

RELIGIOUS INTERVENTIONS IN THE CESSATION OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR AND REDUCING ITS RECURRENCE

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Abstract: This article aims to present the theoretical basis of my research on "The contribution of religious assistance to the process of reintegration of people deprived of liberty in the Gherla penitentiary." It presents the theory of Sampson and Laub (2005) in understanding the turning points; they must include the individual in a structural social space and also they must involve his conscious decision whether or not to engage in a certain action. This article analyzes this theory in terms of behavior changes for a successful social reintegration. The review of a set of analysis and researches aimed at moral-religious interventions on those deprived of liberty presents the effectiveness of these programs in desisting from criminal behavior and reducing recidivism. Having as a starting point the structural social space characterized by the dehumanizing aspect of the penitentiary, due to the transfiguration processes it has on the individual, moral-religious interventions can lead to the emergence of a new self, the opportunity to write a new scenario of their life and to develop a prosocial behavior.

Keywords: penitentiary, treatment, moral-religious interventions, behavior, recidivism

Introduction

The penitentiary, the amalgam of the community of residence and the formal organization is what defines Erving Goffman as a "total institution, the place where a large number of individuals with a similar status, separated from the rest of society for a period of time, carry out their life and activity for an appreciable amount of time and together they lead a strictly delimited life, officially governed by the institution". Based on the "delimiting nature" of this type of institution, Erving Goffman builds his concept of "total institution". The route taken by the person deprived of liberty, once part of the custody of the penitentiary administration, marked by the pressures that the institution exerts on him, has the role of eliminating the "civil ego" and determining this person to assimilate the typical rules and patterns of behavior, all this constituting a "process of degrading the self".

The delimiting character of the "total institution" generates specific characteristics of an institutionalized life: "life takes place in the same place, in all its aspects, in the presence of a large number of individuals, from the same social category, all of them being deprived of liberty and generally having the same obligations; they are subject to the same authority figures, generally most of their actions are strictly scheduled; the purpose of these programs is to meet the goals of the institution. With the time passing, when the stay in the penitentiary is longer, the possibility of a *perfect adaptation* is growing, and as a consequence to this, a *perfect maladaptation* to the free

environment also rises". The accelerated pace of changes, characteristic to contemporary societies, can make it difficult for someone who just got out of prison to reintegrate into the free society.

All of the detainees' needs, starting with the personal hygiene to spiritual ones, are fulfilled according to a certain scheme. This scheme is defined as "the attempt to satisfy a large number of human needs through the bureaucratic organization of large groups of people." Moral and religious interventions, an integral part of the "bureaucratic scheme", aim to develop prosocial behavior and also to reduce the recidivism.

The current review of the research literature provides clear empirical evidences that show how religious commitment is linked to reducing crime and thus recidivism. The data confirms that religion acts advantageously for the inmates, those who are more involved in religious activities are less likely to commit new criminal acts when they get out. Research on religious practices or commitments and deviant behavior indicates that, generally, a high level of religiosity is associated with a lower crime rate.

Most of the revised studies document the importance of religious participation in protecting individuals from the harmful outcomes of the prison confined space, as well as promoting prosocial benefits. The beneficial relationship between behaviors and outcomes is not simply a function of coercing religion or of what is discouraged by moral laws, such as delinquent behavior, but also by what encourages the promotion of behaviors that can lead to a general well-being, to educational and also social achievements. Reviews of the literature show that religiosity is recognized as a key protection factor that helps detainees move forward with their lives.

For a better understanding of the role of religion nowadays and also in the future, the role of religious participation in tackling crime, criminal treatments, rehabilitations, rehabilitation programs and the transition of the detainees back into society, the research reviews some of the existing literature to assess the benefits religious influence may have on detainees in the emergence of a new self, a worthy one, the opportunity to write a new, clean page of their life, and to develop a prosocial behavior. Given the fact that religion and crime receive special attention, both from the academic community and from the media, the research reveals that the penitentiary, through its structure and its way of organizing and carrying out daily activities, places the detainee in front of an identity conversion. Rendering the "value of the self", moral-religious interventions act as a positive resource in the development of prosocial behaviors.

Theoretical Approaches

With the "total institution", defined by Goffman Having, as a starting point, by restricting the identity which consists in dispossessing the roles that the individual plays in civil life, both professionally and in their family, hospitalization procedures (photography, weighing, raiding, pruning, clothing), disfigurement and contamination processes (generated by the fact that the incarcerated person is always in the presence of others) exclude the autonomy and the possibility for him to have a certain degree of control over his own life. All these processes of "ego aggression" consequently lead to a

loss of the capacity to use cultural codes, on the basis of which the inmate interacts with the other individuals in the conventional society.

If the “total institution” has such a profound action over one’s identity, through repetitive processes of the “humiliation of the ego”, interventions on those deprived of their liberty must be at the same level. Sampson & Laub’s (2005) theory in understanding turning points must include the individual in a structural social space and must involve his conscious decision to engage or not in an action. Sampson & Laub (2005) identify five criteria for assessing turning points, one of which consists in “situations that provide an opportunity for self-transformation and that allow the emergence of a new persona or scenario”. Starting from the theory developed by Sampson & Laub (2005) in understanding the turning points, the penitentiary includes the individual in a structural social space, characterized by the processes of “ego aggression” on the one hand, and the moral and religious interventions over the individual can engage him in actions to desist him from criminal behavior.

One of the first studies based on religious interventions revealed that *Teen Challenge* graduates showed significant behavioral changes compared to other non-participating groups within seven years of program completion (Hess, 1976). A number of studies examining the effectiveness of the *Prison Fellowship* (PF), a religious program that took place in a prison dedicated to those deprived of their liberty, show that participants in the program do significantly better than non-participating detainees. Mark Young and his colleagues investigated long-term recidivism among a group of federal inmates, trained as prison volunteers, and found that the group had a significantly lower recidivism rate than the general one (Young et al., 1995). Johnson and colleagues analyzed the impact of religious programs on institutional adjustment and the recidivism rate of two groups of New York State detainees. The likelihood of active participants in Bible studies being arrested in the first year after parole was lower (Johnson et al., 1997). Later, Johnson extended the research, the time being between one and eight years after the release. For the same participants, the possibility of being arrested in the first two or three years was lower (Johnson, 2004). O’Connor’s research (2001) also showed that participants in the *Prison Fellowship* (PF) program are less likely to relapse and return to prison.

The Florida Department of Corrections published a series of data (2000) showing that participants in the *Kairos Horizons* program, a similar program based on religious interventions, have fewer disciplinary and adjustment problems and are more likely to obtain a school qualification. A few years later, a new study took a look at the effects of the *Kairos Horizon* program on participants and their families. The results indicated significantly lower rates of disciplinary offenses, and from the perspective of recidivism it took a long time until their first new arrest (Hercik, 2004, a, b).

In one of the most publicized studies to date, Johnson completed a six-year evaluation of the *Prison Fellowship’s Inner Change Freedom Initiative* (IFI), a program based on religious interventions, conducted in preparation for the release of certain inmates. Among the key findings lays the fact that the recidivism rate for IFI graduates was lower than for those in comparison groups who did not graduate from the program,

and for the group participating in the IFI program, the chances of being re-incarcerated during the two-year parole period were lower (Johnson and Larson, 2003). The Iowa State Department of Management conducted an evaluation of all 17 substance abuse treatment programs identified in eight state prisons, including the IFI program. The final evaluation concluded that the *Prison Fellowship's Inner Change Freedom Initiative* was the first or second most effective intervention for substance abuse and recidivism reduction in the State of Iowa (Iowa Department of Management, 2007).

Duwe and King (2012) published a study evaluating the effectiveness of the *Inner Change Freedom Initiative (Inner Change)*, a reintegration program also based on religious interventions, examining the results of recidivism among 732 inmates released from Minnesota prisons between the years 2003 and 2009. A series of regressive analyzes showed that the participation in *Inner Change* significantly reduced the recidivism rate of participants.

Johnson et al. (2000 a) found that personal religiosity helped at-risk youth, such as those living in poor areas of Philadelphia, Boston and Chicago, to escape drug use and other illegal activities. Furthermore, church participation has the opposite effect on engaging in illegal activities, in drug use, and trafficking among disadvantaged youth. There is growing evidence that religious involvement can reduce the risks of a wide range of delinquent behaviors, including both minor and serious forms of criminal behavior (Evans et al., 1996).

Jang et al. (2008) found that young people raised in strong families emphasized the importance of a religious education, as they were less likely to use psychoactive substances than young people who grew up without prioritizing the formation of a religious lifestyle. Petts (2009) states that regular church attendance during adolescence can be an important and underestimated element in improving the behavioral trajectory of young adults. Empirical studies addressing religious interventions in prison treatment have shown that those deprived of their liberty who regularly take part in Bible studies conducted by volunteers are less likely to commit institutional offenses (Hercik 2004 a, b) or to commit new offenses after their release from prison (Johnson et al., 1997; Johnson, 2004).

Further research shows that antisocial individuals tend to engage in romantic relationships with antisocial partners (Cairns & Cairns, 1994, Rhule-Louie & McMahon, 2007; Rowe & Farrington, 1997, Simons et al., 1993, 2002). Simons et al. (2002) highlighted the theoretical key distinctions of the effect of opposite-sex marriage. Having a conventional romantic partner was one of the key factors that promoted criminal resistance concerning women, along with an attachment to the workplace. Implications of this concept regarding the theory of Sampson & Laub (2005), according to the theory of Simons et al. (2002), state that most antisocial individuals marry antisocial partners and persist in their criminal behavior, but through sudden appearances some antisocial people may fall in love and marry conventional partners who will discourage their criminal behavior and ignite the process of withdrawal from such activities.

Giordano and associates indicate that individuals involved in illicit activities who are tired of the lifestyle involving such criminal activities tend to choose to settle with

prosocial partners. The desire to lead an honest life and to be in a non-criminal relationship plays a key role in this process (Giordano et al., 2002). Warr (1998) suggests that a marriage reduces the amount of time a person spends with people of the same sex, thus limiting opportunities for crime and influencing others towards such behavior. When a person is part of a marriage, they tend to be more closely involved in family obligations.

A review of the research on religious engagement and deviant behavior indicates that, generally, people with a higher level of religious involvement are associated with a lower rate of crime or delinquency related behaviors. Empirical evidence shows that those who are religiously involved are less likely to commit acts against law. Moral-religious interventions in a dehumanizing social space such as a prison can engage detainees in letting go of criminal behaviors, leading to the emergence of a new self, providing them the opportunity to write a new scenario for their own life, developing a prosocial behavior.

Empirical Results

The penitentiary is defined as a “total institution” by E. Goffman, having a “delimiting character”, situating the individual in a structural social space, characterized by a continuous process of “ego aggression”. The shock of incarceration, the relation with the culture and subculture of the penitentiary has a strong influence on the life and behavior of the detainees, seriously affecting their sense of security. Starting from the theory of Sampson & Laub (2005) in understanding which are the turning points, they must include the individual in a structural social space and also they must involve his conscious decision to engage or not to engage in an action. It was discovered, by reviewing the literature, that religious interventions are among the most effective interventions that help the process of reintegration and social reintegration of the former convict. The conscious decision of the person who was deprived of liberty to engage in actions that originate in religious interventions may lead to the emergence of a new self and the opportunity to write a new script for their future life as free citizens.

Furthermore, the literature indicates that religious interventions in the penitentiary help in avoiding disciplinary problems, and they are beneficial to the process of adaptation to the rules and rigors required from this institution; also, the program beneficiaries have a high chance of completing their studies or obtaining professional qualifications. The series of various studies and regressive analyzes that have examined the effectiveness of religious programs on long-term recidivism and on the adjustment to institutional norms also show that program participants do significantly better than non-participating detainees.

Also, regular participation in church during adolescence can be an important element in improving the normal behavioral path for young people who reach adulthood. Young people raised in strong families emphasize the importance of a religious education, as they are less likely to use psychoactive substances than young people who grew up without prioritizing the pursuing of a religious lifestyle. Moreover, personal religiosity helps at-risk youth, such as those living in disadvantaged areas, to

get rid of drug addictions and other illegal activities. Churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship are some of the few institutions one can rely on, that remain in the immediate vicinity of most adolescents and their families. This is also valid for our disadvantaged communities. These religious institutions have the potential to play an important role in promoting the health and well-being of those they serve. The results show that those who are religiously involved are less likely to commit acts against the law.

The effects of marriage in reducing crime are also important, especially those of successful marriages. An important point to remember is that there are no studies evaluating the effects of the disintegration of a marriage, from the perspective of recidivism. Bersani & Doherty (2013) found that those with a shorter marriage time were less likely to be arrested after a divorce compared to the time they were actually married. Those who have been married for two years or more have actually shown an increase in arrests after the divorce.

Empirical studies addressing religious interventions in prison treatment have shown that those deprived of their liberty who regularly participate in Bible studies conducted by volunteers are less likely to commit institutional offenses or new offenses after their release from prison. Studies report a significant reverse or beneficial relationship between religion and a certain crime rate. The increase in religiosity is associated with a reduced likelihood of committing criminal acts.

Methodological challenges

This article regards the theoretical groundwork of my research, “The contribution of religious assistance to the process of reintegration of those deprived of liberty in the Gherla penitentiary”, also including some methodological considerations. Given that the research has a theoretical basis based upon this idea of the turning points involving self-transformation, my methodology must be appropriate, firstly, because the religious denomination in detention units in Romania is different from the one in detention units in the United States, and secondly, the religious area is very specific, and differs from the revised literature. The penitentiary is a “total institution”, through the repetitive processes of “degrading the self”, placing the individual in front of a transformation of the inner self, having the opportunity to write a new scenario of his own life, like a redemption. Furthermore, the statistics of the penitentiary environment are not about the individual lives of those incarcerated, they are about the behavior of the groups they are part of.

The revised literature focuses on religious interventions based on Bible study, on how detainees extract morals from religion. In my research I paid methodological attention to the specifications of the Orthodox religion, the importance of the chaplain, the authority he gives off, that helps the prisoner in changing his life; the Orthodox religion is a strongly ritualistic one, and its relation with morality has very distinct features.

Conclusions

Starting off with the concept of “total institution”, defined by Erving Goffman, we went through a series of studies that examined the effectiveness of religious interventions upon prisoners. The literature on religious interventions in prisons shows significant behavioral changes for the beneficiaries of these interventions, in terms of adjustment to institutional norms, disciplinary issues, the opportunity to obtain a school attendance or a professional qualification and the long-term recidivism, compared to groups that do not take part in moral-religious activities. With time passing, when the staying in the penitentiary lasts for longer period of time, there is the possibility of a “perfect adaptation” and, as a consequence, a “perfect maladaptation to the free environment”. The moral-religious interventions in the penitentiary put a stop to the “process of degrading the inner self” from the harmful physical and mental results generated by the “totalitary institution”.

While some specialised literature has focused on studies addressing religious interventions in prison treatment and the benefits of these interventions, others revised studies emphasizing the importance of being part of a marriage, the importance of the church participation during the adolescence, which may be an element in improving the behavioral path of young people moving towards maturity, and individual religiosity helps at-risk youth, such as those living in disadvantaged areas, get rid of drug addictions and other illegal activities.

The review of empirical studies addressing religious interventions in prison treatment and the benefits of reintegration are appropriate for the topic I personally studied, “The contribution of religious assistance to the process of reintegration of those deprived of liberty in the Gherla penitentiary”. This theoretical framework leads the way for future research directions regarding the investigation of how religion and religious activities, carried out in the penitentiary by the church community, represents a pillar of support during detention and becomes a resource in carrying out post-detention plans of the former detainees. Churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship are some of the few institutions that most adolescents and their families can rely on. This is valid for our disadvantaged communities. These religious institutions have the potential to play an important role in promoting the health and well-being of those they serve.

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