



Prison Culture

It has long been recognized that, just as there is a culture among citizens in the free world, a separate culture also exists within prison walls. Beginning with Donald Clemmer's general study of the prison community in 1940, the dynamics of social relationships in the prison have been thoroughly studied and documented. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, studies moved from the general, as in Clemmer's investigation, to the specific, such as Gresham Sykes's (1958) pains of imprisonment and John Irwin and Donald Cressey's (1962) importation model. More recently, efforts at theoretical integration have been proposed.

PRISONIZATION

The concept of prisonization was first introduced in 1940 by Clemmer in his book *The Prison Community*. Clemmer defined *prisonization* as the assimilation process in prison where inmates take on "in greater or less degree ... the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary" (Clemmer, 1940, p. 299). Clemmer characterized the process of prisonization in terms similar to those used by early sociologists to capture processes of socialization and assimilation in communities at large. Just as we all assimilate to the norms, customs, and laws of our society, inmates must assimilate to the self-contained community of a prison. However, since the values of the prison are discordant with societal values, prisoners must readjust and learn new norms, rules, and expected patterns of behavior. Known as the "inmate **code**," what is considered unacceptable in the free world may be encouraged and rewarded inside the walls of the institution.

It has been argued that the prisonization process, to an extent, affects every inmate; however, several variables influence to what degree prisonization shapes a person's tenure in the institution. Not all inmates, that is, become prisonized to the same degree. The variables contributing to prisonization lie both within the offender as well as within the institution. The form and orientation of the institution can impact its effect on a person. Prisoners in treatment-oriented facilities tend to exhibit lower degrees of prisonization than do those in custody or discipline-oriented institutions. Further determinants of prisonization include intrapersonal experiences, such as the extent of social relationships; work involvement; and the acceptance of roles bestowed on the inmate by other social actors in the institution. Generally, prisoners with shorter sentences, stable personalities, and healthy relationships with members of the outside community as well as with fellow inmates who refrain from excess abnormal conduct within the walls are the least prisonized. On the other hand, people with long terms of incarceration, unstable personalities, and relationships un conducive to proper adjustment will tend to be most prisonized. Because these characteristics and experiences are differentiated between and within inmates throughout their term of imprisonment, the degree of prisonization will occur at different rates for different inmates. The process may even occur in a cyclical fashion.

While Clemmer's analysis of prisonization is not without merit, it has been criticized for not delineating and explaining the origins of the prison culture upon which prisonization is based. This criticism gave rise to two of the most influential theories in modern penology: the deprivation model and the importation thesis. While each theory seeks to explain the origins of the prison culture, they do so by pointing to two different locales. The *deprivation model* locates the origins of the prison culture within the institution itself and the experiences of inmates therein. The *importation thesis*, on the other hand, describes the inmate culture as a conglomeration of characteristics prisoners bring into their institution at intake.

DEPRIVATION MODEL

Early penal culture theorists hypothesized that the culture of the prison originated within the walls of the institution. The unique views characterized by the process of prisonization were said to originate in the deprivations that the inmate faced and attempted to cope with every day. Although these issues elucidated scholars on the origin and implications of the inmate culture, they also raised key questions. What were the deprivations that inmates experienced? How did inmates cope with such deprivations?

A landmark work by Gresham Sykes in 1958 attempted to address these questions. In *The Society of Captives*, Sykes described the "pains of imprisonment" that inmates experience during their time in a correctional facility. According to him, the pains of imprisonment are experienced within the walls of the prison; hence, the origin of the culture is not outside the institution, but inside.

In his work, Sykes delineates five deprivations: the loss or deprivation of liberty, the loss or deprivation of goods and services, the loss or deprivation of heterosexual relationships, the loss or deprivation of autonomy, and the loss or deprivation of security. The *deprivation of liberty* refers not only to the loss of civil rights, both temporary and permanent, but also the loss of ability within the institution to decide such matters as when to sleep, eat, shower, work, and recreate. The *deprivation of goods and services* refers to the manner in which inmates are deprived of goods and services they could obtain in the community if they were free. Compounded by our larger society's ideal that the goods people own and the services they receive comprise their self-worth, the loss of goods and services can be viewed as especially difficult.

The *deprivation of heterosexual relationships* refers to the lack of female companionship in prison. The only available sexual outlet for men in prison is other men, which can lead inmates who so participate to question their masculinity. In addition, since heterosexual men define part of themselves through their interactions with women, a lack of such interaction may impact the inmate's sense of self. Through the deprivation of heterosexual relationships, then, men not only lose the interactions with women, but also the part of their own self-concept that is derived from those interactions.

The *deprivation of autonomy* can be understood as the result of the deprivation of liberty. As inmates realize that they cannot make basic choices for themselves, they also come to realize that officials in the institution have complete control over them. As a result, prisoners may be reduced to a state of childlike helplessness that may impact their ability to function normally upon release. Lastly, inmates experience the *deprivation of security*, which refers to the potential threat to personal safety that exists for inmates within the prison.

IMPORTATION MODEL

As with the initial analyses of prisonization, the deprivation model has not been without criticism. Many critics of this model claim that the inmate culture was derived not from within the prison but from offender characteristics and experiences prior to incarceration; hence, these were the key components of the dynamic relationships developed within the walls of the prison. This view of the inmate world was termed the "importation model." The importation model departs from the explanations discussed thus far in that it does not characterize the prison as a closed social system organized around common values. Rather, from this perspective, it is thought that the prison is composed of multiple subcultures that rival each other with respect to values and norms. These smaller subcultures are derived from subcultures developed on the outside that are imported into the prison, as well as social-demographic characteristics and criminal career variables, such as time served in institutions and offense record. Therefore, instead of viewing the inmate as solely influenced by common processes, the importation model proposes that the inmate culture is comprised of conflicting groups with origins that exist outside institutional walls.

Irwin and Cressey (1962) developed a typology of conflicting inmate subcultures that includes the thief, the **convict**, and the straight subcultures. Inmates who belonged to the *thief* subculture adhered to norms and values developed and adopted by thieves in the criminal world. With central values such as trustworthiness and

dependability, it is maintained that these offenders were most likely to refer to fellow thieves in the prison as their primary reference group. The **codes** of this group, instead of the inmate **code**, were held in high reverence. This may be related to the idea that prison is regarded as only a temporary break in the thief's criminal career.

Unlike members of the thief subculture, **convicts** strictly adhere to the inmate **code**. **Convicts** are those who have been raised in the prison system. Their primary reference group is that of the **convicts** within the walls of the prison. Irwin and Cressey (1962) do note the importance of deprivation when examining the **convict** subculture, as the deprivations noted by Sykes have the most impact on the full development of the **convict** subculture. Nevertheless, the values of this subculture are imported from outside the walls of the institution. *Straights*, on the other hand, were characterized by Irwin and Cressey as one-time offenders. These people often identified more with the officers and administrative staff than with other inmates. This group looked to receive as much as they could while in prison by way of educational and rehabilitative programs, and brought little threat of conflict and disturbance to the institution.

INTEGRATED MODEL

While early studies of the prison culture tend to consider the deprivation and importation models as opposite ends of a spectrum, more recent studies have understood these as complementary rather than competing models. Such an *integrated model* might recognize that while inmates will experience some pains of imprisonment, focusing exclusively on this fails to take into account the way in which inmate culture is constructed of conflicting personalities and prior experiences that are brought into the institution. In addition to combining the concepts of the deprivation and importation models, integrated models may also include additional factors not considered by these initial models, such as family visits, the institutional environment, and inmate coping behaviors. More sophisticated integration is possible via examination of reciprocal effects factors inherent of each model have on each other. It is thought that such variations of integrated models can help to clarify why different inmates respond differentially to the inmate culture and to the overall prison experience.

WOMEN'S INSTITUTIONS

It is important to note that the initial models of prisonization and prison culture were formulated under limited conditions as well as circumstances of the times in which they represent. Yet, many of the principles found in these models are used to explain portions of the inmate subculture today that were not considered in these initial formulations. For example, the theories of prisonization, deprivation, and importation were all formulated through examination of male inmates and institutions. As a result, their relevance for explaining the culture within women's prisons is unclear. Early studies of women's prisons did attempt to construct views of the female inmate culture using the models formulated from analyses of the male inmate culture. Most of the studies of the culture within women's institutions focus on the formation of so-called pseudofamilies among women inmates. Women are more likely than men to form close ties with other inmates. While these ties are often sexual in nature, they are not necessarily so. Indeed, most women within pseudofamilies have an emotional relationship that has no physical or sexual aspect to it.

These pseudofamilies have been explained from both the deprivation and importation perspectives. In terms of deprivation, many researchers explain them as a means by which women ease the pains of imprisonment. That is, women in pseudofamilies may gain a sense of autonomy in the institution as well as establish trust and safety among other inmates. Further, these relationships may also ease the deprivation of heterosexual encounters, whether that deprivation is either emotional and/or physical. In terms of importation, pseudofamilies are based on characteristics and gender roles derived from the outside world and there is some indication that pre-prison identities may carry over to prison. Women, then, may bring not only criminal identities into prison with them, but also gender roles from the larger society. Generally, studies of the female prison culture lend some validity to both the deprivation and importation models.

CONCLUSION

Although the deprivation and importation models were developed through the study of male prisoners, they can aid in our understanding of the female prison culture as well. However, newer examinations indicate that an integrated model, combining elements of both deprivation and importation, may be more useful in explaining the prison culture. Considering factors that inmates bring into the prison as well as socialization that occurs within the institution may be crucial to comprehend fully the nature and etiology of the prison culture for both male and female inmates.

The correctional system in the United States is experiencing a metamorphosis. Consequently, now is a critical time for the development of robust theories of the prison culture. Prison populations continue to soar at alarming rates, and laws impacting the prison population continue to change. Determinate sentencing laws, including Three-Strikes Laws and habitual offender statutes, have helped give the prison population a new dynamic, as the number of elderly offenders continues to grow. Other offender groups who are represented in increasing proportions are those inmates with terminal diseases, such as AIDS, and female offenders. It is entirely possible that this crossroad in corrections cannot be fully understood in the context of traditional models of the prison culture. Even if theoretical models take on a new composition, elements of the classical models will inevitably remain, as they are still relevant in gaining an understanding of the prison culture.

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Entry Citation:

Dobbs, Rhonda R., and Courtney A. Waid. "Prison Culture." *Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2004. 720-24. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.



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