1961). Certain rights are removed, while the unlawfulness of the inmate’s previous action is emphasized. Convicts are labeled outlaws, criminals, deviants, etc., and structure of the prison system is hierarchical, impersonal and controlled.

The informants in this research express that it is important for the inmates to have the possibility to express their anger, worries, sorrow and other feelings that engulf them. Andersen (1998) focused on the meaning of language, and different types of expression, through both words and bodily expression. In the same vein, the conclusion of (Wagner, 1998, 2006a, 2009) from working with prisoners in Kalmar is that a lack of words often leads to increased use of bodily expressions like aggression and restlessness.

Andersen (2006) pointed out that feelings such as irritation, frustration, sorrow and anger must be translated into words in order to be properly understood. One of the most essential aspects of the Reflecting Dialogues is the opportunity of the inmates to develop a vocabulary and add words and emotions to their reflections, enabling them to reflect on their life stories.

Many of the inmates describe how they have been touched and moved in the reflecting Dialogues. They have felt it in their body. When they get touched, they are open and in a position to see something new (Sundet, 2006).

***Changing behavior through reflecting***

A Reflecting Dialogue represents a conversation where the client is given the chance to get in touch with his inner desires and needs, and from there may be define a purpose for himself.

Through this process, new possibilities may emerge in relation to other people and life in general. A new perspective of the past and present can be cultivated through the Reflecting Dialogues, while the prisoners are able to experience social recognition, in spite of their previous experiences with violations and disrespect. With help from the Reflecting Dialogues we have seen that the prisoners can be able to “create an opening between the past and the future”(Arendt, 1978; Øverenget, 2001, p. 239).

They also obtain tools of communication vis-a-vis their fellow inmates and the people around them. Another crucial factor is the way a given phenomenon is discussed, as this may create a new understanding and a different pattern of behavior (Anderson and Goolishian 1992).

When they find a new way of communicating with their girlfriends and wives, it can help them being able to stay in a family relation. When they can express themselves without being angry, it can help them keeping a job. When they start practicing reflection together with cellmates, they can practice other ways of socialization and they do not always have to talk about the next

crime.

It can be assumed that the inmates and the released prisoners now are in a more favorable position to realize their opportunities for change.

**Limitation of this study**

There are for sure limitations of this study. The small sample can give information about those we were speaking to, but we cannot generalize these findings to common knowledge. This study cannot establish that the Reflecting Dialogues are the only effective way of talking to prisoners, as long as we did not compare this method to other methods. In this study we only have the facts that the inmates and the employees shared with us. We did not collect any systematic registration of the inmates´ change of behavior; that they were less aggressive, had more social contacts, or that their language developed. This was only told by the prisoners themselves and the staff. Regarding the effect of the Reflecting Dialogues we met released prisoners who were good examples that the Reflecting Dialogues had been very meaningful to them. But the group we spoke with were too small to generalize knowledge from.

**Ethical implications**

Using Reflecting Dialogues in prison, it is a risk that people with peculiar personalities could learn a way of communication in order to misuse it. They could learn a way of getting near another person just to know how to manipulate them. It might be unethical to teach this kind of people how they can manipulate people also after release. Therefore, it might be important to carefully evaluate who are to be involved in the dialogues.

It is fair to ask if the staff members are always qualified to exclude those who ought not to take part in these conversations. On the other hand, who could be a better judge than a prison employee with 25 years of experience? They have a unique practical knowledge in relation to the inmates; this is also giving them an extra advantage during the conversations.

**Methodological consideration**

The strength of this study is that we have been able to interview a range of inmates and released prisoners of different ages, gender, ethnicities and backgrounds. In addition, a group of prison guards and other staff members have been followed through a two-year-long process of implementing and practicing the method Reflecting Dialogues. In order to preserve the authenticity of the participants, we have relied on direct quotations. This has been done in order to give the participants a voice, and to highlight similarities and differences within the material. An important implication is that the prison has provided access to the participants, which means that the study is limited to a description of the positive experiences with the Reflecting Dialogues among the people involved. We are, however, aware that many prisoners are unwilling to communicate with the prison staff in such dialogues.

**Conclusion**

With help of the systematic approach of family therapy´s Reflecting Dialogue it is stressed that the prisoners are more than criminals, that they are human beings with intrinsic values and with a right to have a meaningful life within a social context. It is also emphasized that reality is created through a hermeneutic process, in which both the prison staff and prisoners contribute.

Furthermore, the material indicates that Reflecting Dialogues promote better conditions for rehabilitation, although this has not been conclusively established. It could be suggested that the people surrounding the released prisoners, such as family, networks and the society in general, may benefit from this activity in the longer run.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The structure and the attitude of the Reflecting Dialogues has for sure a certain effect on the participants, and this knowledge could be further explored.

The Norwegian prison, which this research is about, has developed their work further by giving Reflecting Dialogues to inmates and their families. The intention is to help families to cope with and accept the situation they are in because of the family-member´s imprisonment. Now the prison is planning to expand and offer Reflecting Dialogues also in other prisons in the country. When this communication approach is established, it could be interesting to follow the project with a qualitative research.

Another possibility to study this theme further could be to try out Reflecting Dialogues on new arenas while doing an action research study. For instance, this method could be used with parents by the child protection services to get information about what the parents need after the child welfare system has started to intervene in their family lives. The Reflecting Dialogues could give the parents an opportunity to talk about what is important to them, without being disturbed too much by anxiety and powerlessness, which can be devastating in such situations. Another group could be unaccompanied refugee minors, where Reflecting Dialogues could be used. Their experiences, hope, and how they cope with their situations can be useful knowledge for the practitioners. To collect valid data, it would be necessary to do this qualitative research over time and with large groups of participants.

It could also be beneficial to study Reflecting Processes through a quantitative approach, in order to create useful knowledge. One could map experiences through a survey on a large number of respondents to get detailed information about what works in conversation with practitioners and therapists that uses reflecting processes in their practice.

Finally, it could be interesting to conduct a meta-study with different approaches which uses reflection process methods. This could bring up new perspectives on the third person´s importance in the reflecting processes. And we could get more specific knowledge about what works.

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