



Volume 32

Issue 1 March - Special Issue on Aging and
Older Men: Thoughts, Reflections and Issues

Article 16

March 2005

Review of *At Work in the Iron Cage: The Prison as Gendered Organization*. Dana M. Britton. Reviewed by Katherine van Wormer.

Katherine van Wormer
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Wormer, Katherine van (2005) "Review of *At Work in the Iron Cage: The Prison as Gendered Organization*. Dana M. Britton. Reviewed by Katherine van Wormer.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol32/iss1/16>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



the journalists used their cameras to capture powerful snapshots of gang life, images produced by gang members shed light not only on the world of street gangs but also on how these youths see and experience their own lives in this world.

This book breathes fresh air into traditional academic accounts of gangs and gang members. The chapters in this book challenge modern conventions by offering new ways of thinking about gangs, their function, their culture and their place within the current social climate. It is recommended reading for anyone with an interest in gangs, youth culture, urban street life, and juvenile delinquency. Rather than feeding further stereotypes of gang members and fueling the fear that these youths instill in mainstream society, the authors use both the written and visual mediums to add an important human, cultural, political, social and spiritual element that is too often missing in discussions of gangs and gang members.

Matthew T. Theriot
University of Tennessee

Dana M. Britton, *At Work in the Iron Cage: The Prison as Gendered Organization*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. \$55.00 hardcover, \$19.00 papercover.

Written in the tradition of Goffman's organizational theory, and especially of his conceptualization of the total institution, Britton's *At Work in the Iron Cage* is a major contribution to the sociology of work as well as to correctional literature. As the subtitle would indicate, this book is a contribution to gender studies (male *and* female) as well.

As a person who has spent a lot of time visiting prisons and who has observed a lot of "back stage" as well as "front stage" behavior in the total institution, I still found myself fascinated by many of the revelations provided in this book. The study is based on interviews conducted in the 1990s with 72 male and female officers. Federal and state sites were both included. That the author was even allowed to conduct such interviews in the present volatile and suspicious atmosphere surrounding male officer sex scandals is perhaps the most astonishing fact about this work. That accomplishment is a tribute to Britton's fortitude

and single-minded determination against many odds, as revealed in the appendix.

When I set out to do this review, because it is an area with which I have such familiarity, I planned only to skim the chapters' contents. Yet the writing style, both in terms of choice of words and the interspersing of generalizations with direct quotes, Goffman-style, drew me in, captivated me, to the extent that I could not resist reading every word. From this vantage point, I can share with readers of this review my observation that *At Work in the Iron Cage* is as succinct as it is interesting; not a page or paragraph in this detailed yet carefully edited study is excessive or out of place.

Chapter 1, "Engendering the Prison," introduces us to the concept, *gendering of occupations*, a concept that is informed by an awareness of the complex interplay among structure, culture (masculine and feminine), and agency, all three. In this chapter, we learn of the peculiar legal history of what happened when women gained the right to engage in front-line work in men's prisons. The unexpected consequence of this victory was that the same right was simultaneously accorded to men too, to work without restraint in women's prisons. The inevitable happened; some of the lurid details are described in chapter 3.

Some of the scandals that have occurred in recent years are reminiscent of what happened in the history of women's prisons. Penology in America is the topic of chapter 2. What we learn from the historical record is how ideas about masculinity and femininity influenced the design and practices of men's prisons while some prisons for women (especially white, middle class women), prisons bore a softer touch. No chivalry was accorded to black female offenders, however. They were sentenced harshly and treated harshly. In the inmate leasing system in the South, the plantation was reborn; women of both races were chained together with men; they suffered rape by both inmates and guards.

Chapter 3, "From Turnkey to Officer," chronicles the gradual professionalization of correctional work. Matrons, who actually lived in the institution, were on duty in women's prisons 24 hours a day. Until the 1970s, practically all the matrons were white. The most significant development that has taken place over the last three decades, as Britton notes, has been the increasing prevalence

of "cross-gender" supervision and the employment of men and women in prison facilities that house inmates of the opposite sex. The overwhelming majority of correctional officers, today as then, work with male inmates. The pat-down searches by male officers of female inmates are the subject of a large number of lawsuits. Recent sex scandals have fueled the controversy.

Chapter 4 provides a sociological study of correctional work and training for such work, training that I would describe as militaristic. All officers are trained to handle violence, for work with anti-social men, in other words. The detailed description of officer training provided in this chapter is a major contribution to the literature. Chapter 5, "Work with Inmates," is an especially revealing chapter, as well. Behavioral differences by male and female inmates are compared and contrasted. The extent to which officers prefer to work in men's institutions is tellingly revealed in the many narrative excerpts that highlight this section of the book.

The following chapter continues the analysis of the dynamics of prison work; here the focus is on the interaction between administrators and staff. Recent restrictions on male staff (in state but not federal prisons for women) in the interests of preventing sex scandals, have led to unintended consequences. To protect female offenders, the women officers find themselves confined to the dormitory areas, the least desirable areas in which to work and the most dead-end in terms of career advancement. Male officers, on the other hand, have the run of the institution. Another rule with the unintended consequence of holding women back is the system of promotion which requires a move to a different prison. Geographical mobility is tougher on women with families, so they are more apt to remain behind in subordinate positions.

Consistent with organizational theory, Britton's stated purpose in crafting this study was to present the image of the worker within a complex and multifaceted milieu. In exposing the inner workings of prison staff in a gendered and racialized environment, Dana Britton admirably has achieved her goal. This book should be of interest to criminologists, correctional social workers, and students of gender issues alike.

Katherine van Wormer
University of Northern Iowa