

Adaptation to Prison and Inmate Self-Concept

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to advance penological research by examining the process of prisonization more fully than has been done in the past. In order accomplish this, the importation and deprivation models have been expanded by incorporating a more inclusive set of independent variables as predictors of prisonization. Second, this research offers a more complete model of prisonization by including measures of self-concept and the self-identities that inmates maintain in prison institutions. Measures of deprivation in the current study were more important predictors of the degree of prisonization than were measures of importation. The measures of self-conception used in this research did not significantly contribute to an understanding of prisonization.

Keywords: Prisonization, Inmate Self-Concept, Adaptation to Prison.

Introduction

The study of inmate subcultures began with the pioneering work of Clemmer, who coined the term *prisonization* to refer to the adoption of the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the inmate subculture (Clemmer, 1940, p.270). Clemmer's research later incited one of the more stimulating debates in criminological literature between the deprivation and importation models of prisonization. The deprivation model emphasizes the importance of the pressures and problems caused by the experience of incarceration in creating an inmate subculture. The importation model, on the other hand, emphasizes the effects that pre-prison socialization and experience can have on the inmate social system. Rather than employing either model as an explanation of prisonization, there seems to have emerged in more recent years a consensus among researchers, which promotes the integration of both theories into one model. The purpose of this study is to advance penological research by examining the process of prisonization more fully than has been done in the past. In order accomplish this, the importation and deprivation models have been expanded by incorporating a more inclusive set of independent variables as predictors of prisonization. Second, this research offers a more complete model of prisonization by including measures of self-concept and the self-identities that inmates maintain in prison institutions.

Prisonization

The Clemmer (1940) investigation of prison life in a maximum security prison helped to increase social scientists' awareness of the latent inmate community that exists side by side with the formal organization of the prison. An important contribution made by Clemmer was the concept of prisonization, which he defined as "the taking on, in greater or lesser degree, the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary" (Clemmer, 1940, p. 270). Clemmer believed that all inmates suffer certain influences he called "universal factors of prisonization," which prepared and often shocked new inmates into readiness to enter the prisonization process. Clemmer identified several universal factors of prisonization, such as the inmate's acceptance of an inferior role, learning to adopt to the regulations and structure of the prison, and learning to become passive about one's own needs—many of which were automatically taken care of by the institution.

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In the mid-1950s Sykes expanded on Clemmer's work in his analysis of an inmate social system in a maximum security prison. According to Sykes (1958) all prisoner subcultures (countercultures) exhibit a common pervasive inmate value system, regardless of the location and characteristics of the institution. This value system takes the form of an explicit inmate code, which is used as a guide for behavior in inmates' relations with fellow prisoners and guards. The inmate code, therefore, summarizes the behavioral expectations of the inmates' social system.

Adaptation to Prison: The Deprivation Model

The deprivation model is the theoretical position that argues that the conditions within prisons account for the formation of prison countercultures. Deprivation theory argues that prisonization is an adaptive process employed by inmates to cope with the social and physical deprivations of imprisonment (Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Thomas and Petersen, 1977; Tittle, 1972). Faced with similar deprivations, inmates begin to try to solve their problems collectively. Once such a collective response occurs, an inmate society begins to form, "a society that includes a network of positions, which reflect various types and levels of commitment to sub cultural norms as well as adaptive reactions to the problems of confinement . . ." (Thomas and Petersen, 1977, p. 49). The creation of such a sub cultural system is seen as an effective means of resolving many of the problems of prison life.

Proponents of the deprivation model argued that the subculture into which inmates are assimilated is a reflection of the pains of imprisonment that are caused by the structure of the prison organization. This means that an understanding of inmates' attitudes, values, and behavior can be gained through an examination of the influences that are indigenous to the prison setting (Thomas and Cage, 1977).

In support of the deprivation model, research has shown that prisonization is related to: the number of times one has been in prison (Gruninger, 1975); powerlessness or alienation (Guenther, 1978; Hyman, 1977; Neal, Snyder, and Balogh, 1974; Smith and Hepburn, 1979; Thomas, 1975; Thomas and Poole, 1975; Thomas and Zingraff, 1976; Tittle and Tittle, 1964); interaction with fellow inmates (Morris and Morris, 1963; Wheeler, 1961); and orientation toward staff (Gruninger, 1975; Schwartz, 1971). The deprivation model has also been beneficial in explaining prison homosexual behavior, and types of prison leadership (Akers, 1977).

Adaptation to Prison: The Importation Model

Criticisms of the deprivation model developed into what is known as the importation model of prisonization. The basic position advocated by those who support this model is relatively simple. Pre-prison experiences, particularly those involving the adoption of criminal values, and personal characteristics of the inmates affect the degree of assimilation into the inmate subculture (Irwin, 1970; Irwin and Cressey, 1962). If the deprivations of confinement were the sole determinants of the extent to which inmates become assimilated into the inmate subculture, then, given the common problems of adjustment, every inmate would become highly prisonized. This has not been supported by prison research (Thomas and Petersen, 1977), and although the inmate subculture has been established prior to the time a given inmate enters prison, variations in the receptivity to the subculture cannot be accounted for solely by the structural conditions of confinement. One's adaptation and receptivity to the inmate system is shaped by his/her socialization prior to confinement.

The importation model has found support in research linking the adoption of the inmate subculture to general social demographic factors such as age; race; educational attainment; and preprison socioeconomic and employment status (Alpert, 1979; Jensen and Jones, 1976; Kennedy, 1970; Schwartz, 1971; Thomas, 1973, 1977b; Wright, 1989); criminal history, such as prior convictions, number of arrests, offense type, age at first arrest or conviction, and amount of previous criminal experience (Alpert, 1979; Cline, 1968; Kennedy, 1970; Schwartz, 1971; Thomas, 1973; Wellford, 1967; Zingraff, 1980); identification with criminal values and attitudes toward the legal system (Thomas and Poole, 1975; Zingraff, 1980); identification with broad social, political, and religious ideologies (Irwin, 1980; Jacobs, 1976); and contact with the extra-prison world (Thomas, 1973; Tittle and Tittle, 1964).

Despite the oppositional nature of the deprivation and importation models, researchers have recognized the necessity of integrating these two positions into a more comprehensive model (Thomas and Petersen, 1977; Thomas, Petersen, and Zingraff, 1978; Zingraff, 1980). A single-minded subscription to only one of the theories is rarely seen in the literature today (Kalinich, Stojkovic, and Klofas, 1988). Researchers have suggested that both deprivation and importation variables explain prison adjustment and have attempted to combine the models into a single theoretical perspective (Leger and Barnes, 1986; Thomas and Petersen, 1977; Thomas, Petersen, and Zingraff, 1978).

Inmate Self-Concept

Several researchers have suggested that a complete model of prisonization should include measures of the self-attitudes and the self-identities that inmates maintain in the institution (Faine, 1973; Leger, 1981; Wright, 1991; Zamble and Porporino, 1988). Zamble and Porporino (1988), for example, believed that the great majority of theorists have ignored how individuals with particular personality characteristics or self-conceptions react to the conditions and situations of prison life. Future models should more fully examine the relationship between person and environment by placing more emphasis on inmate self-conceptions.

Inmates who enter prisons have been exposed to the depersonalizing and stigmatizing effects of the legal system. These experiences, combined with the additional societal degradation they experience from serving time and the coercive structure of the institution itself, constitute a “massive assault” on the self-esteem of those imprisoned (Sykes, 1958). The self-efficacy motive refers to the degree to which one perceives oneself as a causal agent in the environment (Gecas, 1986). As a dimension of self-concept, self-efficacy refers to how individuals conceptualize themselves as active persons who have control over their world. Previous research has shown that these motives have behavioral consequences. Those individuals who believe that they maintain control of their destiny are more likely to take steps to improve environmental conditions and be more resistant to attempts to influence them (Bandura, 1977, 1982; DeCharms, 1968; Gecas and Schwalbe, 1983). These individuals will, therefore, resist socialization and/or prisonization attempts that undermine their sense of authenticity.

A third important self-motive is identity salience and addresses the question of whether the various identities constituting the self-concept are meaningful and “real” to the individual (Gecas, 1986). According to these theorists the self is organized into various identities (Burke and Reitzes, 1991; Callero, 1985; Stryker, 1968, 1980). These identities are “parts” of the self and are internalized positions that exist insofar as a person participates in roles and/or structured relationships. Persons may have many identities, limited only by the number of structured relationships and/or roles in which they participate (Stryker, 1968, 1980).

Identity theorists proposed that identities are arranged in a hierarchy of salience, and that the higher an identity is in the hierarchy, the greater the probability that the identity will be invoked in a variety of interactions. Importance of an identity can be defined as the degree to which a person’s relationships to specific sets of others depend on his/her being a particular type of person. The more important an identity is to a person, therefore, the more committed he/she will be to that identity (Burke and Reitzes, 1991; Stryker, 1968, 1980). Commitment to identities is a major source of motivation for individuals to act in accordance with the values and norms associated with these identities. Socialization experiences that undermine the values and norms associated with salient identities may fail. In the case of prisonization, inmates who place a high emphasis on many “valued” or “respectable” social identities may be less likely to become fully integrated into the inmate subculture.

Research Methodology

Sampling and Data Collection

The data for this investigation were collected through personal interviews administered to a sample of sentenced male inmates in a maximum security prison operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The institution housed 2,200 male felons, and 440 were randomly selected from this population. Ninety of the inmates were deleted from the sample before the study began because either they did not speak English or were not present in the institution at the time of the study. During the interview process, 115 respondents would not cooperate or could not be scheduled for interviews. A total of 239 inmates were successfully interviewed (67.5 percent of the sample and 10.8 percent of the total inmate population).

Prisonization

This research utilized the concept of prisonization as its dependent variable. Prisonization is generally described as the process of accepting the normative structure of the inmate social system. The measure of prisonization was provided by a seven-item Likert-type scale. Responses for each scale item were scored on a five-point scale (strongly agree, agree undecided, disagree, strongly disagree). The higher the scale score on this measure, the higher the level of prisonization. The scale had an overall mean of 21.96 and a standard deviation of 3.99.

Measures of importation

Several variables were used to assess inmate criminal history and were measured by a one-item response from the inmate. Age at first conviction and number of arrests were both interval variables used as indicators of involvement in criminal subcultures before incarceration. The mean age of first conviction is 23.52, with a standard deviation of 7.81. The mean number of arrests is 4.59, with a standard deviation of 2.81. It is expected that the younger one's age at his/her first conviction and the greater number of arrests one has on his/her criminal record, the greater the degree of prisonization.

Current offense is the type of felony conviction for which an inmate is presently serving time. This is a dichotomous variable in which offense type is classified into either violent or nonviolent. Ten percent of the inmates were, at the time of this research, serving time for violent offenses. It was expected that inmates who were serving time for violent offenses would be more prisonized, because one of the major values of the inmate subculture is toughness and the use of physical force.

Prior incarceration is also a measure of involvement in a criminal subculture and was measured on an interval scale by noting the number of times inmates indicated that they had been previously incarcerated. Nineteen percent of the inmates had no record of prior incarceration, 32 percent had one prior incarceration, and 49 percent had two or more prior incarcerations. Following the logic of the importation model, it was expected that the more times one had been in correctional institutions, the greater his/her adoption of criminal values, and thus the more accepting he/she would be to the inmate code.

Social roles and statuses are a central link between the individual and the larger social structure. In prison, inmates bring with them certain valued statuses that may "anchor" them to the extra-prison world. These socially valued statuses may be used to determine one's commitment to legitimate society. This research utilized four variables to determine several pre-prison social identities: marital status, race, educational attainment, and employment status at time of arrest. It was expected that those inmates with more highly valued social identities were less likely to become assimilated into the inmate subculture because of their previous commitments to legitimate society.

Marital status was measured by a dichotomous variable by noting whether or not an inmate was married. In the present sample, 46 percent of the inmates reported being married. Race was measured by a dichotomous variable indicating whether an inmate reported himself as White or Black. Fifty-seven percent of the inmates reported being White. Educational attainment was measured by noting the number of grades inmates had completed prior to being incarcerated. Forty-eight percent of the inmates reported having less than a high school education, 29 percent reported having a high school diploma, and 23 percent reported having at least some college. Sixty-four percent of the inmates surveyed reported being employed at the time of their arrest.

Measures of deprivation

Prisons are similar to other types of formal organizations in that they are characterized by a system of rules, a rigid hierarchy of authority, a reliance on coercive power, and a low degree of individual autonomy. Prison officials often use the coercive structure to attain and maintain a desired level of social control which, in turn, often generates strong feelings of alienation among the inmate population (Sykes, 1958; Thomas and Poole, 1975; Thomas and Zingraff, 1976).

Perhaps the most important dimension of alienation for correctional research is powerlessness, which can be defined as a feeling of helplessness and subordination to power, which is vested in others (Neal, Snyder, and Balogh, 1974). If proponents of the deprivation model are correct, one would expect to find high rates of prisonization among those inmates who have heightened feelings of contextual alienation or powerlessness.

A measure of contextual alienation comparable to that reported earlier by Thomas and Zingraff (1976) was employed in this study. The measure consisted of four Likert-type attitudinal items that were derived from a larger pool of initial items. The higher the scale scores on this measure, the greater the feeling of powerlessness. The mean of this variable was 16.29, with a standard deviation of 3.13. A major consequence of confinement is the tendency for inmates to develop an oppositional attitude toward both the prison institution they have been forced to become a part of, and the staff of the institution. When such oppositional attitudes are present it is unlikely that inmates will be supportive of the formal goals and policies of the institution. It is expected that the most oppositional inmates will report relatively high levels of prisonization.

A six-item attitudinal scale was developed to measure opposition to the prison organization. The higher the score on this measure the more profound was one's opposition to the prison organization. The mean for this measure was 17.13, with a standard deviation of 4.31.

A common psychological consequence of institutional oppression is aggression in the form of violence. Violence is often a by-product of confining a large number of people with antisocial tendencies in close and frequently overcrowded quarters. One would expect that those inmates who fail to be aggressive and ruthless would be less prisonized, because the inmate social system places a high emphasis on toughness and "being a man." Physical victimization for the research was measured by the following question: "during the past 6 months another inmate (or staff member) slapped, hit, kicked or bit you, choked or attempted to drown you, or beat you up." Over a 6-month period, 31.8% of the inmates in this sample were a victim of physical violence. The mean for this variable was 2.29 with a standard deviation of 3.11.

This research measured life satisfaction through seven dimensions of an inmate's life: family relationships, friendships, social involvements, religion, physical health, economic security, and personal character. Responses to each dimension were scored on a three-point scale of importance (very satisfied, satisfied, not satisfied). Measures of pre-prison and present life satisfaction were created by summing the satisfaction responses across the seven dimensions. Scores from present life satisfaction were subtracted from the scores of pre-prison life satisfaction to create an index measuring a change in life satisfaction. The mean for this index was 1.45, with a standard deviation of 3.16. Low scores reflect a negative change or decrease in life satisfaction. It was expected that inmates with a negative change in life satisfaction would attempt to find consolation through integrating into the inmate subculture.

Prisonization is typically high among inmates who maintain a low expectation of their post-release life chances (Thomas, Petersen, and Zingraff, 1978). The future expectations of inmates were measured by the variable post-release expectations. This measure indicates inmate perceptions as to whether or not imprisonment is viewed as so destructive that reintegration into family, social, and occupational roles is unlikely. Post-release expectations were measured by a four-item Likert-type scale derived from a larger pool of initial items. The variable had a mean of 14.74, with a standard deviation of 2.24. The higher the scale score on this variable, the higher are inmate post-release expectations. It was expected that those inmates with positive post-release expectations would have a lower degree of prisonization.

Measures of self-conception

Sociological approaches to prisonization have suffered from an inadequate and underdeveloped conception of the inmate. The main reason is that researchers have failed to address inmate self-conceptions when examining assimilation into the inmate subculture. This research organized self-concept into three important dimensions: (1) self-evaluation, (2) identity salience, and (3) self-efficacy (Faine, 1973; Gecas, 1982; Gecas and Schwalbe, 1983). These dimensions of self are important to prisonization theory primarily because they provide a fuller and more adequate conception of the acting subject in the prisonization process.

The first important dimension of self-concept is self-evaluation. One would hypothesize the more stigmatized inmates perceive themselves to be, the more likely they will find comfort in the inmate subculture. In this research, perception of stigmatization was measured by a four-item Likert-type attitudinal scale. The higher the scale score was on this variable, the higher perception of stigmatization. The measure had a mean of 12.59 and a standard deviation of 2.18.

A second important dimension of self-concept is identity salience. According to identity theorists the self is organized into various self-identities based on roles or relationships with others (Burke and Reitzes 1991; Callero, 1985; Stryker, 1968, 1980). The concept of identity salience was measured in this research by determining the importance of five socially valued identities: occupation, family, friendships, social involvements, and religion. Responses to each identity were scored on a three-point scale (very important, important, and not very important). A measure of total present identity salience was created by summing the products of the importance responses across each of the five different identities. The present identity salience index had a mean of score 8.89 and a standard deviation of 2.05. High scores reflect a high importance given to many different social identities. It was expected that inmates who placed a high importance on many social identities, would be less likely to become socialized into the inmate subculture.

A third dimension of self-concept is self-efficacy. As a dimension of self-concept, self-efficacy refers to how individuals conceptualize themselves as active persons who have control over their world. Previous research has shown that these beliefs have behavioral consequences. Those individuals who believe that they maintain control of their destinies are more likely to take steps to improve the environmental condition and be more resistant to attempts to influence them (Bandura, 1977, 1982; DeCharms, 1968; Gecas and Schwabbe, 1983). One would therefore expect that persons with a high self-efficacy are less likely to be socialized into the inmate subculture. Self-efficacy was measured by a six-item Likert-type scale. Responses for each scale item was scored on a five-point scale (strongly agree, agree undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree). The higher the scale score on this variable, the higher self-efficacy was rated. The scale had a mean of 18.70 and a standard deviation of 3.20.

Results

In order to fully examine the influence of the independent variables on inmate prisonization, a multivariate regression analysis was performed. For the regression analysis, the full range of scores on the dependent variable of inmate code adherence was used, dichotomized variables were treated as dummy variables, and ordinal measures were treated as interval. Only standardized regression coefficients were used in order to assess the relative importance of each independent variable. A stepwise multivariate regression analysis was used to determine the importance of each set of variables as predictors of inmate prisonization.

Three regression models are presented in Table 1. In the first regression model prisonization was regressed upon ten measures of importation. The total amount of variance explained by the importation model was 13 percent ($r^2 = .130$). The results of the first regression analysis show that number of months employed before one is arrested is the strongest and most significant predictor of prisonization. The greater the number of months one worked before arrest, the lower his/her degree of Prisonization ($\beta = .271$). Age of first conviction and educational attainment were also significant in predicting prisonization. The older one was at his first conviction ($\beta = .175$) and greater one's educational attainment ($\beta = .125$), the lower his degree of prisonization. Several measures of importation were not important predictors of inmate code adoption. Type of offense ($\beta = .027$), preprison income level ($\beta = .055$), inmate marital status ($\beta = .006$), race ($\beta = .019$), and number of times in a correctional institution ($\beta = .076$) were not related to inmate prisonization.

The second regression model presented in the second column of Table 1 incorporates four measures of deprivation with the eight measures of importation. This importation/deprivation model is better at explaining prisonization than the importation model alone. When the deprivation model variables were entered into the equation, the total amount of variance explained by the model increased to 53 percent ($r^2 = .532$). The results show that the deprivation model variables account for more of the variance in prisonization than the importation model variables.

The deprivation model variables account for 40 percent of the explained variance in the dependent variable, while the importation variables alone only account for 13 percent of the explained variance in the dependent variable.

Among the deprivation model variables, the two strongest and most significant predictors of prisonization were alienation and victimization. Those inmates who felt highly alienated had higher degrees of prisonization ($\beta = .371$) and those inmates who had higher rates of victimization had a higher degree of prisonization ($\beta = .362$). Post-release expectations ($\beta = -.127$) and change in life satisfaction ($-.076$) were not significant predictors of inmate prisonization.

The third regression model incorporated three measures of self-conception into the importation/deprivation model. This model is presented in the third column of Table 1. The total amount of variance explained by the model was 55 percent ($r^2 = .551$). A change in r^2 of only 2 percent. Stigmatization was the only measure of self-conception that was a significant predictor of prisonization ($\beta = .214$). Inmates, who maintained higher feelings of stigmatization, had higher degrees of prisonization. Identity salience ($\beta = .12$) and self-efficacy ($\beta = .082$) were not important predictors of prisonization when entered into the regression model.

Table 1
Dependent Variable = Prisonization

Independent Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
<u>Measures of Importation</u>			
Race	.019	.057	.083
Marital status	.006	.027	.022
Educational Attainment	.125*	.108	.104
Pre-prison Employment Status	.271*	.142*	.140*
Number of Arrests	.116	.064	.043
Number of Times in Prison	.076	.026	.049
Age at First Conviction	.175*	.034	.039
Type of Offense	.027	.049	.051
<u>Measures of Deprivation</u>			
Alienation		.371**	.384**
Victimization		.363**	.352**
Post-Release Expectation	-.127	-.098	
Change in Life Satisfaction	-.076	-.081	
<u>Measures of Self Concept</u>			
Stigmatization			.214*
Identity Saliency			.121
Self-efficacy			.082
R2	.130	.532	.551

*p >.05; **p >.01.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this investigation coincide with some previous research, which concludes that the merger of the importation and deprivation models explains more of the variation in prisonization than either analyzed separately (Leger and Barnes, 1986; Thomas and Petersen, 1977; Thomas, Petersen, and Zingraff, 1978; Zingraff, 1980). Measures of deprivation in the current study were also more important predictors of the degree of prisonization than were measures of importation. This finding was consistent with other researchers findings (Akers, Hayner, and Gruninger, 1977; Thomas, 1977a, 1977b; Thomas, Petersen, and Zingraff, 1978; Zingraff, 1980).

One of the purposes of this research was to assess the importance of inmate self-conceptions in the prisonization process. This was attempted by implementing three measures of self-conception: stigmatization, identity saliency, and self-efficacy. The measures of self-conception used in this research, however, did not significantly contribute to an understanding of prisonization. One reason measures of self-concept were found to be unimportant may be that the measures of self-conception utilized in this research were based upon extra-prison identities and standards. Prisons, however, are different from other socialization experiences in that inmates may totally lose or repress their extra-prison sense of self. Like boot-camps, mental hospitals, and other types of "total institutions," prisons are designed to re-socialize and change inmates 'sense of self. The prison experience is a depersonalizing process in which inmate's are stripped of their civilian or pre-prison identities. They are denied outside roles and possessions put in uniforms, shaved, given numbers, and subjected to other ceremonies of depersonalization (Goffman, 1961). A new self, adapting to the situation is gradually reconstructed, but unlike the old self it is based on the master status trait of prisoner. Pre-prison roles may no longer be meaningful, rather, inmates may take new roles and identities such as the punk, merchant, outlaw, or politician, which allow them to cope and survive in the inmate society. Measures of self-conception based on extra-prison identities and statuses may be invalid measures and may prove to be unimportant in predicting prisonization. Future research needs to further investigate the roles and identities inmates adopt while incarcerated and how these identities are related to the process of prisonization

To further an understanding of the prisonization process, research needs to address the consequences of prisonization in terms of post-release adjustment. If an inmate enters a prison and becomes well integrated into the inmate society, how will this socialization process affect his/her post-release life?

Future studies should examine the extent and ways in which prisonization influences post-release adjustments and whether or not prisonization has a permanent effect on the values, attitudes, and behavior of inmates. This cannot be accomplished, however, through a simple cross-sectional research design. Future research needs to be longitudinal and should examine inmates throughout their institutional stay and their post-release life.

The general contention is that the effects of prisonization are long-term and encourage inmates to become hostile to the legal system, to employ physical violence as a means of solving problems, and to accept and value interpersonal associations with those who engage in criminal activity. If this is true, one might expect those inmates who are most integrated into the inmate subculture to have the highest rates of recidivism and the most problems adjusting to the post-prison world. On the other hand, prisons may also serve as “schools of crime” where inmates may receive vocational training from experts in the field. In prison, inmates can learn how to forge checks, crack safes, avoid deception by police, and generally enhance their criminal skills. If this is the case, then rates of recidivism among the most prisonized inmates may be relatively low because they would be less likely to be caught by law enforcement officers. An alternative view is that prisonization is only a short-term adjustment to the immediate problems and pressures of confinement made by individuals who almost always know that they will someday return to the outside world. In this case, the attitude and behavior changes caused by prisonization may be only temporary and may not permanently affect an inmate’s post-release life. Inmate homosexual activity, for example, is found in virtually all correctional institutions; however, few researchers and few inmates believe such behavior is a reflection of “real” or permanent homosexuality. Rather most view it as a normal adaptation to an abnormal situation, and most inmates return to their previous heterosexual lifestyles after release. Whether the effects of prisonization are permanent or temporary cannot be proven without a sufficient longitudinal study.

Much of the research based on the concept of prisonization has mistakenly taken a narrow view of the factors that influence what happens inside the prison. Prison organizations are greatly influenced by a variety of external influences including the political context in which they operate and the criminal sub cultural patterns of the outside world such as gang membership and drug use. This has led several researchers to challenge the old conception of the prison social system. Marquart and Roebuck (1985), for example, found that the norms against snitching and ratting do not always apply. Rameriz (1984) concluded that staff and inmates are not necessarily opposed on many important issues and Stastny and Tyrnauer (1982, p. 35) see prisons as “detotalizing” power bases in which control is shared between the inmates, the warden, the guards, the courts, and a number of other external groups, which monitor prison life. Such studies may suggest that the inmate subculture is changing. Future research needs to address the fact that prisons may no longer be characterized by one dominate inmate social system. This may be due to the fact that the character of correctional populations has changed substantially. Current inmate populations consist of a more diverse group of offenders, serving longer sentences, for a wider range of offenses. There are greater concentrations of mentally disabled offenders, drug and alcohol abusers, young violent offenders, and racial and ethnic gangs.

Modern prisons may therefore be characterized by a number of small segmented, mutually exclusive gangs or groups, which may be held together by the contraband economy, but not by other values. The current inmate populations are increasingly divided along gang lines, most of which are based on street gang origins and are racial or ethnic in nature. These gangs frequently engage in power struggles for control of the institution, fighting among themselves and attacking prison officials and correctional officers. This new type of fragmented inmate society may be more violent and less stable than those of the past. This presents a problem for future researchers who desire to find or conduct research on a common pervasive inmate subculture. If this is the case, prisonization may be becoming too general and too crude as a construct.

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