

General Systems Theory and Structural Analysis of Correctional Institution Social Systems

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ABSTRACT In this article, general systems theory and structural analysis are utilized as a conceptual framework for investigating the effects of norms, roles, and status positions on the daily operations of the correctional institution community. Structural variables which influence the daily operations of the correctional institutions are discussed (for example, allocation, space, central mechanisms, scope, personality, consensus spheres, and structural distance). In addition to the above variables, twenty-one structural variables are identified for the analysis of the correctional institution and its subsystems.

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the application of general systems theory and structural analysis to the correctional institutions. A review of the literature from 1976 -2003 produced no article that focused on the application of systems theory and structural analysis to the correctional institutions.

In this article, specific attention is given to the inmate system and how structural variables are useful in analyzing individual behavior and the inmate systems' operations. The author identifies structural variables for future analysis of the correctional institution community.

SYSTEM THEORY AND STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Structure is a relatively permanent or persistent organization of parts which as an organization can go into action in unspecified ways and whose types is defined by the kinds of action it takes (: Fairchild, 1944). Structural variables are those variables which determines the context in which relevant social processes occur. These variables provide the setting for interpretation of various social phenomena. Structural analysis asks the question: what is the correctional institutions' organization like? The essential method employed in analyzing a social organization is description. The structure of a system determines its function, and what is structural is also functional. Structure and function represent abstracted aspects of a total operating organization or organized operation (Bertrand,

1972). The most basic structural units of social organization are norms, roles, and status-positions. This article's analysis of the inmate system will be based on these most basic structural units.

System Theory

For the most part, the inputs of the correctional institution system are hostile, dehumanized, and unskilled people, because they have been subjected to degradation, stigmatization, and dehumanizing conditions. Two factors which contribute to their alienation are as follows: that other criminals are often not prosecuted and differential sentencing practices exist for the same crime.

Thoughts include everything that happens to the individual while incarcerated. The correctional institution seeks to rehabilitate and reorganize the inmate's life. However, limitations on professional staff preclude serious rehabilitation efforts. Inmates form social relationships in order to (1) combat the dehumanizing and degrading environment; (2) define norms and roles so that expectations are clear; (3) minimize risk of assault; and (4) associate with inmates who have similar interests. All systems are probabilistic in their outputs. Any given choice is really a response selected from among a variety of alternatives. When inputs are controlled, the choice that is selected is a function of the internal state of the system. The correctional institution system offers few legitimate alternatives to a regimented and dehumanizing life. Therefore, outputs are often very similar.

Norms of the Inmate System

Norms are standards containing some degree of morality (Olse, 1968). Norms provide standards for judging behavior and for behaving and adherence to norms is what leads to orderliness. Gouldner's norms of reciprocity seem to be a factor in determining interaction patterns and social status within the institution. Inmates seek to maximize their pleasure and safety through involvement with those who can reciprocate with social, material, or sexual benefits. Values legitimize norms, while interests do not. To view society with contempt legitimizes the inmate system's protection of each other from society. However, interests of individual inmates often lead to violation of norms for personal gains. A strain toward consistency is evidenced by the fact that inmates give verbal supports to the inmate code even though they may not always conform to it.

Roles of the Inmate System

The norms of a group or the role of an individual is the filtering boundary that permits certain inputs to flow into the system and certain output to flow out. The system boundary selects inputs from a wide range of possibilities. Such selection is necessary because the components of a particular system are structured in a given way. This structure makes certain kinds of relationships with other components more stable (Berrier, 1968). In one system, an individual may be a receiver of directives, but in another, he may be the originator of directives. It is possible to serve in several roles, in different situations. In the correctional institution setting, inmate elites are the receivers of directives from correctional officers, and the inmate elites in turn, are the originators of directives to the inmate population. Within a relatively short time, a system develops a role structure commonly understood by all or nearly all members of the system. The system comes to expect certain specific behaviors from members of the system. The state of the system (: as defined by "who takes what" functional roles) is one determinant of its output. Flexibility and rigidity are important considerations in social structure analysis. Some flexibility in role taking (: system structure) permits the system to accept and process a wider variety of inputs than if the structure is rigid (Bertrand, 1972). The movement

of contaband past the correctional officers is most successful when a variety of inmates participate in the operation. Bilateral reciprocity of role relationships occurs when there is a two-way movement between two or more individuals (Bertrand, 1972). Interaction with other inmates in order to satisfy personal needs is an example of bilateral reciprocity. Reflexive reciprocity is the role in one position and its relationship to an individual's role in other positions. It involves the impact on the individual when he is involved in various positions. This can be illustrated by considering the trustee's position of trust as an errand runner and his position as an inmate (: and the inherent lack of trust). Norms and roles with narrow ranges of reciprocity will have limited effects on the organization. The roles with multi-reciprocity, such as those of inmate elites, are of significance to the organization's functioning. Intramural relationships consider role relationships within the system, and extramural relationships are those outside the system. Role conjunctivity involves the linking of subsystem within the system (Bertrand, 1972). Inmate coordinating councils or inmate elites often serve in this role relationship by linking the inmate subsystems, to the correctional officer subsystems and the administration subsystem. An informal role in the correctional institution setting can be found during a correctional institution riot, that is, inmates temporarily play coordinating roles until the immediate problems are resolved. Often, it is necessary for a third party.

Status-Position in the Inmate System

Status-position within the inmate system determines the extent to which an inmate can try new roles or deviate from existing norms without sanction. Although high ranking are allowed more latitude in behavior, certain norms do exist which should not be violated, for example, informing on other inmates. Composition and rank are two aspects of status-positions which are quite important. Composition is the number of roles making up a status position. The larger the number of roles, the greater the socialization requirements and chances of role conflict. In correctional institutions, role composition is uncomplicated, as a man plays fewer roles, than he would play in the community. Rank is the reward (that is, power and prestige) involved in

the status-position. Rank in the correctional institution is very competitive and highly aggressive as new inmates are continually tested to see where they fit in the inmate social structure.

Status commitment means that the individual is not free to withdraw. System commitment means that the system is committed to its clients, both evident in the correctional institutional structure. Status and system commitment can contribute to the maintenance of the correctional institution organization. Status symbols aid in (1) identification of status-positions, (2) communication and (3) maintenance of system boundaries. In the correctional institution, material possessions are the most evident status symbols; another is physical appearance.

Structural Variables of the Correctional Institutions

Within the correctional institution, there is a variety of structural variables which influences the daily operations of the correctional institutions: allocation, space, time, size, and control mechanisms.

Allocation: Allocation procedures for distributing skill capacities (roles), power (facilities), and prestige (rewards) are critical variables which help to designate the structure of the correctional institution. Coordinating procedures also serve to determine the relationship between subsystems. When the social system allocates decision-making power to a role, 'rational legal' decision-making results.

When a social system allocates decision-making power to a specific individual, 'charismatic' decision-making takes place (Price, 1988). The correctional institution administration decision-making structure allocates power to a particular role, while the inmate system's decision-making is more likely to be allocated to an individual.

Space and Time: Physical space and time are obviously of great significance to the inmate serving a sentence in a correctional institution cell for a given period of years. Social space and social time are also of great significance, because behavior is lodged in a certain context (: inmate system) and is important for the specific length of imprisonment.

Size: As correctional institution size increases, specialization emerges, and preservation of subsystem autonomy and identity is a source of built-

in conflict (Berrien, 1968). Inmate sub-systems began to seek goals which are in conflict with interests of other groups or in violation of the inmate code.

Control Mechanisms: The preservation of organizational structure is ensured through social-control mechanisms (Olsen, 1988). Control is internal if one exercises control over oneself and external if the unit exercises control over the individual. External control can be achieved through selectivity or socialization. Selectivity is not possible for the correctional institution, and so socialization is an important variable. The effectiveness of correctional institution socialization can be assessed by observing the individual's behavior while in the institution, taking specific notice of his adjustment to norms, rules, and the social structure of the correctional institution. While socialization is a process, the content of the socialization process is really a structural variable.

Several variables influence interaction patterns in the correctional institution: scope, personality, consensus spheres, and structural distance.

Scope: The scope of interaction, as discussed by Etzioni (1961), is determined by the degree to which interactions are limited to system members. The scope of the inmates' interaction outside the institution is quite limited except in cases where work-release programs are used.

Personality: The personality dimension is another variable which structures interaction patterns in the correctional institution. Norms and roles are adjusted to fit particular role-player's partner. For example, while a 'politician' may try to 'con' a new inmate, it is unlikely that he will attempt manipulation of a 'right man' (Clement, 1958).

Consensus Spheres: Consensus spheres which are often shared by those in a similar social structure include (1) general values, (2) goal consensus, (3) appropriate means, (4) participation, (5) performance obligation, and (6), cognitive perspectives. These six factors tend to structure patterns of interaction.

Structural Distance: Structural distance is a function of the number of structural boundaries that separate a given norm or role from a second norm or role. Various orders or structural distance can be determined by considering the norms and roles of the inmate system. An example of extensive structural distance is a situation in

which an inmate is on work release and crosses the correctional institution boundary into the community.

Additional structural variables which explain behavior and the operation of the inmate system are delineated in Table 1.

Implications for Correctional Institution Policy

The effect of structure on interaction has important impact on the initial patterning of relationships; that is, it provides the starting mechanism for structural relationships. When a man enters a correctional institution, he needs to know some things about his new life. However, he is a foreigner, not yet a part of the inmate system. He does not understand what is expected of him nor does he understand what to expect from the inmates. To ease the transition, a well-defined structural relationship is necessary. The correctional officer is in the extramural role, that is, he links the inmate system to the correctional institution administration. He provides the initial normative (exceptional) framework from which the new inmate can move on. Without this type of linking role played by the correctional officer, the inmate may suffer psychological consequences or be exploited by the inmate social system.

Through this structure, he becomes aware of ways of avoiding the pains of imprisonment (Sikes, 1970) and learns how to corrupt the

correctional officer through default friendships, and reciprocity (McCorkle, 1970); that is, the correctional officer loosens control of the inmates by becoming friends with them, by allowing them to do his job, and by exchanging goods and services for control over the correctional institution. None of this is prescribed in the formal structure of the correctional institution, and the formal structure changes through time to adapt to the demands of the informal structure.

CONCLUSION

This article has delineated variables which are useful in analyzing the correctional institution. General systems theory was utilized as a conceptual framework for investigating the effects of norms, roles, and status-positions on the daily operations of the correctional institution community. Structural variables which influence the daily operations of the correctional institution include allocation, space, time, size, control mechanisms, scope, personality, consensus spheres, and structural distance. In addition to the above variables, this paper has identified a number of structural variables which are useful in the analysis of the correctional institution and its subsystems. Other variables which should be applied to the inmate social system include the following: sentiment, norm, status-role position, rank, power, sanction, facility, and stress/strain.

Table 1: Structural variables for analysis of correctional institution

<i>Structural variable</i>	<i>Purpose of using the variable</i>
*Role Set	To delineate internal structure of the inmate.
*Rites Of Passage (: regularity)	To aid in community adjustment.
*Physical Architecture control	To determine visibility and social problems.
*Inmate Elite	To uncover invisible elite-power manipulation through participant-observation.
*Role rehearsal	As a prevention tool.
*Opportunity Structures	As a control to determine behavior outcome.
*Ratio of Professional Inmates	To determine availability of treatment.
*Ratio of Correctional Officers to inmates.	To determine gap between responsibility and authority.
*Alienation	To determine feelings of powerlessness.
*Concentration of Authority	To determine level at which authority exists.
*Location Of Power	To determine if power is from an external system.
*Communication Patterns.	To delineate information flows.
*Vertical and Horizontal Complexity	To determine division of labor.
*Consensus on Culture	To determine inherent conflict.
*Ratio of Conformity to positive structure.	To gain information on which to base reward.
*Number of Disruption	To determine system deficiencies.
*Consensus on Norms.	To determine ambiguities.
*Quantity of Innovative Efforts.	To determine staff motivation to improve the institution.
*Power System.	To determine member's ability to obtain performance.
*Absenteeism	To determine inmate's dissatisfaction with assigned duties.
*Status Crystallization	To determine inmate's understanding of their status in society.

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