

# Prisons as total institutions



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Prisons are total s in the paradoxical sense of having barriers and breakdown of barriers! The barriers are its physical features like high walls and wire fences. They break down as the prisoners have to conduct their prison lives in one place that leaves no barriers for different activities of life like sleep, play and work. This totalistic character of a prison as defined by Goffman enforces staying in group performing rigidly scheduled activities all intended to serve the purpose for which the prison is set up. Prisonization (Clemmer) is the process of adaptation by the inmates by way of modification of their behaviors to conform to this totalistic world far removed in character from home, family and society at large. This process according to interpretations by Hassine and Abbott creates a subculture for the prisoners with behavioral ways, beliefs and values that though antisocial to the world outside are promoted and even rewarded within the institution of prison. The in-prison socialization helps in this adaptation process but will be severely damaging when the inmate is released to the real world society.

Deprivation within the walls of the penitentiary in various forms causes loss of self-esteem in prisoners. It starts from the point of becoming an inmate. It is therefore desirable to introduce correctional policies to reduce the level of deprivation like allowing weekend leaves and conjugal visits as has been done to alleviate sexual deprivation. One way of reducing the prisonization is to involve the inmates in the management of the prison obviously excluding the administrative part. This will help in developing a reciprocal and balanced relationship of the prisoners with the prison administrators providing scope for mature handling of the situation.

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The real prisons do not, however, fully behave like a total institution of Goffman but in a manner demonstrated by Hassine and Abbott referring to the prisoners falling in line with the inmate subculture that dominantly influences their experience and shapes their beliefs and values in a way contrary to social norms. Here according to Hassine, admiration is earned even by "strong-arm rapists" for their ability to dominate the weak. Inmates develop their own unofficial codebook with these values and beliefs calling the prisons "gladiator schools" where only the strong survive (Abbott). The survival code according to Hassine is: "Don't gamble, don't mess with drugs, don't mess with homosexuals, don't steal, don't borrow or lend, and you might survive". Ironically, liberalization of prison rules have played a key role in shaping the inmate subculture by importing criminal influences further contradicting the idea of prisons as total institutions.

The prison officers also become the victims of prisonization. The restrictive and supervisory role playing they have to perform force them to align into a group much like the prisoners, developing in them a socialization process with value systems of low tolerance and coercive nature. This is reflected in their performance and relations with the prisoners.

While the penitentiaries are designed to be total institutions, it turns out as a complex organization by conflicting forces of prisonization as the inmates try to balance their behaviors between the demands of a total institution and the simultaneous need to align with the inmate subculture so essential for survival in the prison. There always remains a need for corrective measures to alleviate the sufferings of both the inmates and the prison officers notwithstanding the risk of inviting importation of criminal culture from outside to invade and influence the inmate subculture. It certainly is a

difficult balancing question with no easy answer.

#### References

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