

What do we mean by “normative legitimization?”

This phrase encompasses what would be considered a “normal” reaction or assessment of a situation in the “outside” world.

For example, if you were developing a migraine headache and you had no aspirin to forego the anticipated progress of heightened pain, but you knew that your neighbour had aspirin, you might ask to borrow some aspirin and pledge to return it as soon as you returned from the store. Your neighbour would most likely not hesitate and more likely would be pleased to provide you with this mild pain relief. When problems arise for a neighbour, it is considered good to offer one’s assistance.

This is a normative definition of a neighbour - someone who lives nearby and in this nearness shares the amenities of and is part of a neighbourhood.

Those who live in the neighbourhood often take pride in its upkeep and social interactions and most often cooperate in keeping the neighbourhood safe and clean. Neighbours share in both the happy events in life and the unhappy. Good neighbours can be called upon to assist when misfortune or adversity is encountered.

Prison authorities however, often construct, deconstruct and bend definitions to suit their main purpose of absolute control. Often this misuse raises contradictory expectations. I.e. *Prison authorities reinforce the idea that a cage is a “home” while at the same time restricting and often punishing the activities, possessions and privacy of and in that “home.” Prisoners are often dissuaded from helping their neighbour with advice to prisoners given by prison authorities to--“do your own time.”*

Prisoners, particularly those who will inhabit the “neighbourhood” for an extended period of time will attempt to make it as comfortable as possible. Whether possessions are simply a box of letters or a television set, a few books or a plant, each possession is often cherished and kept in a particular space in an orderly manner. When prison authorities “search” a cell, (most often unannounced entry) they often leave it in a state of disarray and at times with items destroyed. If this activity (breaks and enters) were to happen in the outside world, the person would be angry and feel violated, however the prisoner is refused legitimization for any similar response. The search is justified for the “security of the institution,” to look for drugs or weapons or contraband (anything not permitted at the time.)

In this situation, advocacy may simply be an acknowledgement to the prisoner that their feelings of being violated are legitimate and/or an offer of assistance to file a grievance. If the cell was left in a state of disarray; if an item was broken or destroyed; if the searching of legal papers or the sacred items of an aboriginal prisoner like a feather box or hair violated a prisoner’s rights and/or if an item was confiscated with no receipt given for the item, the matters may be grieved. This is a way that you can help the prisoner to become more active in his or her own existence and to lessen their feelings of helplessness, frustration and anger (see Section II on grievances).