

Study Looks at Social Structure of Prison Communities

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In community settings, there's always at least one person or perhaps a group of individuals who are most highly respected. Prison systems are no different; one's social status results from interpersonal dynamics. To better understand social structure in California prison communities, Brian Colwell, a researcher at the University of Missouri, recently examined peer relationships among inmates.

His theoretical study examines prison culture and processes in which inmates determine respect, or lack thereof, for their peers. He said respect is rooted in perceived similarities among people and can be conveyed in a variety ways: eye contact, physical orientation, similar behaviors and how inmates speak to one another.

"People always want to size up another person," said Colwell, assistant professor of sociology in the College of Arts and Science. "But in prison, marking another person as being of higher or lower status, and communicating those evaluations, can get you in a lot of trouble. You don't want to seem subservient, and you also don't want to diminish someone else. You want to maintain a level playing field. For that reason, to avoid conflict, a lot of emphasis is placed on respect. Showing someone respect is a way of recognizing his or her value as being similar to yours. It's a way of honoring someone as a person, but not necessarily doing so because they're better."

Social circumstances and realities associated with prison environments necessitated the study. At 16 California prisons, Colwell conducted 131

interviews of first-time and long-term male inmates, asking them questions like: What advice do you give new inmates coming into prison? What are some of the things you want to know about an inmate you're meeting for the first time? What prevents inter-group violence at this prison?

He said the California system is unique because it is factional and populated with various groups of inmates who align themselves according to communities, ethnicity and gang affiliation. They must coexist, he said, but in most circumstances those various groups prefer to remain separated because they don't get along. In addition, they don't want to be subjugated, Colwell said.

"There's a lot that goes on in prison," he said. "Prison is not an alien world; similar things occur outside of prisons such as groups not getting along and having separate social organizations but trying to coexist. It's like the term Balkanization, inter-ethnic conflict, the Sunnis and Kurds. A prison itself is like this ongoing society that is fractured, and one's relations are often characterized by extremes of conflict and cohesion. It's a microcosm of situations where there's a lot of civil strife. It's an inmate society, but the dynamic is pertinent to how people deal with living in contentious social environments."

Along with respect, Colwell also examined reasons for violent behavior, which occurs frequently in prison communities due to conflict. He said violent acts are more than just about establishing a pecking order and are one sided "celebrations" of the contrast between aggressor and victim. Colwell said violence – verbal slights or overt acts of aggression – sometimes emanate from just wanting to reinforce one's self-identity.

The study, "Deference or Respect? Status Management Practices Among Prison Inmates," will appear in the December issue of *Social Psychology Quarterly*.

Source: University of Missouri

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