U3A Understanding Imprisonment

Session 5: The pains of confinement
Menu

1. Sykes’ analysis of the 5 main pains.
2. Modern assessments and the variations that occur by type of jail and prisoner characteristics.

- Study of male maximum security prison in the USA in the 1950’s.
- Probably more isolated than prisons today.
- Concluded that prisoners experience particular pains of confinement.
- This leads to pressure to deviation and sub-cultures within the prison and enables a symbiotic relationship to be built up between prisoners and staff.
Sykes on the official aims of imprisonment.

- **Custody.** Sykes means what in the UK might be ‘security’ i.e. preventing escapes.
- **Internal order.** Sykes suggests that a staff priority is that the prison operates in an orderly fashion.
- **Self-maintenance:** Personal survival.
- **Punishment:** People are sent to prison as a punishment.
- **Reform:** Prisons aim to change people for the better.
Sykes’ view of prisoners:

• Most prisoners begin with little acceptance of the legitimacy of the prison.
• Prisons are experienced by most prisoners as dangerous places which they must endure and survive.
Pains of confinement experienced by prisoners:

- Deprivation of liberty: prisoners are held against their will.
- Deprivation of goods and services: prisoners cannot buy things as they could on the outside.
- Deprivation of heterosexual relationships: prisons are single sex.
- Deprivation of autonomy: prisons are run on a command basis.
- Deprivation of security: prisons are places of personal danger.
Consequences: prisoners

- Prisoners are ‘pushed in the direction of deviation’ (Sykes 1959:22) making them to various degrees, at least unwilling and at most downright recalcitrant.
- They are made susceptible to various sub-cultural groups.
- Lack of legitimacy, recalcitrance and sub-cultural patterns combine to make them difficult to manage.
Consequences: staff

• Prison staff want to maintain the existence of the prison and continue in their employment.

• To ensure the survival of the prison staff must accomplish security and order.

• To effect this staff are equipped with the appearance of total power. But…
Symbiosis?

• But the staff cannot exercise total power all the time. Why not?
• Staff ultimately depend on prisoners on a 24/7 basis.
• Staff and inmates thus form a symbiotic relationship.
• From which inmate codes or sub-cultures form to ensure survival.
Inmate sub-cultures: mores, roles and deviations

• Inmate code: ‘don’t interfere with other inmates’ interests’; ‘never grass’; ‘play it cool’; ‘be tough and be a man’; ‘don’t steal from inmates; ‘don’t side with or show respect to staff.’

• Inmate role: ‘real men’

• Role deviations: ‘merchants’; ‘gorillas’; ‘rats’; ‘punks/fags’; ‘ballbusters.’
Critique of Skyes (1958): his account pays insufficient attention to:

- Wider processes that influence what happens on the inside.
- Variations in prisons.
Critique continued

- Sykes has also been seen to ignore the impact of imprisonment over time (prisonisation)
- He neglected changes in sub-cultures.
- He downplayed the role of rewards in mitigating inmate behaviour. For e.g. IEP (Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme in E&W) (Leibling et al 1997)
Further criticisms

- Sykes tended to see that the pains of confinement accrued to the men imprisoned and neglected broader effects.
- It is now generally recognised that imprisonment affects the relatives of those imprisoned (partners/children/parents, friends) in a number of ways, making ‘a second sentence’. See Mills and Codd (2007).
Yet further criticisms

• Sykes sees that order and security are key staff priorities. Perhaps we should acknowledge in the current age of austerity that there is a further staff priority: economy and cuts. Impact on the pains?

• Finally, to what extent are the pains of confinement affected by the current state of crisis in prisons?
Prisoners’ accounts

• For male adult prison see James (2003, 2005). Erwin James is the lifer who has been contributing a column to ‘The Guardian’ for some years, but who has now been released on licence.

• Adult women’s experience of imprisonment see Wyner (2003). Ruth Wyner is the Cambridge charity worker who was jailed for allowing the charity premises to be used for drug selling/use. See also the article by Wyner in Jewkes (2006).
Books