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**Contraction in an age  
of expansion**

# A Study of Prisonization among Danish Prisoners<sup>1</sup>

*Dr Linda Kjaer Minke, Assistant Professor at University of Southern Denmark, Institute of Law.*

## Introduction

**There is an extensive international literature on socialization into prison culture.<sup>2</sup> However, the topic has not been systematically examined in Denmark in recent decades despite prison conditions having changed significantly: longer sentences, a higher proportion of foreign national prisoners, more drugs in prison and more gang members<sup>3</sup> in prison society. This study seeks to shed light on prison culture in a Danish maximum security prison between 2007-2009 asking (1) in what ways are prisoners socialized into prison culture and (2) in what ways does prison culture affect the individual prisoner?**

## Theoretical approach

Based on his research in a US maximum security prison, the late American sociologist Donald Clemmer developed the concept of prisonization, which he defined as:

'The taking on in greater or less degree of the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary.'<sup>4</sup>

By 'Culture', Clemmer meant artefacts, norms, language, attitudes toward staff as well as acts and relationships among prisoners. The process of prisonization therefore implied acquisition by each prisoner of a new view of themselves, their fellow inmates, the prison system and wider society. The

process of prisonization resulted in an oppositional attitude towards the prison and its representatives — the staff. However, Clemmer was mainly concerned with the process of induction and paid little attention to the changes that inmates may exhibit as they approach the time of release.

Twenty years later Stanton Wheeler re-examined Clemmer's concept of prisonization and provided an empirical test of the process. Wheeler found that prisoners' conformity to conventional norms covered an important aspect of prisonization. He used hypothetical conflict situations to develop an index of conformity to staff role-expectations. These vignettes were presented in a questionnaire which was distributed among 259 inmates between 16 and 30 years of age. He also classified inmates into phases or stages of their sentence and then examined whether conformity to staff role-expectations changed during time spent in prison. Wheeler found two processes in operation. When inmates were classified either by length of time served or by stage of sentence he found a steady increase in the proportion who had low levels of conformity to staff norms. The second process appeared to be a differential attachment to the values of the broader society: a u-shaped distribution of 'high conformity' responses. The trends suggested that inmates who were soon to return to the community were more frequently oriented to conventional values. Inmates conformed least to conventional standards during the middle phase of their sentence.<sup>5</sup> Later, Wheeler conducted a similar study in the Scandinavian

1. I am most grateful for usefull comments from anonymous referees and I am also grateful to Mary Munro for her comments on earlier drafts.
2. E.G. Bondeson, U. (1968), *Argot Knowledge as an Indicator of Criminal socialization in Scandinavian Studies in Criminology*, Vol. 2, pp. 73-105; Crewe, B. (2009) *Prisoner Society*, Oxford University Press, UK; Galtung, J. (1959), *Fengselssamfunnet – et forsøk på analyse* [Prisoner society – an attempt to analysis], Universitetsforlaget, Oslo; Gillespie, W. (2003) *Prisonization*, LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, USA; Grapendaal, M. (1990) *The Inmate Subcultures in Dutch Prisons in British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 341-357; Harvey, J. (2007), *Young Men in Prison – Surviving and Adapting to the Life Inside*, Willan Publishing, UK; Hayner, N. & Ash, E. (1939) *The Prisoner Community as a Social Group in American Sociological Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 362-369; Irwin, J. and Cressey, D. (1962) *Thieves, Convicts and the Inmate Culture in Social Problems*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 142-155; Mathiesen, T. (1965) *The Defences of the Weak*, Tavistock Publications, UK; McCorkle, L. & Korn, R. (1954) *Resocialization within the Walls in The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 293, No. 1, pp. 88-98; Ramirez, J. (1984) *Prisonization, staff and inmates – Is it really about Us versus Them?* in *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 423-460; Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives*, Princeton University Press, USA; Thomas, C., Petersen, D., and Zingraff, R. (1978) *Structural and Social Psychological Correlates of Prisonization in Criminology*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 383-394; Ugelvik, T. (2011), *Fangenes friheter: makt og motstand i et norsk fengsel* [Prisoners liberties: power and resistance in a Norwegian Prison], Universitetsforlaget, Oslo; Wheeler, S. (1961b) *Role Conflict in Correctional Communities* in Cressey, D. (Ed.) *The Prison: Studies in Institutional Organization and Change*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., New York.
3. In Denmark, gang members and outlaw bikers are defined and registered as such by the police. When an official gang member serves his sentence, he does so in a maximum secured prison in a segregated unit among similar gang members/outlaw bikers.
4. Clemmer, D. (1958 [1940]): 299 in *The Prisoner Community*, Holt, Reinhardt and Winston, New York.
5. Wheeler, S. (1961a) *Socialization in Correctional Communities in American Sociological Review*, Vol. 26, No. 5, pp. 697-712.

countries. He found no evidence of a similar u-curve among Scandinavian inmates.<sup>6</sup> Neither has subsequent research found evidence of a u-shaped distribution between stage of sentence and prisonization.<sup>7</sup>

In this study prisonization is defined as:

*A socialization process in the prison where the inmates in prison in varying degrees endorse oppositional norms towards the employees and the official prison system they manage and represent.*

According to this definition one may be less or more prisonized during imprisonment but prisonization involves conflicts with officialdom and opposition towards society.

### **A study of prisonization among prisoners in Denmark — method and context**

This investigation of the incidence of prisonization of prisoners in Danish prisons was conducted from 2007-2009 using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. The research approach is inspired by reflections about and strategies of doing ethnographic fieldwork in general and has, of course, taken the particular setting — a prison — into account. This, for example, means awareness of performance in prison society, prison conduct, the importance of prison regimes and rules, order and security.<sup>8</sup>

The qualitative study took place in a closed prison with a total of 220 prisoners.<sup>9</sup> The prison was built in 1859 to a cellular design based on the Philadelphia System. Nowadays, most prisoners are on association during the day. Prisoners who are not on association are kept in solitary confinement voluntarily or because of disciplinary infractions. The prison consists of four wings each of three sections ordinarily holding 20 — 22 prisoners. Prisoners have association until 9.25 pm

when all inmates are locked in their cell until the next morning at 7 am. All cells are one-man cells. In each section, the prisoners have to share two showers, two toilets, a TV room, a dining room, and a kitchen. There is segregation within the prison: prisoners undergoing drug treatment serve their sentence in special units; and members of particular (biker) gangs serve their sentence in another section. Six sections consist of a mixed group of inmates serving sentences up to life.

As a rule, prisoners receive money to buy their own food in the prison shop. Prisoners have a right and a duty to occupation through work, education or other approved activities, during the day between eight in the morning and three in the afternoon. Prisoners receive wages for this. Due to the Danish principle of normalization<sup>10</sup> all prisoners wear their own clothes and prepare their own dinner. Much leisure time among the prisoners is about planning, shopping, and preparing dinner.<sup>11</sup> Prisoners are entitled to visits for at least one hour a week. Visits takes place in separate visit rooms and are not normally supervised by staff. Cells are about nine square metres and are furnished with a bed, a table, a chair, a refrigerator, and a wash hand basin. Most prisoners rent a TV and PlayStation equipment from the prison authorities.

The prisoners are male, mainly over 23, having lived in Greater Copenhagen prior to imprisonment. Most of them are serving sentences of over 5 years on conviction for drug offences, robbery, homicide and aggravated assault.

The ethnographic fieldwork in the prison lasted for 13 months (or 148 days or 1090 hours), during which the prisoners' everyday life, interaction patterns, relationships between the prisoners and staff and the surrounding community were studied. I carried keys to the prison and, except at night, I was allowed to join all sections almost any time I wanted to. During the same period, I conducted structured interviews with 68 prisoners of which 59 were audio-recorded. The

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6. Cline, H. & Wheeler, S. (1968) *The Determinants of Normative Patterns in Correctional Institutions in Scandinavian Studies in Criminology*, Vol. 2, pp. 173-184.
  7. Wellford conducted a quantitative survey of 120 male prisoners, which identified a weak correlation between the temporal phase of imprisonment and prisonization: Wellford, C. (1967) *Factors associated with adoption of the inmate code in Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science*, No. 58, pp. 197-203. Another U.S. study was conducted by criminologists Robert Atchley & Patrick McCabe. Although they used exactly the same time index as Wheeler, it was not possible to retrieve the u-curve: Atchley, R. & McCabe, P. (1968) *Socialization in Correctional Communities: A Replication in American Sociological Review*, Vol. 33, pp. 774-785. A survey study conducted under the guidance of Ronald Akers found that inmates who serve in treatment-oriented sections and in less restrictive prison regimes are lesser prisonized compared to prisoners in »ordinary sections« and in more restrictive regimes. The study did not support evidence of a u-curve: Akers, R., Hayner, S. and Gruninger, W. (1977) *Prisonization in Five Countries in Criminology*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 527-554.
  8. Spradley, J. (1980) *Participant Observation*, Holt, Rineholt and Winston, USA; Crewe, B. (2006) *Prison Drug Dealing and the Ethnographic Lens in The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 45, No. 4, pp. 347-368; Crewe 2009 see n.1; King, R. & Liebling, A. (2008) *Doing research in prisons* in King, R. and Wincup, E. [Ed.], *Doing research on Crime and Justice*, Oxford University Press, UK.
  9. This is an average prison size compared to other closed and open prisons in Denmark.
  10. The principle of normalization was introduced in 1946 in a preliminary version of the Danish penal law. It states that prison conditions as much as possible should be comparable to conditions in the surrounding community: *Foreløbig Betænkning vedrørende Fuldbrydelse af Fængselsstraf mv (1946)*, Afgivet af det af Justitsministeriet den 25. februar nedsatte udvalg [Preliminary Penal Law etc. (1946)]. This approach was inspired by the Swedish penal law.
  11. Minke, L. (2012), *Fængslets indre liv* [The Prisoner Community], Jurist og Økonomforbundets forlag, København.

interviewees were selected using various criteria such as age, ethnicity, marital status, crime, length of imprisonment, and time served in prison. The social status of prisoners was also taken into account. In some cases, it was difficult to understand the hierarchy among the prisoners. I therefore asked an interviewee to nominate other interviewees whom he considered differed most from himself. Using this selection criterion I got information about prison life which would have been otherwise difficult to uncover. The long period of participant observation and my frequent presence in the prison led to a gradual build-up of trust and confidence on the part of the prisoners as well as the staff.

The quantitative study was a cross-sectional survey to examine if qualitative results could be generalised across other prisons and also to identify the most important factors which might influence levels of prisonization. The survey was conducted in 12 correctional institutions such as remand centres, closed and open prisons and half-way houses. A questionnaire (in Danish and/or Arabic) was distributed and collected by hand among 1647 convicted prisoners. This number was almost half of the overall prison population in Denmark at that time. There were 803 completed questionnaires, giving an effective response rate of 49 percent. Most non-completions were from prisoners who could not read Danish or Arabic.

Inspired by Wheeler's early study on prisonization,<sup>12</sup> three vignettes were devised to identify whether prisoners expressed solidarity with staff or fellow prisoners.<sup>13</sup> Prisoners could mark their response on a 5 point Likert scale from 'totally agree' to 'totally disagree'. Prisoners with an average value of  $\leq 3$  expressed conformity to staff role-expectations and

were categorised as 'low prisonized' and prisoners with an average value of  $> 3$  expressed conformity to inmate role-expectations and were categorised as 'high prisonized'. Values for respectively low and high prisonization were calculated for the population (N = 745): 56.5 percent of respondents expressed a high degree of prisonization and 43.5 percent expressed a low degree of prisonization.

A logistic regression analysis was undertaken in order to find out which variables had most impact on the level of prisonization. The model can be defined as an 'integrated model'<sup>14</sup> and contains information about prisoners' gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, children, educational level, employment, religious belief, number of prior sentences, conviction charge, whether the conviction charge was committed in association, type of prison, type of section in prison, stage of sentence<sup>15</sup> and visits from outside.

The starting point of the analysis was the calculation of regression equations for all independent variables. By using a backwards search strategy it is possible to determine which independent variables contribute significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) to the prediction of degree of prisonization.

But the question is how the process of prisonization is initiated? The ethnographic fieldwork discussed below helps to understand this process.

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### **The initiation of prisonization and introduction to prison codes of conduct**

Prior to transfer to a closed prison, several prisoners reported that they were anxious about being assaulted or exploited by other prisoners. For that

12. Wheeler 1961a see n.4.

13. The vignettes were (1) An inmate commits a minor rule infraction and is reported by a prison officer. Two prisoners discuss the incident. One of them criticizes the prison officer. The other claims that the prison officer usually is fair, and he was only doing his duty. What do you think about the inmate defending the prison officer? (2) The two inmates Thomas and Michael are friends. Thomas has smuggled a mobile phone into prison but now thinks that prison officers suspect him of having a mobile. He asks Michael to keep it for him a few days. Michael accepts and hides the mobile phone for Thomas. What do you think about Michael hiding the mobile phone for Thomas? (3) Two inmates have planned an escape from prison. The only way it is possible is if their fellow prisoner, Soren, smuggles tool from work. Soren agrees to do the smuggling. What do you think about Soren smuggling tools for the two inmates?

14. In the early study of prison culture it was assumed that prison culture was formed and found in the prison itself. This hypothesis founded the so called deprivation model (e.g. Sykes 1958 see n.1). Irwin and Cressey founded a second model – the so called importation model – which explained prison culture as a result of a subcultural and normative behavior pattern prisoners bring into the prison and reproduces in there (Irwin and Cressey 1962 see n.1). Thomas et al. (1978 see n.1) suggested a third model which integrated the above-mentioned two models and named this the integration model.

15. Early phase of sentence includes those who have served less than six months; middle phase is those who have served more than six months and have more than six months left to serve; and late phase is those who have less than six months remaining to serve.

reason, most newcomers were wary and felt insecure about the prospect of imprisonment. A prisoner explained: *'The first day in this prison, I stayed in my cell behind a closed door and I hoped that no-one would come in.'* Similarly, several prisoners said that they were mentally prepared for the worst case scenario such as being assaulted, raped or robbed. With limited prior knowledge about prison life some prisoners asked the staff questions but: *'The guards don't tell you much (...) But the other prisoners tell you a lot about how prison is.'* Because of prisoner turnover, poor communication skills or maybe limited knowledge about prison conditions, some prisoners forgot to pass important (informal) information to new prisoners. To ensure a less haphazard introduction, prisoners themselves had devised a proper induction process, named the 'Spokesman introduction'<sup>16</sup> (in Danish: 'Talsmandsvisitationen') as follows:

'1) Introduce yourself and welcome the newcomer. 2) To ensure the newcomer can become accustomed as quickly as possible to prison life, review the different forms used by the prison authorities such as applications for visits, for making telephone calls, vouchers for the shop. 3) General introduction to the section, the routines and daily life e.g. for example dishwashing system. 4) Make a guided tour of the section. 5) Make sure the newcomer shows you his criminal record (for the sake of the newcomer, because we don't want people to get into trouble because of the crime for which they were convicted).'

Some of these points merit further explanation. Point 2 'vouchers for the shop' is to make sure that the prisoner can get groceries from the prison shop. At a given time once a week, prisoners in one section may shop for food but if a prisoner is unable to do his shopping at this particular time or has forgotten something he can give another prisoner a mandate to shop on his behalf. This mandate has to be completed in advance and is therefore important to know about. Point 3 'dishwashing system' differs from one section to another. In some sections, prisoners employ a fellow inmate as dishwasher and then each prisoner has to

pay an amount from his salary to him. It might be that the newcomer can apply for the dishwashing job. It is therefore seen as important to know about this practical issue. Point 5 to 'show the criminal record' is justified because prisoners do not want to serve their sentence in the same section as 'grasses' or inmates convicted for sexual crimes. If a newcomer refuses to show his criminal record — or if he has a problematic criminal record — he is usually asked by the fellow inmates to be transferred to another section or even to another prison. A prisoner explained: *'If you don't have a proper criminal record, then it's goodbye.'* If a prisoner is transferred to another section or another prison for not having a proper record, it is almost impossible to be included in another prison. Rumours about the prisoner often arrive before the prisoner himself. In several cases, an excluded prisoner therefore has to serve his sentence in a 'voluntary' isolation section with all the limitations this kind of sentence entails.

Another informal part of the introduction relates to the most important aspect of the prison code of conduct. This may be summarised briefly as: *'Don't steal from fellow prisoners, don't grass, and don't interact with the guards.'* Depending on how serious rule breaking behaviour is perceived by others, the prisoner is met with a range of informal reactions: verbal reprimanded, being 'voted out' of the section,

or in some cases being physically punished. When a prisoner is voted out, he has to move section or even prison. Fellow inmates claim to the prison authorities that they cannot guarantee his safety and then, because of the need to maintain order and security, the prison authorities have to transfer the prisoner whether he accepts it or not. The excluded prisoner runs a high risk of becoming a 'ghost' in the prison society. He is transferred from one place to the other leaving behind nothing but a bad name and a vague impression.

To examine how common the rule of conduct 'not to interact with the prison guard' was amongst prisoners, they were asked how often they talked voluntarily with prison guards or other professional for more than ten minutes. 53 percent (N = 766) of the prisoners had rarely (once a month or less) talked with

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16. According to the Danish penal law section 34 prisoners should be able to influence their lives in the institution through elected spokesmen. In every section prisoners have possibility to elect a prisoner as a representative (spokesman) for the prisoners in each section. Normally the spokesmen from the different sections in the prison hold a meeting once a week and discuss different aspects of prison life. Among the spokesmen one of them is chosen as a »common spokesman«. This person is supposed to hold a monthly meeting with the prison authorities. During this meeting he is given authorization to speak on behalf of most prisoners in the prison.

prison guards for more than ten minutes. It is striking that, at the same time, 39 percent of the prisoners (N = 753) requested *more* social contact with the prison guards.

### Emotional brutalization as an possible aspect of prisonization

‘Don’t grass’ means not divulging anything to prison officers about what takes place among fellow inmates. A prisoner also has to be careful not to listen or even to see too much of what takes place in prison. The ideal prisoner is described as like the three wise monkeys — eyes, ears and mouth closed — minding his own business. In many cases, this must be taken quite literally. One prisoner had observed a group of fellow inmates who had Gaffa taped a youngster and threatened to rape him to ‘scare him straight’. The youngster wet himself with fear while the other prisoners stood laughing around him. A prisoner observing this scenario felt bad emotionally about the incident but he could not talk about it even to his family, in case they would make them very worried. If he had told staff about the incident, he would have been regarded as a snitch. During my time doing participant observation in prison, I noticed a prisoner with a broken nose, prisoners with broken teeth and bruises on prisoners’ backs or faces because of punches. However, according to official prison statistics, only three prisoners are assaulted by fellow inmates a year. When I asked a prisoner about the number of incidents reported he laughed and responded it was a true sign that prisoners complied to the rule ‘not to grass’. If the prison system becomes aware of incidents among inmates which are perceived to be an order and safety risk, prisoners can be roughly strip searched, cells might be turned upside down for security purposes, and groups of prisoners might be isolated and transferred to other prisons. These forms for collective punishment have the consequence that prisoners keep their knowledge to themselves.

Because of their experiences during imprisonment, some prisoners said that they experienced a kind of emotional brutalization or hardening during their imprisonment. At the beginning of imprisonment, they reacted more emotionally to assaults or injustices towards themselves or fellow mates. As time went by, they reacted less. For that reason some prisoners found it difficult to see themselves through the eyes of, and also to relate to, people from the outside: *‘I cannot live in two worlds. If I do, I lose my strength and get weak. If I get weak, I will get attacked.’* The daily life in prison was seen as a struggle and the prisoner had to be psychologically alert and physically strong. He needed to keep in good shape physically to protect himself from other prisoners and was constantly on the alert

for the worst case scenario. External contact and life beyond the prison walls was experienced as a parallel society, which the prisoner — for as long as he was imprisoned — did not have the resources to get too involved with. As a prisoner expressed it: *‘I don’t need friends from outside anymore. My life is so much about prison life. If I have visits from people outside, I don’t know what to talk about.’* Several prisoners reported similarly that as time went by they divorced themselves from social contact with people from the outside and focussed their concentration on life behind bars.

### Final model equating to high or low prisonization

The logistic regression model equating to levels of prisonization had five variables left in the final model: 1) gender 2) age 3) conviction charge 4) prior sentences and 5) stage of sentence.

Table 1: Final model if term removed (N547)

Variable	Sig.	Exp. B	95% C.I. Lower	Exp. B Upper
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	,063	,206	,039	1,091
<b>Age</b>				
15-23	,000	1,000		
24-29	,625	,846	,433	1,654
30-39	,045	,536	,291	,987
+40	,000	,185	,095	,359
<b>Conviction charge</b>				
Drug offence	,010	1,000		
Robbery	,069	,476	,214	1,060
Aggravated assault	,596	,860	,493	1,501
Homicide	,003	,425	,240	,753
Sexual offence	,014	,213	,062	,728
Other offence	,071	,492	,228	1,063
<b>Prior sentences</b>				
0	,000	1,000		
1-5	,030	1,616	1,049	2,491
> 5	,000	3,015	1,745	5,208
<b>Stage of sentence</b>				
Early	,005	1,000		
Middle	,002	2,109	1,312	3,390
Late	,032	2,412	1,081	5,384

The analysis shows that male prisoners had a higher probability of being highly prisonized compared to women, and prisoners up to 29 years old had a higher probability of being highly prisonized compared to older prisoners. Prisoners with more than five

previous prison sentences were three times as likely to be highly prisonized as inmates being incarcerated for the first time. Prisoners who had committed drug offences had higher probability of being highly prisonized compared to prisoners who had committed sexual offences and those in the early stage of their sentence (less than 6 month spent in prison) were less likely to be highly prisonized compared to prisoners who had been imprisoned for a longer time. There were no statistical difference between middle and late stage of sentence which indicated no decline in level of prisonization as the time of release approached.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the study did not find a u-shaped distribution of prison conformity responses.

### Discussion

This study found that prisoners in Danish prisons are socialized to a prison culture which emphasizes a conflicting attitude about officialdom and society. It appears that the actual time the prisoner has spent in prison is significant in determining the level of prisonization. Taking other variables into account the analysis reveals that prisoners who spent more than six months in prison are more likely to be highly prisonized than inmates who have spent less than six months. No indication was found that prisonization decreases at the time of release. Furthermore, it did not matter which

kind of prison regime — open or closed — the imprisonment took place in.

This study also found that prisoners are likely to undergo an emotional brutalization during imprisonment because of the power of the inmate code, which obliges them to keep quiet about incidents of assault and exploitation amongst prisoners. One reason for this norm is the knowledge that prison authorities will adopt a tougher regime and use collective punishment for security purposes if prisoners tell them about such incidents. Prisoners therefore keep their knowledge and experiences among themselves, which may result in a greater risk of separation from the wider values of Danish society and also may result in a higher likelihood of recidivism. The study also showed that prisoners are in fact willing to discuss incidents with staff if this does not have negative consequences for others or could impact negatively on the prison community in terms of higher levels of security, isolation and segregation. The asymmetrical power relations between prisoners and staff, and the norms of conduct among the prisoners, inhibit speaking out openly about problems and concerns about prison society.

This study suggests that the distinctive norms of Danish prisoner culture contribute to an individual and group identity that is in conflict with the institution and wider social values. This is likely to inhibit re-integration on release and the process of desistance.

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17. Wheeler found a decline in level for prisonization as time for release approached. The distribution was shaped as a u-curve (Wheeler 1961b:706 see n.1). In his later study of prisonization in Scandinavia he didn't find a similar u-curve (Cline & Wheeler 1968 see n.5).