

Gender Differences in Prison Adjustment

Researchers Dr. Jean Wahl Harris and Dr. Kevin N. Wright of the State University of New York at Binghamton conducted a particularly interesting study that examined factors affecting prison adjustment for both male and female offenders. Inmate adjustment was assessed by examining inmate needs, perceptions of their environment and the degree to which the environment satisfies their needs.

While men have learned to be dominant and self-sufficient, women are traditionally socialized to be more dependent and more concerned with interpersonal support systems. One would expect these differences to manifest themselves within the prison environment, especially through subcultures which develop in the institutions.

The researchers sampled 942 male and 71 female inmates from maximum and medium security institutions in New York State. In order to assess inmate needs, Toch's Prison Preference Inventory was revised by Wright and administered to the inmates. The new inventory assessed the extent to which the eight needs areas of the Toch scale are present in the environment. A measure was also developed to characterize the prison environment in terms of its ability to meet the needs of inmates. In addition, the inmates' prison adjustment was measured in two ways; through a prison adjustment questionnaire, which assessed the inmates' perception of their adjustment and through official disciplinary records.

The results suggest that there are slight differences between needs of male and female inmates. Males and females ranked most of their needs similarly, with the exception that male inmates indicated a greater need for freedom, social stimulation and support. The authors suggest that these differences may be explained by the fact that the needs of female offenders are being met by the "pseudofamilies" which appear to exist in many female institutions. Female inmates may not expect as much as males do from their environments.

With respect to their environments, male inmates perceived that they had a great amount of activity and freedom. Females, on the other hand, drew attention to the highly structured nature of their environments. This can be attributed to the small size of female institutions, which may promote more controlled environments. The greater degree of programming and recreational opportunities within larger male institutions apparently create a feeling of freedom and activity among inmates.

In considering the extent to which prison environments meet the needs of inmates, Harris and Wright's findings suggest that there were no differences between male and female institutions. In fact, it appears that the differences in institutional environments of male and female inmates may respond to their gender-specific needs.

With respect to inmate adjustment, the results suggest that male and female inmates are similar on all adjustment measures with the exception of disruptive behaviour. Male institutions, particularly medium security institutions, are characterized by more disruptive behaviour than are female medium security institutions.

Harris, J., Wright, N. (1988). *Beyond Physical Differences: How Female Inmates Differ from Male Inmates in Adjustment to Prison*. Unpublished Research Report, State University of New York at Binghamton.