Inmate Subculture and Criminal Recidivism in Ghana

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Abstract

This study explains the nature of inmate subculture in relation to re-offending in Ghana. Differential association and subcultural theories were used as the frameworks for data analysis. The results indicate that re-offending in Ghana is significantly a function of social interaction among the inmates. Furthermore, there is a well-defined informal social structure in which inmate leaders supervise co-inmates and coordinate their activities and those of prison authorities. There are criminal justice systems in each cell which ensure social control. These cultural practices provide statuses and roles to the inmates which further give them recognition and respect by both inmates and prison authorities. An underground economy through which contraband commodities are smuggled into the prison also exists in the prison. The data suggests that the criminal contacts and values, inmate customs, and folkways develop into criminal subcultures in the prison. These, as well as an apparent feeling of nostalgia to some extent lure former offenders back to the prison in the face of post-release social rejection in Ghana. These findings point to the need for more effective pre-release rehabilitation programmes to help inmates develop life skills and pro-social attitudes that can counter the influence of inmate subculture. In addition, post-release social support for ex-convicts through their participation in conventional social activities would serve as a means of social inclusiveness to former prisoners. This would further help them better perform their pro-social roles, build new identities and contribute to reducing criminal recidivism in Ghana.

Keywords: Inmate Subculture, Peer Governmentality, Rehabilitation, Social Rejection, Criminal Recidivism

Introduction

Just as there exist cultures within the mainstream society, one can equally find a unique culture in prison (Sirisutthidacha and Tititampruk, 2014). Since the pioneering work of John Howard1 who toured some prisons in Europe, life in prisons has continued to surprise social reformers. Although prison life forms a significant part of prisonization, sociological analysis of the inmate culture in prison is a recent phenomenon. Studies have analysed the structure of prisons and the consequence of prisonization (Clemmer, 1940; Goffman, 1959; Hayner and Ash, 1940; Irwin, 1980; McCorkle and Korn, 1954; Sykes and Messinger 1960; Sykes, 1958; Zingraff and Thomas, 1976). Most of these studies have addressed questions as to the reasons why prisoner community arose in the first place, its manifestations, importance to members and its impact on rehabilitation and post-released reintegration of offenders. Studies have shown that inmates conform to the norms, values and belief systems distinctive to the prisoner community (Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Wooldredge, 1997). These values and beliefs do not only express ties of inmates’ loyalty as a cohesive group but also their opposition to conventional values of society in general and prison authorities in particular (Sirisutthidacha and

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1 John Howard is a prison reformer who toured some prisons in UK and Europe in the 1770s.
The thinking, feeling and behavioural manifestations in conformity to these values and believes constitute the inmate subculture. This type of culture is a major structural feature of every prison community. Sykes and Messinger (1960) see the subculture comprising mainly of the inmate social code. The main objective is to regulate the behaviours of inmates as well as the inmate-staff relationship. The code functions to ensure the interest of inmates prevail, prevent conflict between inmates and enhance their dignity and respectability. Some scholars argue that the inmate subculture originate from within the prison environment. They uphold the view that the subculture represents inmates’ collective response to the pains of imprisonment (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Sykes, 1958). Other researchers also believe that the inmate subculture is imported into the prison from outside the prison (Irwin and Cressey, 1962).

Statement of the Problem

Despite research on inmate subculture in other jurisdictions such as the United States (McCorkle and Korn, 1954; Sykes, 1958; Sykes and Messinger, 1960), New Zealand (Winfree et al., 2002), Asia (Reisig and Lee, 2000; Tititampruk and Sirisutthida, 2014), not much has been done on inmate subculture in Ghana. It is imperative that the consequence of inmate subculture has policy implications for prisons management, rehabilitation options, public safety and post-release reintegration of offenders in Ghana. Therefore, a study that will enhance our understanding of the nature and consequence of this inmate subculture is relevant at the present.

Research Questions

The questions this study sought to address are as follows: What are the patterns of inmate subculture in Ghana? How does the inmate subculture in Ghana differ from inmate subculture in other countries? How does it contaminate prisoners? How does inmate subculture attract former offenders back to prison? The following segments provide information on relevant literature on inmate subculture, social code and argot distinctive to the inmate community, the theoretical framework involved, research design, findings, discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

Literature Review

Inmate Subculture

The inmate subculture includes the informal norms, attitudes, knowledge, believes, laws, customs, values, statuses, roles and everything that makes the prisoner community unique from culture in the free world. Clemmer, (1940) refers to it as the prisonization process whereby inmates learn prison culture through social interaction. Through prisonization, inmates get assimilated into the culture and existing patterns of prison life (Clemmer, 1940; Irwin and Cressey, (1962); Sykes and Messinger, 1960). McCorkle and Korn (1954) observe that the prison community is a functional social unit. The daily experiences of prison life may not only be affected by formal administrative structure, but also by an informal social organization. Hayner and Ash (1940) observe that the prison environment by its structure is an example of conflict situation. Although both the administrative staff and the prisoners pay lip service to the reformatory function of the prisons, neither of them accepts this. In prison, prisoners are viewed with suspicion by the administrative staff. This group regards the prisoners as criminals who are incarcerated to serve time for
the crimes committed. As a consequence, penal practice places much emphasis on outward conformity rather than inner conviction (Abotchie, 2008). The inmates in response to the harsh conditions, manage the impression by showing their social selves in their relations with the prison officials at the front stage and reserve their true character in a relationship built underground (Goffman, 1961). Inmate subculture develops as a coping mechanism due to the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). According to McCorkle and Korn (1954), the subculture involves complex adaptation processes by which inmates attempt to cope with the pain of prison life. It is “a way of adjusting to the situation in prison and making the best of the circumstances” (Hayner and Ash, 1939: 364). Inmate subculture is also seen as a way of life which enables inmates to avoid internalizing the negative effects of prison life and converting social rejection into self-rejection. The objective is to reject the rejecter rather than themselves. By providing a coping mechanism for the pains of imprisonment, the prisoner community opens a path to the restoration of self-respect (McCorkle and Korn, 1954).

Inmate subculture is beneficial to those who uphold the tenets of the inmate social code. It supports and protects those opposing the conventional values of the larger society (McCorkle and Korn, 1954). It thus supports inmates who are criminally acculturated and threatens those loyal to non-criminal world (McCorkle and Korn, 1954). The subculture encourages the values of dignity and ability to endure the pains of imprisonment through a number of norms and reinforces them with informal controls (Sykes and Messinger, 1960). It is interesting to know that one major feature of the inmate subculture is its escapelessness. Therefore, non-acculturated prisoners are rejected not only by the society which defines them but also suffer a double jeopardy of rejection by the inmates group which they are compelled to live with (McCorkle and Korn, 1954). Inmates learn that they can succeed within the prison walls by deceiving, conniving and evading the administrative, custodial staff and professional authorities. Behaving in accordance with the code is an important value and an inmate risks being an outcast if he does not uphold the code of behaviour. The acceptance of individuals into this subculture is dependent on the adherence to the social code and prison argot (Hayner and Ash, 1939).

**Inmate Social Code and Prison Argot**

The inmate social code is a normative imperative that guides the behaviour of inmates and the relationship between the inmates and prison authorities (Sykes and Messinger, 1960). Although this code is not codified, it is usually transmitted to prisoners from generation to generation (Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Wooldredge, 1997). Conforming to or deviating from the code is the basis for classifying and describing the social relations of prisoners. The maxims (code) are pronounced with great passion by the inmates and violations attract punishment. Inmates give strong verbal support to these values and directly or indirectly uphold them. This promotes ties of mutual aid, loyalty, affection, respect and unity against their common enemy (Sykes and Messinger, 1960). The behavioural patterns recognised and labelled by the prisoners in a form of argot form a collection of social roles which together with their interrelationships constitute the inmate subculture. The tenets of the inmate code are expressed through the argot or languages, slangs and jargons understood by the group. The objective is to ensure a communication gap between the inmates and prison authorities. However, prison argot differs in male and female facilities (Einat and Einat, 2000; Wittenberg, 1996) and even from prison to prison and from country to country. Some of the argots include maxims that caution. For instance, never interfere with inmates interest is expressed as: *never rat on a con*. Other maxims include injunctions to refrain from
quarrels or argument with co-inmates: don’t lose your head. Inmates should not take advantage of one another by means of force, fraud or deceit is expressed as: don’t steal from a con or sell favours. Inmates should not be weak but be able to “take it” thus maintaining his dignity and withstand frustrations or threats without complaining. Finally, there are maxims that forbid according prestige or respect to custodians: Don’t be a sucker (Sykes and Messinger, 1960). Furthermore, in the vocabulary of the inmate world, prison authorities are referred to as screws, inmates who betray co-inmates are labelled rats or squealers, those who spy for the custodians are stool pigeons, inmates who respect custodians are suckers, inmates who are troublesome are toughs, those who use violent means to achieve their ends are gorillas, inmates who exploit their colleagues through manipulation or trade goods in short supply are merchants or peddlers, homosexuals are also called wolf and the one who strictly go by the inmates’ code is the right guy. He is the hero of the inmate social system and a role model to all the above categories of inmates (Sykes and Messinger, 1960). Scholarly research has shown that the inmate code emphasize its oppositional values to conventional society in general and to prison authorities in particular (McCorkle and Korn, 1954; Sykes and Messinger 1960). These aspects of prisonization prevent rehabilitation efforts and inspire deviant behaviours.

The Origin of Inmate Subculture
Deprivation, importation and integrated explanations have been given for the origin of prison culture (Thomas, 1970; Sirisutthidacha and Tititampruk, 2014). The deprivation model finds expression in the works of (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958; Sykes and Messinger, 1954). This model views prisons as a closed system organized around common values. It explains that, inmate subculture develops from within the prison environment. The proponents of this model believe that prison life by its structure, routine life and discipline is very frustrating and therefore requires a way of adjustment. As the name implies, prisoners are deprived of their autonomy, security, goods and services and heterosexual relations (Irwin, 1980; Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Sykes, 1958). The real status of inmates is reduced to anonymous beings (Clemmer, 1940). Zingraff and Thomas (1976) observe that the coercive nature of prison presents high levels of alienation among inmates. Such alienated environments generate the pains of imprisonment and influence the levels of prisonization. According to Wellford (1967), the length of time spent in prison, phase of institutional career and criminal social type are the factors relating to the degree of adopting this dogma of prisoner community; the longer the length of sentence the greater the degree of prisonization, (Clemmer, 1940). Wheeler (1961) observes that prisonization is influenced by the phase of institutional career. For him, prisonization is lower during the early and later phases but higher during the middle phase. The assumption is that from the beginning of imprisonment, conventional values of new-comers still influence his behaviour (Lutze and Murphy, 1999) and during the later part, prisonization declines. Schrag (1944) maintains that it is not all prisoners that perform roles towards the inmate subculture. He adds that the ‘right guy’ perform roles towards the code while the ‘square john’ perform roles towards the goal of the prison administration.

The importation model rejects the explanation that the prison is a closed system organized around common values (Schrage, 1961). According to Irwin and Cressey (1962) inmate subculture develops from outside the prison environment particularly from offenders’ characteristics, values, attitude and experiences before the incarceration. Finally, other scholars assert that the integrated model which combines the deprivation and importation models explains inmate subculture (Archambeault & Fenwick, 1993).
1988). It explains subculture as a product of family visits, institutional factors and coping mechanisms. These models constitute the framework for explaining patterns of inmate subculture.

**Theoretical framework**

Differential association and subcultural theories are the major frameworks underpinning inmate subculture. Sutherland (1974) postulates that criminal behavior develops through social learning where criminal values are transmitted from one person to the other. The criminal behavior is learned through interaction with others in an intimate personal group. The learning processes include verbal and non-verbal communications. The criminal behavior learned includes the techniques of committing crime which can be simple or complex. For him, the learning process also involves the specific direction of motives, drive, rationalization and attitude. These variables are also learned from definitions of the legal code as favourable or unfavourable to the violation of the laws. Thus a person becomes criminal when there is an excess of definitions favourable to the violation of the law over definitions unfavourable. Finally, the criminogenic significance of differential association varies depending on the frequency, duration, intensity and how early it begins in the life of a person. Sutherland’s differential association theory can contribute to our understanding of inmate social system and criminal recidivism in Ghana. Due to the pain of imprisonment, inmates get relieved from interactions that promote criminal ideas. The social learning and the consequence of their interactions generate criminal subculture. For instance, cell culture during story time and talk shops promote the socialization of inmates with criminal subculture thereby leading to vicious cycle of sentence contamination.

Subcultural theorist such as Merton (1958) posits that in every society, members are socialized to accept the cultural goals and legitimate means to achieve them. However, due to unequal opportunity structure, the category less favorably placed tends to develop cultures to suit themselves (in Abotchie, 2008). Cohen (1955) postulates that delinquency is the response of the underprivileged group to a situation in which they are encouraged to aspire to a status which can only be attained through success in middle class norms while they are unable to achieve such success by their lower class background. They react rejecting the middle class norm and seek status in their own lower class subculture through acts of vandalism, aggression and theft (Abotchie, 2008). Cloward and Ohlin (1960) believe that although delinquents utilize illegitimate opportunity structure to achieve status, only criminal neighborhoods offer juveniles the opportunity to learn criminal role. They divided delinquent subculture into criminal subculture, conflict subculture and retreatist subculture. Subcultural theories can contribute to our understanding of reoffending in Ghana. The more the legitimate opportunity structure is blocked, the greater inmates develop the criminal subculture as a mechanism of accessing the cultural goals and achieve status in their lower class background.

**Research Design**

Qualitative research approach was used for this study. This allows for the exploration and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of inmates within the prisoner community. This research design was used because it allows for a variety of approaches through which researchers attempt to understand everyday activities and the social settings of the people (Van Den Hoonard, 2012).
Nsawam Medium Security Prison (NMSP)
The study was conducted at the male section of Nsawam Medium Security Prison (NMSP). It is the largest prison in Ghana (Appiahene-Gyamfi, 2009). It accommodates all the categories of criminals from different security levels and different types of offences such as economic crime, crime against public order and violent crime. Penal policy in Ghana focuses on custody and welfare of prisoners and whenever practicable, undertakes reformation and rehabilitation. Traditionally, new inmates undergo risk assessment and classification before case management. Prior to release, another assessment is conducted to determine plans for transfer to another facility. Parole does not exist in the prison although inmates are entitled to remission. Reformation and rehabilitation are major forms interventions aimed at changing the criminal attitudes of the inmates and providing them with employable skills so that they would lead law-abiding lives after release. Reformation deals with the renewal of the mind and heart from criminal thinking while rehabilitation involves the acquisition of vocational and educational skills. In other words, reformation has to do with spiritual and moral transformation while rehabilitation goes with vocational training, formal education and non-formal education.

Although there is freedom of worship, the spiritual transformation is dominated by two religious beliefs and practices, namely Christianity and Islam. There exists a church and a mosque where Christians and Moslems worship. There is a Chaplaincy Unit with two ordained religious leaders (pastor and imam). Their role is to coordinate and liaise with other religious bodies and civic organizations in providing inmates with religious instructions, moral education and the donation of items such as food, clothes, medicine, televisions and tools. In both religions, the fear of punishment and the desire for God’s reward shape the religious instructions. In addition, both religions equate crime to sin. In the Bible for instance, the Ten Commandments prohibit Christians from committing such acts as stealing, armed robbery, fraud, murder, false witness just as the Koran equally instructs Moslems. There are religious groups made up of Coalition of Prison Evangelists (COPE) constituted by churches such as the Presbyterian Church, Roman Catholic Church, the Methodist Church and Seventh-Day Adventists Church. Groups from the Moslem community also fellowship with the inmates and present some items to them but it is not official. Some of these religious bodies undertake aftercare. This is because the Department of Social Welfare is not well resourced to carry out the aftercare. However, reformation is not effective correctional intervention because the majority of inmates do not take religious training seriously. One prison officer noted that “The inmates don’t take religious training seriously. Some of them go to church because the churches give out some items”. A few of them genuinely reform but because of lack of post-release support, they re-offend.

Rehabilitation involves vocational training, formal education and non-formal education. With vocational training, male convicts are trained in areas such as agriculture, carpentry, tailoring, barbering, and draughtsmanship, shoemaking, laundry, and masonry; while female convicts are trained in sewing, soap making, hair dressing, bakery, batik, tie and dye. There is no prison industry where inmates can work and receive income while in prison and capital for aftercare. Formal classroom education namely Junior and Senior High Schools and non-formal education include subjects such as English, Maths, Integrated Science, Social Studies, Economics, and Financial Accounting and ICT (non-examinable). The non-formal education subjects are Ewe, Twi, Ga, English (reading and writing) and numeracy. Currently, the Ghana Education Service standards are used to assess the students as they write the final examinations.
conducted by the West Africa Examinations Council (WAEC) called West Africa Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Presidential Special Initiative on Distance Learning (PSI-DL) provide some support for inmates’ formal education while the non-Formal Education Division of the Ministry of Education also supports functional literacy programmes. Currently, the Inmate Education Unit in collaboration with the Centre for National Distance Learning and Open Schooling (CNDLOS) coordinate the formal education programme.

However, despite rehabilitation in mind, the main objective of punishment in Ghana is custody and security. As a consequence, rehabilitation is ineffective due to the lack of or inadequate state funding, inadequate skilled personnel, short sentencing, lack of interest and inconvenience. As a consequence, only a fraction of the convicts participate in rehabilitation programmes. Furthermore, the prison industries where convicts can work in workshops, on the field or as apprentices to generate income do not exist. Therefore, prisons labour is not effectively trained and harnessed for productive ventures to benefit the inmates and the state. Moreover, living conditions in prison are harsh; overcrowding is a major challenge as the current inmate population is five times the size of its original intake. Besides, inmates are disproportionately burdened with medical and mental health problems. The interaction between inmates and staff is formal and structured. Relationships among inmates are based on power although they are not predominantly aggressive. In conclusion, due to the physical and psychological discomfort, inmates adapt to prison lifestyles as a coping strategy.

Research Participants
The study participants were made up of two groups namely the recidivists and prison officials. The choice of this study population is based on their peculiar characteristics, knowledge, feelings and experiences of prison life.

Sample Size and Procedure
Purposive sampling was used to identify 31 recidivists and 6 prison officials. The recidivists include cell and block leaders while the prison officials were drawn from block commander and officials from the various units such as the diagnose center, education unit, inmate welfare, records and chaplaincy. Purposive sampling ensures that the sampled population as identified above satisfies certain features and attributes which were not randomly distributed in the total population but were typical or exhibit most of the characteristics of interest to the study (Twumasi, 2001).

Method of Data Collection
Face-to-face in-depth interviews (Van Den Hoonaad, 2012) were used to solicit information from the participants. This allowed for flexibility because the researcher had few questions in mind but had the freedom to phrase questions and probe responses which were unclear. This enabled the investigator to understand the sentiments that follow a particular answer (Twumasi, 2001). The data were reduced to analyzable units by first editing. Key words, phrases, themes and patterns of occurrence were identified and assigned labels. The labels were used to identify concepts for discussion. In all, the data are subjected to content analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).
Data Analysis

Patterns of Inmate Subculture
This segment presents the patterns of inmate subculture in Ghana in comparison with other jurisdictions. As a prisoner community, inmates in NMSP have a formidable informal social structure. This unique way of life enables them to cope with the pains of imprisonment and avoid converting the social rejection to self-rejection. It promotes interactions, discipline, loyalty and solidarity among the inmates. It begins with the assessment and classification, universal prisonization and contamination, hierarchy of inmate leadership, subgroups, inmate social code, prison argot, underground economy and impact on prison administration, rehabilitation and post-release reintegration.

Assessment and Classification
Inmates in NMSP are classified into blocks after the risk assessment. There are eight blocks for accommodating inmates. These include condemn/special block, main block annex, block 1-5, annex B and infirmary. The condemn/special block accommodates offenders condemned to death or serving life sentences, main block annex also accommodates high sentence offenders while block 1 houses remand prisoners. Blocks 2-5 accommodate short and medium sentences offenders, annex B for condemn and convicts, and infirmary block for sick offenders. Although condemn inmates are supposed to be kept in solitary confinement, however, there are four inmates to a cell while those on high sentences are arranged in 4-8 per cell. Offenders in block 1 to 5 are arranged between 30 to 40 inmates per cell. These arrangements are not based on home origin, geographical or ethnic background as reported by Sirisudacha and Tititampruk (2014) in Thai prisons.

Universal Prisonization
Prisoners in Ghana, like any prisoners in the world, undergo universal prisonization. In NMSP, as soon as a convict arrives, he is sent to the gate before the reception. At the reception, prison officers check the documents to ensure that he is the right person to be legally detained. Besides, the belongings of the inmate are searched for proper records and safe keeping. The inmate receives uniform/cloth for proper identification. Finally, inmates are made to know the prison rules and procedures before the initial health screening to identify the current health status. From the reception, the new prisoner is then given orientation to integrate him into the prison community. This usually takes place in a separate section (diagnosis centre) for a period of not more than three weeks. The assessment occurs immediately after the completion of reception and orientation. The assessment is a process by which information is obtained about offenders to assist in making decisions about their placement and management while in prison. Through the assessment, information relating to educational opportunities, work, visit and health are obtained from the prisoners. The assessment is to identify offenders who are more likely to escape, re-offend after their release from prison as well as their strengths and needs. This ensures that programmes are designed to address these risk factors. These programmes differ depending on the risk factors and the type of re-integration challenges to be addressed. Thus it is based on the completion of the assessment and classification that case management can begin. The following is an excerpt from one prison officer:

If a prisoner arrives, after being searched at the gate, he is escorted to the administration. After the necessary documentation, he is sent to the diagnosis centre for orientation. This is
followed by risk assessment and identification of talents to enable us place him at the appropriate block.

Contamination in NMSP

One dogma of the prisons that enhances the acquisition of criminal attitudes among prisoners and prevent post-release reintegration is contamination. Two main cultural practices that promote criminogenic environments for the assimilation of members into pro-criminal attitudes are the “story-time” and “talk shops”. This occurs from 4.30pm upwards when inmates are locked up in their various cells. They do not fall asleep, life seems boring and inmates need some entertainment. As an involuntary intimate group comprising about 45 inmates in each cell, custom demands that new offenders tell the stories of what brought them to the prison. This is the time they manage their impression through discussions where members of the cell exhibit their true nature and character. As one block leader said “it is the norm that fresh inmates mention their names three times, the offence committed and the sentence imposed. Then after, they describe the successful operations embarked on earlier, the modus operandi and how arrests were effected”. In the process, inmates share criminal contacts and ideas including the techniques for committing them. Thus, new offenders become corrupted and contaminated. Inmates then accord respect to the hardened and notorious criminals because they view them as their role models. Besides, due to the difficulty in ensuring proper segregation in the yard, all the categories of prisoners are allowed to mingle together. This, coupled with the lack of skills training to pre-occupy and re-socialize them with pro-social attitudes, enmesh the inmates with a criminogenic environment where inmates learn how to play their criminal social role. An inmate may “open a key” or start with a topic on conniving activity for discussion. This leads to re-arrest, re-conviction and re-incarceration. This mode of contamination in Nsawam Medium Security Prison in Ghana is similar to the talk shop in Washington State Reformatory at Monroe (Hayner and Ash, 1939). One Ghanaian prison officer said: “We don’t keep them busy so they engage themselves in criminal conversations with their friends”. Another prison officer lamented as follows: “Classification is a problem here. First offenders are not supposed to mingle with second offenders but because there is no proper classification, the interaction among them leads to contamination.” The following are excerpts from some recidivists in Ghana.

Here, we discuss a lot of things among ourselves. For instance, when a new person comes, we ask what he did, whether the person is a first time offender or not, what happened before the person was arrested and how he went about the act. Thus because of the “toli” (stories) we share, some of the offenders commit bigger crimes and come back to the prison.

When we wake up, we don’t have anything to do, so some of the inmates group themselves somewhere and converse. One person can “open a key” and thus begin a topic for discussion. For instance what did you do and how were you arrested? If that person made a mistake that led to his arrest, another person can also suggest how he could have executed the act and escaped without arrest.
Inmate Leadership Hierarchy
The inmate leadership is hierarchical, comprising of cell leaders, block leaders and national leader. The block leaders and national leader have their respective assistants. The cell leaders are responsible to the block leaders while block leader is also responsible to the national leader on matters that emanate from their respective jurisdictions. Sometimes, when the issue borders on health and legal matters, cell and block leaders report to the block masters or block commanders who are prison officers. It is the duty of block commanders to either resolve the complaints or refer the matter to the appropriate units or second Officer-in-Charge for final solution. The national leader is the chief of the inmate community and plays a critical role in maintaining order in the yard and liaises between inmates and prison authorities. He also makes decisions concerning peace and welfare of inmates. Besides, there are block executives, block-chequers and senior chequers. All these groups constitute the star class. The star class maintains law and order in the yard. The block executives are 7 members comprising of the well-to-do inmates in the block. Thus they help in welfare matters in the block. For instance, provision of television set in the block, or if a block member is sick and the medicine required is expensive, the block executives can contribute for the payment of these drugs. The executives also make policies for the blocks; such as raising a football team. In addition, there are block-chequers who assist prison officers in checking the inmates in each block while the senior checkers assist in checking all the inmate population in the yard. There are office boys who work in the various offices and yard boys who clean the yard. This structure of inmate leadership command in NMSP in Ghana is similar to the one documented for Thai prison, where leadership command include the leader, consultants and members (Sirisudacha and Tititampruk, 2014). In the US, inmate leaders are referred to as politicians and members constitute community council (Hayer and Ash, 1939).

One unique culture in NMSP is that each cell has a criminal justice system that ensures social control. Each cell has a court, judge, police, commando and father. The cell leaders have a book in which they record complaints and violations of cell rules. If there is any violation of their rules, the offender faces trial. Sentencing ranges from washing the bath room for one week, removal from one’s bed or a fine not exceeding two Ghana cedis (less than 1$), depending on the financial status of the inmate. It is imperative to know that these leaders are appointed based on their comportment, age, experience, knowledge and financial status just as people are appointed in the society. This culture of inmate governmentality provides statuses, power and roles to the inmate leaders. Besides, leaders are well recognised and respected by both inmates and prison authorities. By virtue of helping the prison officers to ensure social control, inmate leaders enjoy subtle privileges. For instance, prison officers sometimes ignore petty violations of the prison rules by the leaders. All these statuses and roles in addition, the availability of recreational facilities, free meals and free accommodation as well as a sense of survival and happiness in prison more or less lure ex-prisoners back to the prison due to the post-release social rejection in Ghana. The following are comments from a prison officer and a recidivist:

Life in prison is more interesting than life in the outside world. Some of the inmates serve as cell and block leaders and executives. So they are well recognised and respected by both inmates and officers. Some of the inmates have people serving them and greeting them while others engage in little businesses such as washing for a fee, so they are happy here.
One prisoner has a farm and has gone out and come back for about 5 times. Anytime he is being released, he would ask a co-inmate to take care of the farm until he comes back to take over the farm and make himself like a king. Sometimes, when he comes out of prison, he links up with old convicts and re-offends.

Subgroups in NMSP

Beside the political culture, there are also identifiable groups such as the Christian and Muslim groups, student group, football and volley ball groups all of which have their leaders. There are student groups, football and also volley ball teams. Sometimes, the inmates invite teams from the Nsawam community to play within the prison yard. There are no fully developed gang groups where criminal sub-groups are formed. However, there are para-gang groups existing in the prison based area of neighbourhood, language, religion, same school and tribe. For instance, inmates from Ashaiman and Tema, Nima, Maamobi and Newtown, or Ashanti region, Nigerians and other foreign nationals see themselves as one people. As one prison officer observes “one Nima-boy beat Asaiman-boy and it became conflict between the two groups”. One block leader observes that “if an inmate is sick and needs blood, it is usually an ethnic brother who would volunteer to donate the blood”. In Thai prisons for instance, gang groups include those young adults with juvenile crime record, body tattoo group and traffickers. These subgroups benefit from illegal activities such as phone smuggling, drug trafficking and gambling (Sirisudacha, Tititampruk, 2014).

Inmate Social Code

In all prisons, there are rules from the authorities to inmate leaders to enforce. Inmates equally have their own rules, values and belief systems that prescribe the behaviour among them and how inmates should behave towards prison officers. This is referred to as the inmate social code and it is a common feature of every prisoner community. It protects the interests of the inmates, ensures inmates’ cohesiveness and restricts conflict between them. In NMSP, there are cell rules and general rules. Some examples of the cell rules include “no stealing, no shaving of hair in the cell, no fighting and arguments in the cell, no sodomy, no noise making during news time and no unhygienic attitudes”. The general rules include no roaming in the yard especially around the fence, inmates should move to their blocks after hearing the bell ring, all complaints should be channelled through the cell or block leaders, report an inmate who verbally or physically assaults a colleague to the star class and so on. Also, respect all officers irrespective of their ranks. Inmates are also required to refrain from being informants or collaborate with the authorities.

Prison Argot

All prisoner communities have maxims, jargons or slangs though which the social code is expressed. In virtually all prisons, prisoners commonly use specific languages to define the social types and their roles. These jargons facilitate conniving activities and help to ensure communication gap between the inmates and officials. In NMSP, a recidivist is referred to as “old-jail-man” or “old-kako”, sodomy is “kpay”, prison officer is “weather-man”, “road oo” or “alert oo” means an officer is coming, “machine” means phone, “dealer” is a trader in contraband, ‘sand’ is “weed” “commando” is a strong guy, selling an item is “who see am”.

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Open and Underground Economies

There are two main economies existing within the prison. These are open and underground economies. With the open economy, each inmate is fed ₵1.80 (less than a dollar) a day. All the inmates are allowed to hold ten Ghana cedis (₵10) for buying necessary goods from the store in the yard. Extra money belonging to inmates is kept by the prison social welfare officer. Formal request for the money can be made through the block leader to the officer for their release to buy essential commodities. Besides, inmates also engage in some services like barbering, shoe making, washing for a fee while others exchange goods for goods. However, there is an underground economy or inmate block market where contraband commodities such as weed, cigarette, alcohol and mobile phones are smuggled into the prison. The smuggling of these contrabands into the prison is usually by collaboration between the inmates and outside contacts. The two strategies through which contrabands get into the prison are the “pumping”, and “fresh systems”. The pumping system is where the inmates pump the contrabands in their anus into the prison. The fresh system is where the visitors conceal the contrabands in their attire or foods into the prison. With the pumping system, there are inmate financiers, carriers and dealers or distributors. The financiers are usually those who have good financial standing or convicted on drug-related offenses. The carriers are inmates who have the opportunity to go outside to bring the goods and the dealers distribute them. This underground economy is similar to the one described for the Thai prisons (Sirisudacha, Tititampruk, 2014). Besides, the practice of gambling or betting and sodomy also exist within the prison. The following are interviews with two block leaders:

When the boys go out to work, they are given some few minutes to buy some items and return. In the process, they collaborate with people in the town who supply these goods. Then they pump these marijuana, cigarette (tuska) and alcohol (k20) into their anus and bring them into the yard. For instance, K20 is sold at ₵20 and ₵25, a stick of tuska is ₵2, ₵3 and ₵5.

Marijuana, cigarette (tuska), alcohol (k20) and mobile phones are smuggled into the yard through the pumping and collaboration between the inmates and visitors. We have those who finance the business, those who carry them and those who distribute them. K20 for instance is sold at ₵15, ₵30 and ₵40 during festive occasions.

Discussion

It emerged from the study that inmates are classified into blocks and cells to allow for their treatments during case management. Consistent with the Risk, Need and Responsivity Principle (Andrews et. al., 1990), inmates in NMSP are classified on the basis of their risk assessment and health status. Moreover, inmates in NMSP like any prisoners undergo universal prisonization (Clemmer, 1940), because incarceration socialises prisoners into aspects of prison lifestyle. The process enables inmates to assimilate the culture and existing patterns of prison life. New prisoners begin to share the sentiments, memories and traditions of the group.

The study uncovered that the subculture developed as a coping mechanism thereby corresponding to the deprivation theory. Through universal prisonization, prisoners are deprived of real status and reduced to anonymous beings. Inmates are given certain attires as a form of identification and their names are replaced with numbers (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958). Goffman (1961) in his work on asylum discusses the social situation of mental patients and compares it to prisoners. He observes that as a total institution
involving large inmates and small supervisory staff, inmates’ needs are handled in an impersonal manner. He perceives the mental hospital as an authoritarian institution that forces patients to define themselves as mentally ill, change their attitudes, accept restrictions and adjust to institutional life. Like mental patients, prisoners are mortified and dispossessed from their normal social role and stripped of their identities.

As a criminal community, the interactions among the offenders are deleterious. The culture of the cell during story-time when inmates are locked up, and talk shops within the yard promotes high criminogenic environments where pro-criminal attitudes are transmitted among the inmates. This according to Antwi (2016) is due to ineffective pre-release rehabilitation programmes to help them develop life skills and pro-social attitudes that can counter the influence of inmate subculture. Consequently, criminal contacts and values are shared by members of this community. Inmates thus manage their impression and the pain of imprisonment by exhibiting their real nature at the back stage (Goffman, 1959). Criminal notoriety becomes a passport to respectability. As a consequence, first-time offenders become contaminated. Consistent with Sutherland’s (1974) differential association theory, inmates learn the criminal subculture including the knowledge, values, attitudes, beliefs, habits, customs and the techniques that make deviant behaviour a more desirable way of life. Clemmer (1940) discovers that there are some negative aspects of prisonization which produce or worsen criminality and makes inmates assume criminal attitudes. Like the school of crime, inmates graduate from the prison having learnt advanced techniques of committing crime. However, the extent to which prisonization occurs depends on the personality, the crime committed, the age, home or residence, intelligence, situation in which the prisoner is placed or institutional factors (Johnston, Savitz and Wolfgang, 1970). Studies have shown that inmates who internalize the attitudes and criminal lifestyle have a greater propensity to develop criminal careers (Clemmer, 1940). Hayner and Ash (1939: 369) observe that:

It has long been recognised that our reformatories do not actually reform. Inmates learn new and improved techniques in our prisons. Conversations are between fellow convicts. Talks commonly turn to shop as each inmate describes those varieties of techniques with which he is best acquainted. The forger talks of forgery, the embezzler talks of embezzlement, burglar on methods for entering homes and stores...Whether he wishes to or not, he assimilates new crime techniques.

The study further reveals that inmates have a hierarchy of leadership made up of cell, block and national leaders as well as block executives who constitute the star class. These inmate leaders help the prison officers to maintain law and order and mediate between the inmates and the prison officials. These leaders are selected based on good behaviour, experience, knowledge and other factors. Harer et al., (1996) observe that male prisoners have hierarchy of command, and inmates assume or are forced into specific roles. Each position indicates the status and power of the inmate within the community. In Thai prisons, inmate leaders are hierarchically structured with the leader “Mean dude” at the top followed by consultants and members. The leader is the group commander who plays key roles in controlling the inmates. He makes all decisions regarding their lifestyle, businesses, safety, and keeping peace among group members. The consultants are the secretaries of the group while the members are the real guys (Sirisudacha and Tititampruk, 2014: 103). Hayner and Ash (1939:367) refer to inmate leaders as “politicians”. Membership of this “community council” depends on the nature of supervision. If there is close supervision, trouble-makers are prevented from assuming key positions in the penal institution. By virtue of their positions, inmate leaders become “town fathers” of the prisoner community.
There are also Christian and Muslim groups all of which have their leaders. There are student groups, football and volley ball teams. There are also para-gang groups in the prison based area of neighbourhood, language, religion, same school and tribe. This is para-gang because it is in the incipient stage unlike other jurisdictions such as those in the Thai prison where three gangs namely young adults with juvenile crime record, body tattoo and traffickers (Sirisudacha, Tititampruk, 2014). The inmates like all prisoners have their social code prescribing the norms of behaviour, values and belief systems among themselves within the cell and the prison yard and between them and the staff. Sykes and Messinger (1960) observe that inmates have a social code that specifies the normative imperatives in the inmate social system. There are also maxims, jargons and slangs through which the code is expressed. The argot when given content analysis reflects the norms and values of the group. Einat and Einat (2000) note that the argot expresses aspects of prison experience such as prisoner status, drugs, sexual relations in prison, violence, prisoner behaviours, and nicknames for police officers, and prison staff.

Finally, the study reveals that there is an inmate block market where contraband commodities such as weed, cigarette, alcohol and mobile phones are smuggled into the prison. There are inmate financiers, carriers and dealers or distributors in these conniving activities. Hayner and Ash, (1939) reveal that since the primary function of the inmate subculture is to provide the goods and services denied them by the officials, status is achieved not through extravagant life but the ability to play important role in the conniving process. Sirisudacha and Tititampruk (2014) note that, traffickers in Thai prisons developed financial influence and cooperation between their groups outside and exploited opportunities in mobile phone smuggling, contraband trafficking, gambling and other prohibited activities. This inmate black market enables the traffickers to earn income in order to supervise members and to create negotiation power with other Homes and the authorities in order to ease the pain of imprisonment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study investigated the nature of inmate subculture in relation to re-offending in Ghana. The results indicate that inmate subculture develops in response to the pains of imprisonment. In particular, two main cultural practices that promote high criminogenic environment is the story time and talk shops where criminal values are shared among the inmates. Custom demands that fresh inmates mention their names three times, the offence committed and the sentence imposed. Then after, successful operations embarked on earlier, the modus operandi and how arrests were effected are discussed. The talk shops in the yard due to lack of rehabilitation also contaminate. There exist inmate leaders in a hierarchical order comprising cell, block and national leaders who supervise co-inmates and coordinate their activities and that of prison authorities. These leaders together with block executives constitute the star class. The star class assists the prison authorities to maintain law and order. In addition, each cell has a criminal justice system; there are cell courts, cell judges, cell police and these ensure social control within the prison. These structures and inmate governmentality provide statuses and roles to the inmates and further give them recognition and respect by both inmates and prison authorities. There are Christian and Muslim groups, student group, football and volley ball teams and para-gang groups based on ethnic, language, religion or place of residence. There is an underground economy in which contraband commodities such as marijuana, cigarette, alcohol and cell phones are smuggled into the yard. Also in existence are sodomy and gambling. This criminal subculture and an apparent feeling of nostalgia to some extent lure former offenders back to the prison in the face of post-release social rejection in Ghana.
These findings suggest the need for penal reforms in Ghana with emphasis of pre-release rehabilitation programmes to help them develop life skills and pro-social attitudes that can counter the influence of the inmate subculture. Further, there is the need to introduce parole into Ghana’s corrections to ensure the supervision of parolees. The need for the use of modern technology to detect and prevent illegal activities through CCTV and sound recorders is also indicated by the findings. In addition, post-release social support through the participation in conventional social activities is a prerequisite. This would further help them better perform their pro-social roles, build new identities and contribute to reducing criminal recidivism in Ghana.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is suggested that future research should concentrate on the inmate subculture in female prisons in Ghana.

References


