

The Sociological Imagination: Reflections of a Prisoner in Australia

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ABSTRACT

The sociological imagination (SI) has been an important framework relied upon by the field of sociology. This paper intertwines the SI with reflexive narrative to illuminate insight into the carceral experience from the perspective of an incarcerated person. Combining reflexive practice and drawing on various sociological principles, it delves deeply into the emotions, concerns, context in how the prison system fails incarcerated people. Interrogating various themes including, employment, homosexuality in prisons, and the underlying social misconceptions of the utility of prisons; It spotlights the realities of people under the care and control of the correctional system by drawing on autoethnography, theory and empirical evidence. The use of the SI in elaborating upon the carceral experience provides a more intimate approach not otherwise explored in the traditional modes of criminological inquiry, adding an important person-centred dimension to the analysis of the carceral experience.

1. The Sociological Imagination

Sociology is the study of society (Willis, 2004). Simplistically, it is a study which interrogates the relationship between individuals, and the social context in which that person exists, also described by C. Wright Mills as a “Sociological Imagination” (SI) (Willis, 2004). SI is an important foundation for sociological thought as it elicits curiosity and encourages us to pursue knowledge about our immediate social world (Willis, 2004).

The SI is directed by four important principles (Willis, 2004):

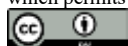
1. Historical. As the involvement and struggles of human beings are central to the study of sociology, a SI takes into account the broader historical context in which social phenomena occurs (Willis, 2004). Plainly speaking, who we are as both a society and individual are largely shaped by our history (society) and biography (individual).
2. Cultural. This refers to the non-natural aspects of society learnt through social processes which include, convention, custom, and language (Willis, 2004). Further, cultural features dictate how we live, how we do things, and how we understand, process, and experience society (Willis, 2004). For example, the vernacular of incarcerated populations (see Devlin, 1996) in prisons may seem bizarre, odd or

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incoherent to those looking into carceral geographies. This may be partly attributed to the varied cultural context in which the observer, and the performer are socialised, or what Dupre (2001) refers to as “metaculture” (p.13).

3. **Structural.** This is a conceptual tool or heuristic device which describes the social context in which human experiences occur (Willis, 2004). A simple explanation to illustrate this principle is the distinction between the sociological notions of agent (the individual), and structure (the society in which that individual belongs to), and the way in which they shape, or contribute to the human experience (Willis, 2004). In other words, do the experiences and behaviours of agents shape social structures, or do social structures shape the experiences of agents? For example, does the physical space of prison itself invoke a certain identity of the “prisoner,” or does the “prisoner” contribute to the characteristic nature of prison?
4. **Critical.** This refers to engaging in critique about all aspects of our social world, including our position, and the occurrence of phenomena within it. In other words, the SI encourages us to be constantly reflexive, interrogative and curious about our positionalities in social schemas.

These principles are not merely scientific guidelines, but rather they are sensibilities. That is, “having an appreciation of, or consciousness about, aspects of explanation” (Willis, 2004, p.65). Further, a key aspect of the SI is the analysis of not only the subject, but also the observer (Willis, 2004), referred to as reflexivity: the continued pursuit of knowledge and awareness of ourselves in the context of our social experience (Abercrombie et al., 2006). This also includes altering, or working, and reworking our own biographies as an outcome of our continued reflexive pursuit (Giddens, 1991).

There is an abundance of theoretical concepts in sociology and related fields which have been utilised to frame human experiences. In fact, sociology is the very study of understanding, explaining and interrogating human experiences against the backdrop of context, although the conception of context may not always be a given. However this discussion is beyond the remit of this article. This paper cannot, of course, elaborate upon each of these of these theories, but indeed there is scope here to mention a few, including Latour’s (2007) Actor-Network-Theory, Goffman’s (1974) Frame Analysis, Weber’s *Verstehen* (Abel, 1948), Bronfenbrenner’s (1992) Ecological Systems Theory and so on. Although not necessarily conceptualised as a theory, but rather a philosophical concept, the SI has been a mainstay of the field of sociology since C. Wright Mills (1959) published his book *The SI*. Since then, it has been taken through various applications, from anthropology (Scheper-Hughes, 2009), geography (Phillips, 1998), social psychology (Gecas, 1989) and even scholarships outside what we would refer to as the “social sciences,” such as economics (Dinnerstein et al., 2014) and business (Kushins & Behounek, 2020). The SI offers a unique grounding in which social experiences can be elaborated upon, encouraging deep reflexive practice. To my knowledge, it has not been used to frame autoethnographic perspectives especially of incarceration. This paper then offers a unique contribution, bringing together autoethnography and the SI.

2. Reflections of a Prisoner

As an incarcerated person, the SI has encouraged me to be curious about prison. To interrogate the institution of prison as a system which perpetuates a schema of exclusion, negation, and rejection (Foucault & Simon, 1991). To understand why we are increasingly becoming a punitive society (Monterosso, 2009). To ask why it is that prison is regarded as something necessary for the preservation of social order, when evidence shows that it does not work (e.g., Cullen et al., 2011). To understand the consequences of prisons, the way it separates families

(Davis et al., n.d.), traumatises children (Martin, 2017), and leaves people's lives in limbo (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2018). To examine why the government subscribes to an idea which wastes taxpayer's money (Richards, 2009), when it could instead spend it on preventative measures, like better education (Hetland et al., 2007), better services for drug-users which make-up a significant proportion of incarcerated populationsⁱ (Krohn et al., 2016). And to illuminate alternative sanctions, those that work, not driven by sensationalism, but rather by the science of criminology (e.g., Cullen et al., 2011). These are adaptations of sociology's five basic questions, and it is these that help us observe the world in which we live, in tandem with the principles of the SI. It was Marx who argued that critique in itself is not simply a negative intellectual judgement of ideological systems, but rather a practical and revolutionary activity, best captured in his statement: "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, to change it" (Abercrombie et al., 2006, p.89).

In the realm of criminology, there is a growing body of literature which elevates, and to some degree fetishizes, the experiences of individuals caught in the criminal justice system. Outside the scholarship of convict criminology, which has been critiqued for failing to assimilate into the local academic milieu of Australia (Doyle et al., 2021), lived experience in criminology has not been otherwise conceptualised. Indeed, there has been work published around concepts of "co-production" and "co-design" in criminal justice (Johns et al., 2022) but these insights have been more or less illuminations of practical measures, considerations and benefits, among other things, of involving people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. Not to say that the work of the likes of Johns et al. (2022) are unimportant but there is scope to explore lived experience further. Whilst it is beyond the remit of this article to comprehensively set out a theoretical framework for lived experience in criminology, a project which I am in the process of accomplishing, the SI could contribute as an overarching guide which frames lived experience of criminal justice interaction, offering a person-centred approach not otherwise brought to light by traditional criminological modes of inquiry. This article can perhaps be conceived as an iteration of my academic quest to produce scholarship buttressing lived experience within a theoretical framework.

Reflecting on prisons in Australia (and globally), as a society we subscribe to the idea that prison keeps communities safe because it incapacitates incarcerated people from committing further crime (Ryan, 2009). This is a notion that goes unchallenged, at least for those blinded by purported representations of crime and justice discourses purveyed by conventional media (e.g., Martinovic et al., 2022). In turn, punitive agendas are championed, engendering opinions which seek to necessitate the institution of prisons into our cultural tapestry. As I was growing up, I subscribed to this ideal without reflection. I accepted that these were the rules of society. These views were reinforced by discourses found on mainstream media outlets which depicts all criminals as egregious, informs that all members of our community are all equally susceptible to victimisation, and suggests prison as the only panacea to the "growing" problem of crime (Surette, 1994; Sarre, 2011). In this regard, our social structures essentialises all incarcerated people into one homogenous kind – violent offenders, creating a mythology around the identities of the "prisoner."

2.1. Exploring Employment Opportunities of Incarcerated People through the SI

These generalisations do not strictly operate within the penal estate, but they have also permeated beyond prison walls. The most salient of these is in relation to the employment prospects of the formerly incarceratedⁱⁱ. The fear of crime has led society to close its doors to those entangled within the criminal justice system (Surette, 1994). Individuals, like me, with criminal justice experiences are less likely to obtain employment post-release (Kapuscinski et

al., 1998). For example, Kinner (2006) conducted a longitudinal study of people leaving prison, and found that some 84% were unemployed. On the unlikely chance that the formerly incarcerated do obtain employment, they are most successful within the secondary labour market, on part-time or casual contracts (Pager, 2003). These employment arrangements are characterised by low pay, low skill, insecure jobs, and poor working conditions (Furze et al., 2014), making the commerce of crime often more lucrative (McCarthy & Hagan, 2001; Braithwaite et al., 1992). It is therefore not surprising that the majority of the formerly incarcerated re-engage in crime post-release. It is these social structures that prove detrimental to those released from prison, a fate I will inevitably face in the near future. These employment pathways are not just ways of making money for sustenance, but they provide the formerly incarcerated with positive social ties that reinforces their position as part of community (Surette, 1994).

Moreover, whilst social structures directly impinge on a formerly incarcerated person's employment prospects, it can also impact the agent itself. Credentialism, the process in which jobs previously undertaken by high-school-leavers become career pathways requiring formal qualifications are increasingly evolving to include the attainment of relevant work experience (Willis, 2004). Incarcerated individuals fail to accumulate employment experience while imprisoned due to the interruption caused by the incarceration period (Pager, 2003). Whilst prison offers employment that requires unspecific skills, it is however vastly limited, and constricted to manual labour-type vocations (Deputy Commissioner's Instruction, 2014). These include woodwork, metal fabrication, cleaning and food preparation. The selection of jobs available in prison is another way in which social structures narrow the employment opportunities of incarcerated people, by assuming that they are all incapable of performing complex, and intelligible work (Shilling, 1988). Indeed, a significant portion of the prison population are uneducated beyond secondary schooling (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). Harlow (2003) finds that approximately 41% of people incarcerated in the United States have not obtained their high school diplomas. However, the prison cohort is not homogenous, and educated individuals can also find themselves incarcerated (Holtfreter, 2005). Further, individuals with the capacity to perform at higher academic levels should be provided the opportunity to do so. After all, outside the retributive aims of prison, it is also expected to perform its rehabilitative function in line with seeing the incarcerated individual successfully reintegrate back to community (Hayes & Prenzler, 2019). Further, the lack of education of most of the prison cohort cannot be attributed to a lack of individual motivation. To this, a structural critique must be administered. Research shows that a significant proportion of uneducated incarcerated people belong to geographic areas with the highest density of low socio-economic cohorts (Lilly, 2018). It has been correlated that in these locations, deviant economic opportunities are most pronounced in comparison to legitimate economic opportunities, best captured in Sutherland's theory of differential association (Lilly, 2018). Therefore, individuals from these areas are more likely to engage in crime, interrupting in their ability to obtain requisite employment commodities like education, and work experience, leading to their perpetuated cycle of criminal activity. Social structures do not leave allowance for these considerations, and formerly incarcerated people are continuously discriminated in the employment pool for this reason (Pager, 2003). This exclusionary practice is not new in mainstream society. Prior to the Enlightenment, criminals were outcast, and deemed incompatible with society (Lyon, 1991). This was largely made possible because feudalistic structures placed the power on the affluent and criminalised those on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum (White et al., 2017). Drawing on Marxist scholarship, criminalisation could then be perceived as a protectionist regime of the rich and powerful.

2.2. Homosexuality in Prisons through the SI

Whilst the institution of prison (and its mechanics) and employment are constant themes published in the field of criminology and related fields, the experiences of people that identify as LGBTQIA+ in carceral spaces are often pushed aside. This has been a site of critique of many authors working the field of queer criminology (Buist & Lenning, 2015). But beyond being an incarcerated person, I also identify as a gay cisgender man. It is at the crossroads of these intersecting subordinations that I experience imprisonment. It would be remiss not to expand upon my carceral experience through the SI as someone that experiences layers upon layers of marginalisation. As a homosexual man in prison, I have had to grapple with the hyper-masculinity that is pervasive in this environment (see Morse, 2017, Uglevik, 2014). One of the questions commonly asked by my peers is, “so how are you going to have kids?” The basic assumption here is that because I am not sexually attracted to women, I am then unable to reproduce. However, technological advancements in medicine have allowed same-sex relationships to bear children (Furze et al., 2014). Children in this sense cannot be defined in traditional nuclear terms, whereby they are the offspring of both biological parents. An obvious differentiation would therefore be that each individual child can only be a biological offspring of one parent. Indeed, sociologists who follow scholarship grounded in functionalism regard this as a detriment, as the traditional nuclear family; characterised by a wife (female), a husband (male), and biological children, is the institution in which children become socialised (Furze et al., 2014). When the institution of family is modified, it is then assumed that children will become socially inept, undertaking delinquent qualities (Furze et al., 2014). Research does show that children raised by only one parent increases their likelihood of engaging in crime (e.g. Blazer et al., 2008; Heck & Walsh, 2000). However, this has been critiqued as failing to consider alternative explanations, including analysing the function of society itself in proliferating nuclear family ideals that affect the image of other family arrangements (Wortley, 2011), which at times can result in interaction with the criminal justice system.

Additionally, the nuclear family unit is not necessarily the “natural way,” it is a mere product of environmental, and economic conditions which have made it particularly desirable in the historical context in which it was advanced (Smith, 1993). During its heyday in the period following the Second World War, the economy was enjoying considerable growth (Furze et al., 2014). Allowing families to survive with only one breadwinner; usually the husband because strong normative pressures helped keep women at home (Furze et al., 2014). However, the proliferation of second-wave feminism in the 1970s has brought the nuclear family unit ideal into question (Calhoun, 2016). Particularly the notion that the nuclear family structure is natural, borne by science (Furze et al., 2014). As explicated above it is a mere by-product of both anthropology, and history (Furze et al., 2014). Further, the myth that everyone adhered to these prescriptions is untrue, some 20% of the total workforce in the first half of the 1900s was comprised of women (Furze et al., 2014). For me, my departure from mainstream convention in this regard will pose its own challenges, including grappling with the lack of acceptance in my own Filipino culture as a result of strong religious traditions. Further, my attempts to find eligible individuals who are accepting of my criminal history will also be an added barrier. Society has historically labelled, and discriminated against the formerly incarcerated, and finding people that accept my history will pose as a challenge of its own.

Moreover, the same-sex marriage plebiscite only attracted support from 61.6 % of Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Which means that 38.4% of Australians do not support same-sex marriage - a significant proportion. The staging of same-sex relationships into public discourse is relatively recent, in comparison to the feminist movement which first initiated in the 1800s by figures such as Jane Addams (Furze et al., 2014). In fact, the literature indicates that it was not until the height of HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s that much of the inequalities

endured by LGBTQI+ people were brought to mainstream discourse (Altman, 2005). The feminist movement has been a protracted process, and even today feminist inequalities still exist (Furze et al., 2014). Removing LGBTQI+ inequalities will also take time, and whilst the wheels of social change have slowly started to turn, we must also appreciate the power of continuity in allowing our rich traditions to survive in the advent of modernity (in short, our contemporary period [Abercrombie et al., 2006]).

Returning to the concept of masculinity in prisons, I have also had to overcome immense challenges assimilating to the prison subculture. Vulnerability and openness have been especially useful tools in gaining not just acceptance and tolerance in a carceral, hyper-masculine environment, but also building a camaraderie between those that do not identify as queer (see Antojado, 2022). There is a dearth of literature in this academic field, especially illuminating the experiences of queer people's assimilation into prisons. Although there is some anecdotal evidence that I have encountered through my own experience, pointing to the power of narrative in re-shaping and challenging people's conception about the queer community. It is also my belief, through my autoethnography of interacting with incarcerated people that they are beyond the mythologised "violent creatures," that they are in essence just human beings. In the conversations I have had with my peers in prison, it is common for non-queer people to become reflexive about their own misconceptions of homosexuality. They do not keep themselves at an arm's length in our interactions, they listen with empathy, consoling when needed, questioning when curious. It is loosely reminiscent of what Weber (1913/1917) refers to as *Verstehen*, which when translated into English means "to understand." This idea of empathetic understanding is of particular interest and significance to the process in which I was able to build camaraderie with my non-queer peers. It was not so much that I induced them to be empathetic, but rather that through their own volition, whether consciously or not, chose to show humanity. Indeed, there is much work, especially in academia, to bring to light the experiences of the queer community within carceral geographies, and it is certainly envisaged that this publication will elicit more work, especially from those with lived experience, in this area of scholarship.

3. Conclusion

The SI is an important tool that allows us to see the world in a different light (Willis, 2004). It encourages a unique sense of curiosity that engages our mind to think, and ask "why?" Indeed, it does not offer a panacea to our social world's most conflicting problems, including those located within the institutions of gender, employment, and families, as explored in this publication. But rather it is a way of thinking that elicits profound analysis and interrogation of our social context, environment, conception, idea and philosophy (Willis, 2004). Incarceration has never been offered as a subject of the SI but clearly there is scope for reflective practice to be framed through its principles. In fact, it offers a person-centred dimension to the way in which incarceration is experienced by people. As we enter an era in criminology which fetishizes the lived experience of people in carceral institutions, the SI provides a possible framework to the way in which these experiences can be conceptualised. Indeed, the SI does not merely encompass the two main focus areas of interrogation in this article, it is a versatile device which can be applied in almost every aspect of the sociological quest.

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ⁱ There is overwhelming research in this field which indicate that people who enter and exit custody have substance addictions that are improperly addresses by carceral involvement.

ⁱⁱ I use the term formerly incarcerated to describe people who have exited custody. I have made a concerted effort to deviate from terms such as “inmate” or “convict,” as they carry associations with negatively impact upon the identity of incarcerated people, signalling that they are merely their experience of imprisonment. I encourage the criminological scholarship to utilise alternative ways to address people involved in the criminal justice system, in non-pejorative terms.