Prisonization

Background
Prisons are unnatural. No human being was created to be locked in a cage. Living in such an unnatural state for a significant period of time inevitably changes a person. In most cases the change is for the worse, not the better. Aside from the confinement aspect of prison, there are other aspects that negatively affect the prisoner’s psyche. A major aspect is that of the prison culture.

Prison culture is different from any other culture in the world. When a person enters prison for the first time, they are confronted with a unique set of conditions. They leave behind the cultural norms of the free world and enter into a totally different society—the likes of which they could never have imagined. They must forget about the cultural norms they have lived under for all of their previous life and quickly adapt to these new norms and conditions, if they are to survive both physically and psychologically.

The movie *The Shawshank Redemption* is a classic example of what we mean by prisonization, or what some call institutionalization. I prefer using the term *prisonization* because it is a unique and specific form of institutionalization. In the movie, the newly released Brooks, who was in prison for many decades, finds the notion of living in the free world terribly frightening. When he learns that he is being paroled, he attempts to knife his friend in order to extend his sentence. Having failed, he resigns himself to his fate—to face the outside world after many decades of incarceration. Shortly after being released and attempting to cope with the pressures of society, he carves the words, “Brooks was here” into the rafters of his halfway house room and hangs himself.

Definition
Prisonization is the fact or process of becoming prison-ized. Prisonization is the process of being socialized into the culture and social life of prison society to the extent that adjusting to the outside society becomes difficult. According to Wayne Gillespie:

> Prisonization involves the formation of an informal inmate code and develops from both individual characteristics of inmates and from institutional features of the prison. Both the individual characteristics of inmates and institutional qualities affect prisonization
and misconduct. Individual-level antecedents explained prisonization better than did prison-level variables.¹

**Intensification of Prisonization**

Changes in the prison system over the past decades have made adapting to prison culture even more intense and difficult than in times past. Because of mass incarceration, the number of prisoners has more than quadrupled over the past three decades or so. Typically, prisons that were designed to hold about 600 prisoners now house over 1,000. Cells that were built to house one prisoner are now double-bunked to hold two prisoners. Prison pods contain nearly twice as many prisoners than they were designed to accommodate. Thus, the living conditions of prisoners have been adversely affected.

During the same time frame, correctional philosophy changed dramatically. Up until the 70s, the focus of prison was rehabilitation. There were numerous programs operating in the prisons aimed at making the prisoner a better person during his prison stay and preparing him to become a better citizen once released. Programs included vocational, educational, and psychological programs. Those in prison were able to learn valuable trades and skills that enhanced their lives while incarcerated and increased their chances of gaining employment upon release.

Criminal justice scholar Robert Martinson began to write about prison rehabilitation in the early 1970s. He studied a number of corrections programs and came to the conclusion that none of them worked to reduce the prisoners’ risk of recidivism. His philosophy became known as “Nothing Works.” Based upon his work, correctional administrators began to quickly eliminate programs within their institutions. The aim of corrections turned quickly from rehabilitation to sheer punishment. This led to the warehousing of prisoners. Prisoners now languish for hours upon hours per day with no constructive activities provided for them. Educational and vocational programs are few.

The overall attitude from correctional administrators and officers changed as well. The rights of prisoners and their obligation to protect prisoners became lesser regarded. Prison discipline became all the more harsh. Interest in protecting a person in prison from their peers diminished. More restrictive facilities were built, such as “super max” prisons. Those in prison were routinely sent to these harsh facilities for relatively minor infractions.

Also, during this time period prison sentences became longer. First-time offenders, who in times past may have been given probation, were sentenced to relatively long prison sentences. The rights of juveniles were more often waived, and young teenagers were tried as adults and given adult sentences. Thus, we saw many going into prison at younger ages and serving longer sentences.

**Psychological Effects of Prison**

How a person in prison spends his/her time while incarcerated can affect their level of prisonization. All those in prison do not spend their time in the same manner. Some spend their time pursuing recreational activities and playing games to while away their time. Their strategy for survival is to keep themselves entertained. Those who are athletic will spend time playing basketball, baseball, lifting weight or some other sport. Some spend their time playing games such as checkers, chess, dominoes and various card games. They may use drugs or drink alcohol to the degree that it is available to them. Those who take this route, I have observed, seem to be more susceptible to the effects of prisonization.

Some spend their time in their continued pursuit of criminal activities. Often those who had also spent time in juvenile facilities will take this approach. They view themselves as the prison elite. They are committed to the criminal lifestyle. In many ways they are powerful forces in shaping the prison culture. They are the purveyors of all kinds of criminal enterprises within the prison system. They are perhaps the most prisonized group within the prison population. They demonstrate no desire to change and adapt to the norms of society on the outside.

And there are those who, despite all of the negative aspects of prison, make a conscious decision to better themselves. They seek out any program within the prison that they can use to better themselves. They are avid readers. They attend classes. Some of them have been able to earn degrees while in prison. They associate with other like-minded prisoners. Their positive activities serve to insulate them, to the degree possible, from the effects of prisonization.

Many turn to faith in God. Prison is a curiously religious environment. People in prison often become more reflective of life once they are incarcerated. This self-reflection leads some to ponder spiritual matters. Many men and women tend to gravitate to established faiths. Christianity and Islamic-based religions are the most popular faith groups in prison. Becoming a firm part of one of these groups can insolate people from the harsh effects of prison. Of course, as a Christian, I believe that turning to faith in Christ provides spiritual, psychological and emotion protection from culture.

It is tremendously challenging psychologically for a person to adapt to life in prison. Aside from the awful realization that one will face severe restriction of their freedom for a significant period of time, there is the stark difference between how people conduct themselves in prison...
versus how people comport themselves in the free world. Failure to learn the prison culture can result in serious psychological or physical harm including sexual assault from fellow prisoner or even death. This places a tremendous strain on the psyche of the newly incarcerated individual. Many people are permanently scarred psychologically by their prison experience. Few people are able to survive the prison experience unaffected psychologically.

**Stages of Prisonization**

Prisonization occurs in stages. The longer a person is incarcerated, the more pronounced the effects become. The more pronounced the effects of prisonization become, the more difficult adjustment back to society becomes. When a person first enters prison, it is extremely difficult for them to adjust to prison life and the loss of freedom, loss of privacy, loss of status, lack of personal security, and miserable material conditions. Most find it an extremely difficult adjustment to make.

The longer a person spends in prison, however, they begin to accept their situation and adapt to their circumstances. When I entered prison, I was told by a seasoned prisoner that it takes a year for a person to learn how to “jail.” What he meant was it took a year for a person to go through the adjustment period of learning and adapting to the prison routine and culture. Like many other transitions in life, once a person experiences all of the seasons in a particular condition, acceptance becomes considerably easier.

According to Haney, prisonization is a subtle process that occurs within the psyche of the incarcerated individual:

> In the course of becoming institutionalized, a transformation begins. Persons gradually become more accustomed to the restrictions that institutional life imposes. The various psychological mechanisms that must be employed to adjust (and, in some harsh and dangerous correctional environments, to survive) become increasingly “natural,” second nature, and, to a degree, internalized. To be sure, the process of institutionalization can be subtle and difficult to discern as it occurs. Thus, prisoners do not “choose” to succumb to it or not, and few people who have become institutionalized are aware that it has happened to them. Fewer still consciously decide that they are going to willingly allow the transformation to occur.²

Haney contends that there are seven psychological adaptations that must be made for a person to successfully adjust to prison life that lead to prisonization. They are (1) dependence on

---

institutional structure and contingencies: They must give up the notion that they can make their own day-to-day decision; (2) hypervigilance, interpersonal distrust, and suspicion: They must become acutely aware of the dangers posed by their fellow prisoners and maintain strict personal boundaries for their own protection; (3) emotional over-control, alienation, and psychological distancing: Many in prison create a “prison mask,” a persona that keeps other, potentially dangerous inmates at a distance; (4) social withdrawal and isolation: Many adopt a survival strategy of keeping to themselves and trusting virtually no one, which leads to a prolonged state of social isolation and possibly chronic depression; (5) incorporation of exploitative norms of prison culture: Prisoners learn to deal with threats to their personal safety and attempts at exploitation in quick, decisive, and very often violent ways that are grossly inappropriate in free society; (6) diminished sense of self-worth and personal value: The degrading conditions under which incarcerated people are forced to live, including social stigmatization, causes them to have a diminished self-identity; and (7) post-traumatic stress reactions to the pains of imprisonment: The prison experience is so traumatizing to some individuals that it causes symptoms akin to PTSD once they are released from confinement.

Reintegration into Society
The effects of prisonization make it quite challenging for many released from prison to adjust to society. One of the most insidious effects of the prison experience is the incarcerated person’s diminished capacity to make decisions. Many formerly incarcerated people have reported how stressful it was for them in the early months of their release to be forced to make everyday decisions. The inability to make major decisions can easily cause a person to fail in their attempt at reintegration and leads to their return to prison.

The diminished ability to trust, emote, and openly communicate poses great challenges to those attempting to reintegrate from prison to society. These cause challenges in many areas of the returning former prisoner’s life including family. Healthy family life is built around mutual trust, open communication, and the freedom to express one’s true feelings. The effects of prisonization cause a great deal of stress upon the family a person returns to and upon the person returning to the family from prison.

The inability to trust, emote, and openly communicate can cause a great deal of stress in the workplace. Many formerly incarcerated people have internalized the notion that everyone wants something from them. They believe that if someone offers them something, material or otherwise, something will be expected from them in return. They are wary of trusting others. They are often socially awkward and sometimes isolated from their coworkers. This leads to a potentially stressful workplace experience for those returning from prison and for their coworkers.
The most dangerous aspect of prisonization is the person’s forced acceptance of the use of violence for protection and to settle disputes. In order to survive, incarcerated people must at least project the image of a person who is willing to use violence to protect himself or to settle a dispute. If they ever possessed any skills related to settling disputes in free society, they may have been stamped out by the prison experience. In many instances, when a prisonized individual perceives a threat or a slight, their conditioning may cause them to react as if they were still in prison—with threats or violence. Of course, this reaction is totally unacceptable in most settings in free society.

It is not uncommon for those who have experienced intense prisonization to find their way back into the prison system within a short timeframe. The psychological strain of adjustment to free society becomes overwhelming. Many would not admit that they intentionally committed a crime in order to go back to prison. Most would not admit that they just could not handle life on the outside. Whether consciously or subconsciously, however, they take the sure steps that will lead them back to the place that became comfortable to them because of prisonization.

Programs to Address Issues of Prisonization
During my career as a correctional ministry professional I have not come across any programs that are specifically aimed at ameliorating the effects of prisonization. Because of mass incarceration, there are many thousands of individuals who have spent many decades in prison. Many of them went to prison when they were in their teens, sometimes their early teens. Many did not possess adequate social skills, including life skills and employments soft skills before they went to prison. Some come from families and neighborhoods that did not equip them to thrive in society. These deficits will make it extremely difficult for them to be able to function successfully in society. Like Brooks from the Shawshank Redemption, they will find the prospect of life on the outside of prison scary and depressing.

Many of those who have spent decades in prison are being released from prison on a regular basis without much thought given to their level of prisonization. Many are turned out into the community with little or no support provided by corrections or parole agencies. The very fact that they spent so much time in prison means that they may not experience much family support. Often their parents have died while they were in prison. Sometimes, I have found that siblings may be willing to support their loved-one returning home from prison after such a long time of incarceration. Family members, however, are almost always at a loss for how they can meet the needs of someone who has spent so much time in prison.

Corrections and parole agencies must begin to give attention to the needs to those returning to the community with high levels of prisonization. Programming for these individuals should be more intense and more long-term than that offered to others who are released from prison.
They should have access to self-help and didactical support groups geared specifically for them. They should have access to long-term housing options as some may never be able to truly live independently.

**Bibliography**


