

Clemmer and Sykes in the “Tube” at San Quentin: The Secondary Prisonization of Women Visiting Inmates

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Over the last three decades, the United States has experienced a colossal growth in its carceral population, zooming from incarceration rates so moderate in the early 1970s that it was conceivable to theorize the ‘end of the prison’ to rates so high at present that the U.S. is the world leader in its rate of locking residents behind bars. This steep rise has led to a growing interest in the repercussions of incarceration on inmates’ kin and friends, who, around the time the carceral population hit the 2-million mark in 2000, started to receive attention as people who themselves were profoundly affected by the punishment meted out to their relative or loved one.

Among many of the activists concerned with what has come to be called the “collateral consequences” of incarceration, discourse on this issue has centered on a portrayal of the correctional facility as a wholly destructive institution. Stories are told of families torn apart by a parent’s forced abandonment of the household, of women and children thrown into poverty due to the removal of the primary wage-earner, and of stigma transforming the interactions of people “left behind” with their friends and neighbors. While there is compelling evidence that incarceration creates and compounds various forms of socio-economic disadvantage and harm to mental and physical health for jail detainees, prisoners, and their intimates, a monolithically negative accounting of correctional institutions overlooks two major factors: 1) the degraded and damaging conditions of daily living for the American poor (from whom the majority of inmates are drawn); and 2) the transformative effects wrought by the correctional facility on legally “free” people as they attempt to maintain contact with an incarcerated loved one.

In this paper, I discuss how ethnographic research enabled me to identify and analyze the impact of these two factors on women visiting men at San Quentin State Prison. Of interest to the focus of our discussions in this conference, my first contact with prison visitors was not as a researcher, but in the more “public sphere” role of an employee of a community-based

organization (CBO). In 1995, after finishing my undergraduate degree and thinking that I was finished with academia, I began working for a CBO that provided general assistance and health education to people coming to visiting prisoners at San Quentin. San Quentin is a state prison located on the northern shores of the San Francisco Bay in California; it is a medium-sized facility by California standards, housing just over 6,000 men, and holds the state's Death Row for males as well as medium and low-security inmates. My work took place at the center for visitors, which was owned by the CBO and located 30 feet outside the main gate of the prison. During my 2-year tenure, I was in direct contact with hundreds of visitors each month, providing basic services (such as child care for people unable or unwilling to take their children into the prison) and running HIV-prevention education classes.

During this period I also was young, politically engaged, and living in Berkeley, all of which inclined me toward participation in local activist groups organized around incarceration issues. However, I found it hard to reconcile my daily work experiences with these groups' characterization of imprisonment's effects on families as being uniformly negative, and the characterization of the families themselves as "resisting," in various ways, the correctional system. At the prison, although I certainly saw grief, tears, and the disintegration of relationships, I also witnessed relief, laughter, and the evolution of paradoxical forms of intimacy. Overall, I was unsatisfied with the "public sphere" answers to the perplexing questions I found myself asking about the more complicated aspects of maintaining relationships with incarcerated men and the impact of frequent and sustained contact with a carceral institution on legally free people.

Thus it happened that, somewhat to my surprise, I left the CBO in 1997 to begin graduate school. I returned to San Quentin in 2000 to conduct fieldwork as a doctoral student in sociology, this time with an array of theoretical tools to guide me in seeking to explain the phenomena of which I had become aware several years earlier. For nine months during the prison's weekly four visiting days, I sat on a hard wooden bench in the concrete corridor that served as the waiting area for visitors who wanted to enter the penitentiary. Among the correctional officers and the visitors alike, this corridor is referred to as "the Tube." Technically on state property, but not within the secure boundary that demarcates the prison itself, the Tube is a liminal space between

“inside” and “out” where people prepare for and exit from their visits. The vast majority of these people are women and their children, many of whom arrive hours before the start of their visit in an effort to be close to the front of the line. From the Tube, people are allowed one-by-one through a door that leads to what is called the “processing area,” where they have their identification checked and entered into a computer to verify that they are allowed to visit and then pass through a metal detector and have their clothing scrutinized to make sure they meet the strict regulations governing garments that can be worn into the prison. If there is any hitch in these processes, visitors are ejected back into the Tube, which is usually still packed with other people waiting to enter. The Tube therefore is a space in which the range of emotions associated with visiting transpire: the boredom or anxiety of waiting, the frustration of or resignation to meeting institutional regulations, the comfort or irritation of seeing the same faces week after week, the elation or devastation that lingers after spending time with a prisoner.

Observing the enactment of these emotions – or the efforts to conceal them – day after day, week after week, month after month, all the while conducting interviews with a total of fifty women with an incarcerated male partner, I slowly built up the documentation of what my previous experience working with visitors had indicated: maintaining a relationship with an inmate was financially costly, emotionally intense, and at times harrowing, depressing, infuriating, and humiliating. But in addition to these hardships, women also expressed relief that a troubled loved one had been removed from their home and was now being managed by others; enjoyment of having time to reconnect with men who had been too absent, too addicted, or too violent while “on the streets” to forge bonds with their partners or children; and appreciation of the prison as a site for social interaction that was calmer and safer than their own neighborhoods.

In trying to find an analytical framework for these observations and interviews, I was aware of the use by advocates for prisoners’ families of the vocabulary of victimhood. Inmates’ parents, spouses, and children were claimed to be the “other victims of crime” due to their treatment by a harsh and overly punitive criminal justice system. But none of the visitors I observed or the women I interviewed ever claimed this status, and indeed, women who had been primary victims of crime made clear distinctions between those involuntary experiences and the deliberation involved in choosing to remain involved with an incarcerated partner. Instead, a different phrase

echoed in my head, this one uttered repeatedly by visitors as they waited through seemingly endless and unexplained delays, contended with problems in being processed into the prison, or had their visits “terminated” early due to minor violations of behavioral codes: “They treat us like we’re prisoners too.” From my space on the hard bench, watching women spend hours in line and then being denied entry because their small child’s outfit violated the dress code, this terminology rang true. And indeed, returning to the classics of prison sociology – notably Donald Clemmer’s *The Prison Community* and Gresham Sykes’ *The Society of Captives* – I realized that the theories of how inmates were transformed by their experiences of incarceration also applied to inmates’ kin and loved ones, whose relationships drew them into close and often prolonged contact with the penitentiary.

The long and robust explication of this theory forms the core of *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison* (M. Comfort, University of Chicago Press, forthcoming). An abbreviated version is that Clemmer introduced the concept of “prisonization,” or the socialization to prison culture and norms that occurs among inmates. He likened this process to that of the “Americanization” of immigrants, noting that some people will become prisonized more quickly or more fully than others depending on the strength of their ties to the “outside world” and the stakes they have in returning to it. Indicators of prisonization include the use of prison-specific language, changes in dress and behavior, and recognition of the role and authority of the penitentiary.

I argue that women with incarcerated partners undergo “secondary prisonization,” a less virulent but still potent form of this socialization. Spending long hours each week inside of (and waiting to enter) the prison, receiving phone calls and mail from inmates, assembling and sending packages to them – all of these activities subject women to the surveillance and control of the penal authorities. Over time, women acquire the penitentiary lingo, they change their styles of dress to accommodate the prison’s regulations, they modify their personal and professional schedules according to the institution’s timetable. In Clemmer’s words, the “wise up” to the penitentiary culture, and adopt the habits necessary for facilitating their interactions with it. As with inmates, making these changes doesn’t necessarily come easily and can provoke anger, resentment, or a sense of despair.

Yet as women become secondarily prisonized, they also become increasingly absorbed into the correctional facility. As women “wise up” to the prison, their interactions with it become relatively easier, which can make visiting a more pleasant experience. This might boost the amount of time women spend visiting, and encourage them to relocate various ostensibly “private” activities into the penal sphere. At San Quentin, all prisoners have the right to marry and, depending on the inmate’s security level, men and their visitors can eat together (and sometimes even barbeque and picnic together) and spend the night together. Women who engage in marrying, eating with, and spending the night with prisoners describe these activities in interviews with notable pleasure, cherishing them as means of solidifying connections with the incarcerated loved one. For many, this time is particularly valuable because it contrasts favorably to the quality of couples’ interactions prior to the man’s arrest (since quite often the activities that resulted in his being taken into custody also seriously interfered with his ability to cultivate his primary relationships). In addition, impoverished women who are homeless or living in devastated neighborhoods come to identify the correctional institution as a place that is more secure and more tranquil than their usual environs. As one woman, who lived in a San Francisco housing project renowned for its levels of violence, told me: “[San Quentin] is a nice prison. And I enjoy it. I look forward to coming to visit him. ... [When I had an overnight visit] it was *wonderful*. When I was there, I slept well. It’s peaceful.”

Overall, using the theoretical framework of secondary prisonization to analyze the relationships and experiences of women with incarcerated partners enables us to reconcile and comprehend the otherwise contradictory expressions of frustration and gratitude, of hardship and pleasure. While maintaining contact with a partner, women navigate their role of “quasi-inmate” with more or less ease depending on their familiarity with carceral institutions, their socio-economic circumstances, the quality of their relationship prior to a man’s arrest. Importantly, these influences are fluid and a woman’s degree of secondary prisonization might change during the incarceration period, or from one incarceration period to the next. A homeless woman who uses her overnight visits as a refuge but then becomes housed might decrease her positive estimation of the prison. A woman dependent on government aid who feels she has little other than visiting to occupy her time but who suddenly finds solid employment may not regret that her increased

work hours limit her visiting to two days a week. Someone else who had to make a long journey to the penitentiary on her own but whose partner is then transferred to the same prison where her brother-in-law and uncle are incarcerated might start carpooling with her female kin and begin to look forward to visits as an occasion to bond with her extended family.

Returning to the theme of this gathering, ethnography and the public sphere, I offer a few concluding reflections on the question of an ethnographic vs. a public “agenda.” By definition, advocacy groups have an agenda to lobby for the rights of prisoners and their families and for the policy changes that would benefit them. In a political climate that is openly hostile toward prisoners (or, more commonly, “criminals”), the logical activist stance is to position family members as the opposite of criminals, that is, as “victims.” Victims are blameless, and bad things happen to them through no fault of their own. Victims often have the faces of women and children: vulnerable, “innocent,” in need. Victims deserve help and assistance, and they should not be stigmatized. Constructing prisoners’ families as victims, imposing this identity upon them, has sense in the public sphere. And in the public sphere tales told about these families, the victims narrative is easy to trace: Everything was fine until that fateful day. I never thought this could happen to me. I feel shamed to be in this situation.

Conducting meaningful ethnographic research required setting aside this public agenda, despite my recognition of the political utility for it. It required relinquishing all investment in determining prisoners’ families to be blameless (or blame-worthy), deserving (or undeserving), or belonging to some other preset category that would steer policy makers in a specified direction. This undertaking of an ethnographic study grounded in sociological exploration rather than policy frame-making enabled me to step back from the heated issues of moral worthiness and see the structural bones of what I was observing, namely people being processed by an institution. From there, I could map out the similarities with people being processed by other institutions (welfare offices, hospitals) and with people being processed by the same institution (prisoners), arriving at a more nuanced understanding of the commonalities and differences among them.

I still live in Berkeley, and I still consider myself politically engaged. Where now to go from here? Approaching the problematic of prisoners' families through scholarly study does change the framing of issues. Yet, although initiated in a more detached manner than an activist group would adopt, my research supports many of the same conclusions about the need for assistance for people affected by a loved one's incarceration, and indeed broadens the scope of that assistance far beyond the criminal justice system. Secondary prisonization is not the story of the victim who was doing fine until her breadwinning husband was incarcerated, which can too easily be reduced to a story about simply not putting so many people behind bars. Rather, secondary prisonization is the story of women living in circumstances of such enormous disadvantage that spending time locked inside of an institution of punishment in a nation that has been chastised by human rights groups for the conditions of these very institutions feels like a "nice" way to spend an afternoon. It is the story of women who have been so abandoned and mistreated by social services that the only way to obtain even a degraded form of drug treatment and intervention for an addicted, abusive spouse is to call his parole officer and have him returned to custody. It is the story of chronically unemployed men who are reduced to only being able to play the role of caring, invested, dependable husbands and fathers when a third party provides them with food and shelter so that they can devote their attention to the emotional needs of their family. And it is the story of vast numbers of poor and African-American men being incarcerated, which brings women into lifelong contact with correctional facilities as they visit their fathers, then their brothers, and finally their partners therein.

The analytical framework of secondary prisonization therefore highlights the interplay of poverty, housing instability, substance abuse, domestic violence, and unemployment in women's reactions to the incarceration of their partners. It emphasizes the need for broad-scale social-welfare measures rather than mere reductions in sentencing numbers. With *Doing Time Together* due out later this year, it remains to be seen if this analysis will be able to reach the public sphere, how it will be received if it does, and what contribution, if any, it will have to offer policy debates.