The Representation of Prison Subculture Models in Mid-20th Century Hollywood Film

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Abstract:

In the mid-20th century, penologists shifted their focus from attempts to understand penal reform and offender rehabilitation/punishment to determining if there existed an inmate subculture and what that subculture was. Specifically, questions about how inmates adapted to the "pains of imprisonment" came to the forefront of penological discourse, with various models such as Clemmer's origin of the prison community (i.e., prisonization) and Sykes's deprivation theory dominating academic discussion. While the contemporary literature of the time was premised on the observational research by the aforementioned penologists, scholarly research has not examined the effect mid-20th century prison movies had on the formation or modification of the behavior of the persons observed, thus potentially impacting the development of these models. This paper presents a content analysis of four popular films produced during and shortly after the Great Depression. The argument is presented that these films could have potentially had a role in the development of the prison subculture models by these penologists, specifically as the media may have played a role in shaping the behavior of the subject (inmates and prison staff) they observed.

Introduction

In the mid-20th century, studies of prisons within the social structural-functionalist paradigm gave the field of penology its first look into the social organization of penal settings (Sykes 1995). Prior to this time, the inmate social world was not considered in systematic detail from an academic standpoint, as much of the empirical focus in the field had been placed on the efficacy of the rehabilitative ideal during the early decades of the 20th century. Shortly after the Depression years, penologists shifted their focus and "went inside" the institution to examine the inmate social world. Beginning with Donald Clemmer's study of the prison community in 1940, the dynamics of social relationships in prison were examined and documented. In the 1950s, prison social organization studies moved past Clemmer's general hypotheses, to the specific, such as Sykes' (1958) analysis of the inmate subculture. While many scholars have delved into current media representations and their representation of currently held penological frameworks, many penologists and penal commentators have failed to note that the prison cinema productions that were popularized during post-Depression era Hollywood appeared at roughly the same time the prison subculture models were developed by Clemmer and Sykes.

While the films featuring prison settings of the late-1990s and early-2000s have received some general attention in the academic literature (O'Sullivan 2001), the prison-themed movies of the mid-20th century have not been analyzed in light of the classic prison subculture models. The focus on contemporary film and a lack of interest in the "classic productions" of post-Depression era Hollywood is understandable in that contemporary prison movies are more readily accessible to consumers and are largely representative of some current issues plaguing the penological landscape. Given this, it is not surprising that contemporary prison-related cinema has grown in popularity with public consumers of media. Much of this popularity can be attributed to the War on Crime and the "get-tough" attitude toward crime and criminals, as the public has become more aware of crime and punishment trends in the last 30 years, and movies profiling inmates and prisons have increased in popularity since the early 1990s (i.e., *Con Air*

[Bruckheimer and West 1997], *The Shawshank Redemption* [Marvin and Darabont 1994], and *American History X* [Morrissey and Kaye 1998]). While these films have attained some popularity with the public in recent years, many young consumers of these films may be unaware that the first wave of production of prison movies occurred in the mid-20th century, beginning in earnest during the depression-era 1930s and ending in the late-1950s.

An analysis of the "classic prison movies" through the lens of the prison subculture presents a unique opportunity to review the tenets of the theories of the prison community popularized during the mid-20th century, question whether the public – and thus, those individuals producing the movies – considered the reality of prison inmates and how they served their time, and analyze whether the films depicting inmate life during this time period were an accurate representation of prison life as depicted by penologists such as Clemmer and Sykes. The purpose of the present analysis is to examine the plot lines of four different films set in correctional facilities/programs during the mid-20th century. The films included in the analysis are *The Big House* (Thalberg and Hill 1930), *Hell's Highway* (Selznick and Brown 1932), *Each Dawn I Die* (Wallis and Keighley 1939), and *Brute Force* (Hellinger and Dassin 1947). After an overview of the public construction of prison life, a review of the early prison subculture theories, and a short look at the place of narrative within sociology more broadly, we will introduce the methods we used for our content analysis, summarize the four films, and explain our findings within the context of early penology literature (i.e., Clemmer and Sykes).

Literature Review

While detailed accounts of the prison social network began with the work of Clemmer (1940) and Sykes (1958), the first assessments of the lives of prison inmates and the operation of correctional institutions likely began as early the development of the first correctional facilities. In the post-bellum era of the 19th century, Enoch Cobb Wines and Theodore Dwight completed an assessment and evaluation of correctional facilities and penal methods in the

United States for the New York Prison Association (Rotman 1995). Their analysis, entitled the Report on the Prisons and Reformatories of the United States and Canada was generally critical of these correctional facilities, including the poor condition of the physical plants of the facilities, lack of training for correctional staff, and the absence of centralized supervision of the facilities, which were generally operated in a parochial fashion. However, at this time, detailed accounts of the inmate community and how inmates adapted to prison life had not yet been produced.

Ten years after the first Congress of the National Prison Association in 1870, the population of the United States had grown to 50,000,000, and at the beginning of the 1880s, the United States housed 30, 659 persons in correctional facilities, or about 61/100,000 (Cahalan and Parsons 1986). By 1930, the prison population in the United States had grown to 120,396 with an incarceration rate of 98/100,000. It was perhaps because of this growth in inmate numbers that Clemmer and others not only analyzed and evaluated the operation of correctional facilities, but began to study the social aspects of the offenders who lived in correctional facilities; hence, the 1930s saw the beginning of the studies of the prison subculture. Clemmer's book, *The Prison Community*, first published in 1940, provided the first comprehensive look at the prison subculture. Clemmer's work was followed two decades later by Gresham Sykes study of the New Jersey Penitentiary, *The Society of Captives* (1958), in which the author theorized that the prison subculture developed as inmates found ways to adapt to the "pains of imprisonment."

Penological Studies of Prison Social Organization

The structural-functionalist perspective of crime was popularized during the early years of the 20th century. Studies of prisons utilizing the structural-functionalist perspective gave the field of penology its first academic analysis of the social organization of penal settings (Sykes 1995). Beginning with Clemmer's general study of the prison community in 1940, the dynamics of social relationships have been studied and documented (Massey 1986).

Clemmer's Prison Community

From the time of birth, people come in contact with the norms and rules of the society to which they belong. These norms and rules describe the behavioral foundation upon which members of a particular society are expected to conform. Differential assimilation can be described as adhering to norms not characteristic of legitimate society. Examples of such norms include illegitimate methods of obtaining income, such as gambling or prostitution, or immature coping behaviors, such as drug use. Differential assimilation can occur in settings such as low-income neighborhoods, where, for example, people may turn to the selling of drugs to obtain income to support their families.

In 1940, Donald Clemmer brought the study of assimilation of norms to the prison setting. In his seminal work *The Prison Community*, he described the process of prisonization; specifically, the unique ways that inmates assimilate to the social world of the prison. Clemmer characterized the process of prisonization in terms similar to those used by early structural-functionalist sociologists to capture processes of assimilation in communities and society at large. Prisonization is the assimilation process in prison where inmates take on "in greater or less degree…the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary" (Clemmer 1940: 299).

Clemmer argues that every inmate is affected by the prisonization process to an extent; however, several variables influence to what degree prisonization shapes the inmates' time in the institution. For instance, upon entrance to a correctional facility, every inmate

> …is immediately stripped of his wonted supports, and his self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified. In the accurate language of some of our oldest total institutions, he is led into a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self. (Goffman 1997: 100)

From intake into the institution, the prisoner is referred to by a number, not his name, and he is given state-issued clothing to be worn. Replacing one's name with a number and requiring the inmate

to wear uniform clothing "strips" the new prisoner of his uniqueness. This intake process was considered the first step in becoming prisonized (Clemmer 1940).

The ensuing process of the "stripping" procedures leads the inmate to the next stage of prisonization. The prisoner responds to his new identity and begins to question his daily routine, which includes things he previously took for granted in free society. The inmate is now told when and what to eat, when to sleep, and when and where to work. Eventually, inmates may question their work assignments, or they may engage in behaviors considered deviant outside the walls of the prison. Examples of such behavior include gambling and abnormal sexual practices (Clemmer 1940).

It is important to note that not all inmates become prisonized to the same degree. Generally, men who have served long terms in prison tend to be the most prisonized, but the key variables contributing to prisonization lie within the offender through determinants such as the relationships the inmate has prior to being imprisoned the types of relationships the inmate maintains outside the walls of prison while serving their sentence, and finally, the relationships the inmate forms with other prisoners (Clemmer 1940).

Although Clemmer provided advancements in the understanding of the inmate social system, his work was not without its criticisms. Some authors have noted the absence of post-release data and commentary on the effects of prisonization on post-release success (Blomberg and Lucken 2010). However, probably the most debilitating criticism of Clemmer's work stems from the fact that he failed to delineate and explain the origins of the subculture upon which prisonization is based. This weakness gave rise to one of the most influential theories of the penal subculture: the deprivation model. This perspective bases its tenets on the experiences the inmate has inside the walls of the institution.

The Deprivation Model

Early penal subculture theorists, such as McKorkle and Korn (1954), hypothesized that the subculture of the prison originated with the walls of the institution. The unique subculture characterized by the

process of prisonization was said to originate in the deprivations that the inmate faced and attempted to cope with on a daily basis. Prisoners were said to experience deprivations to such an extreme that healthy relationships could not be formed with members of the community outside the walls (McCorkle and Korn 1954). Although these issues elucidated penologists on the origin and implications of the inmate subculture, it also raised some key questions. What were the deprivations that inmates experienced? How did inmates cope with such deprivations?

Sykes (1958) described the pains of imprisonment that inmates experience during their time in a correctional facility. As the pains of imprisonment are experienced within the walls of the prison, the origin of the subculture is not outside the institution, but inside the facility. These pains can be described as losses or deprivations that arise "from the indignities and degradations suffered by becoming an inmate" (Massey 1986: 21). Sykes delineates five deprivations: the loss or deprivation of liberty, the loss or deprivation of goods and services, the loss or deprivation of heterosexual relationships, the loss or deprivation of autonomy, and the loss or deprivation of security. It is important to note that variables affecting deprivation are institution-specific. Issues to consider include the characteristics of the prison such as facility type and security level.

Deprivation o Liberty

By imprisoning the felon behind the walls of the institution, society is communicating that he is no longer a person that can live in a respected and trusted manner in the free world. The moral rejection that is implied through this practice and reaction by society is what Sykes called the loss of liberty. The nature of the institution, as described by Goffman (1997), conveys, through symbols such as numbers and uniforms, this loss. Civil rights are lost, and are often not regained by the inmate upon release (Sykes 1958). Inmates had to obtain permission to eat, sleep, shower, and interact, the latter of which restricted the ability to maintain relations with family and friends" (Blomberg and Lucken 2010: 127).

Deprivation of Autonomy

The deprivation of autonomy can be interpreted as a state that follows the deprivation of liberty. As a prisoner realizes that he cannot make choices for himself, he too realizes that the officials have complete control over him, and he has no power to make decisions for himself. The inmate questions rules and feels more of a sense of deprivation when inadequate answers that lack rationale to him are given by officials. These measures are seen as

> …irritating, pointless gestures of authoritarianism…prisoners are denied parole but are left in ignorance of the reasons for the decision. Prisoners are informed that the delivery of mail will be delayed—but they are not told why. (Sykes 1958: 74)

This loss of autonomy reduces the prisoner to a state of childlike helplessness. Inmates often are unable to help themselves in normal social situations upon release due to this stripping (Blomberg and Lucken 2010).

Deprivation of Goods and Services

Prisons confine inmates in poverty-like conditions, which are perceived by prisoners from disadvantaged, abject backgrounds as more inadequate than the conditions from which they came. Furthermore, even if the institution's conditions are considered to be adequate, prisoners are likely to see their imprisonment as depriving of things they could obtain in the community if they were free. Examples of these commodities include food cooked at home and a preferred brand of cigarettes. Compounded by Western society's ideal that the goods people own and the services they receive comprise their self-worth, the loss of goods and services is especially depriving for the prisoner. Some inmates in Sykes' study took a radical approach in commenting that the prison system condemns prisoners to live in poverty conditions so they can be economically regulated and controlled.

Deprivation of Heterosexual Relationships

Just as the lack of goods and services stripped the inmate of self-worth and definition, so too does the lack of female companionship.

Because the inmate defines portions of himself through his interactions with women, Sykes defined the man in prison as only a "half-self" in accordance with the fracturing of Cooley's (1902) looking glass self-concept. When this happens, sexual outlets become other males, which causes the inmate to question his masculinity. For the heterosexual male, these encounters produce anxiety. Thus, imprisonment deprives the inmate of relationships as well as ideas of self that are related to the feelings generated in such relationships (Sykes 1958).

Deprivation of Security

The last deprivation formulated by Sykes is the loss of security. Although disturbances within the walls of the institution do not affect every inmate, the potential threat to personal security increases anxiety levels in prisoners – and this anxiety remains for the duration of an offender's prison stay. To illustrate, inmates in Sykes' study described their fellow inmates as "vicious and dangerous" (Sykes 1958: 77) even if, in reality, the majority of inmates pose no general threat to the prison population.

Neutralization of the Pains of Imprisonment

Inmates cope with the pains of imprisonment in several ways. Some choose to escape physically, either through escape of the institutional walls, which is virtually impossible or unsuccessful when attempted, or through seclusion in one's cell or living space. Some prisoners choose to psychologically withdraw into fantasy. Further still, at the highest extreme, inmates may choose to rebel in the form of violence, such as a disturbance (Johnson 1996; Sykes 1958).

The methods of coping described above can be termed "individualistic coping." Although these mechanisms are in fact a form of coping, they are still seen as negative, for they contribute to social friction within the institution. Sykes' interpretation was that "the more realistic mode of surviving the pains of imprisonment was through the patterns of social interaction established by the inmates themselves. These patterns, termed "adaptive endurance," are the

key to understanding the origins of prison subcultures (Blomberg and Lucken 2010: 129). The formation of the inmate subculture is a product of the reactions to the deprivations of imprisonment, either collectivistic, as described above, or individualistic. Roles and social groups within the prison are defined by the adaptation techniques offenders utilize (Blomberg and Lucken 2010; Sykes 1958).

Narrative in Sociology

While Clemmer (1940) and Sykes (1958) provided a plethora of information about prison life, it is likely the books were read by only a small portion of the general population. This raises important questions about whether people in the United States and elsewhere thought about prisons and the people who lived there, whether an inmate subculture existed, and if so, how prisoners become socialized to prison. To the extent that popular media is representative of the public's interest in corrections and prisons, even in the silent film era (roughly 1920 – 1927), film makers in the United States produced one to two silent films with prison-centered themes (Querry 1973). Rafter (2006) notes that these prisons movies, especially those created after the advent of talking movies, allowed the public to conceptualize the "brutal realities of incarceration." Movies, especially talking movies, provided visceral images of prisons, prisoners, and prison life. It would be both reasonable and likely that a person who had no knowledge of life in prison and its inherent subculture would therefore believe that the prisons depicted in films were factually correct images of correctional facilities. This process would be consistent with Surette's (2011) concept of social construction of reality, which posits that a person's knowledge of a subject is socially created using four sources: a person's personal experiences, the experiences of a person's intimate social relations, other social groups and institutions, and the media.

In the mid-20th century, only a small number of people in the United States had any personal knowledge of the life of a prisoner, or experienced prison life through their contact with social intimates who had such personal contact, or by way of other related social groups and institutions. A person determining the social reality of

prison would likely rely on those images depicted in the popular media. Considering this, it is important to note that during the decades of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the public flocked to the movies. In the 1930s, it is estimated that 80 million people in the US, or 65% of the population, attended a movie weekly (Pautz 2002). As noted above, correctional-themed movies were popular during this era, and using the principles of social construction, the perception of the reality of prison life held by the majority of citizens was likely a social construction of narratives from their exposure to the media.

Sociological interest in narrative has been an ongoing practice, particularly in the subfields of deviance (e.g., Mills 1940; Scott and Lyman 1968; Stokes and Hewitt 1976) and symbolic interaction (e.g., Becker 1953; Becker and McCall 1990; Goffman 1959; 1963; 1979; 1983). Sociologists agree that the amount of narrative forms, tropes, and plots used by individuals, organizations, and societies are limited (Bruner 1986; White 1980; 1987). There are also limits on whom is allowed to tell what stories and in what venues those stories are acceptable (Gubrium and Holstein 1999; D. Loseke 2000; D. R. Loseke 2001; Plummer 1995; 1996; Somers 1994). Stories are trusted sources and powerful agents of socialization and normative values; simultaneously stories are also things to be mistrusted as vehicles of indoctrination at worth and entertaining but trivial at best (Cazden and Hymes 1978; Polletta and Lee 2006). Gubrium and Holstein (1998) describe the combination of storytelling, the resources of storytelling, and the venue in which stories are told as "narrative practices" and argue for more conscious attention on both the "spontaneous and the conditional sides of storytelling" (164-165).

The past sociological research into stories makes it adequately clear that stories are important in all levels of social life. Given the centrality of stories, understanding the elements that are present within the narrative is similarly important. Narratives are made up of three basic building blocks: plot, or the structure given to the events in a story to connect them to a cohesive and meaningful whole (Somers 1994); characters, or the people involved in the events of a

plot that are treated as "the combination of traits that are required to enact the actions that make up the narrative" (Polletta, Trigoso, Adams and Ebner 2013: 293), and the setting, or the location(s) in which the events take place. While setting does have a large impact on both the plot and the characters, there has not been much sociological research on its presence within storytelling. This is part of the gap in our knowledge about storytelling we wish to fill; the setting in the four movies in which we analyzed – prison – is highly salient to the viewer's understandings of the characters and their motivations, dominates the prospective plot options, and heavily influences the genre expectations.

Methods

We completed an a priori content analysis, using codes defined based on Clemmer (1940) and Sykes (1959) respective models of prison life and prison subculture. These codes included prisonization, or the process by which a "free human" is turned into an "inmate" through the process where every inmate is "stripped of his wonted supports" (Goffman 1997: 140). We also coded for resocialization, or the process through which inmates are then socialized into the new norms and behaviors of their institution. The prisoner responds to his new identity and begins to question his daily routine, which includes things he previously took for granted in free society. We then looked at deprivation, which Sykes (1958) characterized as the loss of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. Finally, we coded for adaption and neutralization, which portrays the ways in which inmates cope with the pains of imprisonment. All five codes were drawn directly from Clemmer (1940) and Sykes (1958).

Our sample was purposefully picked to reflect films that were made during the years in which early prison theorists such as Clemmer (1940) and Sykes (1958) were writing. Both Rafter (2006) and Surette (2011) note that prison movies were a dominant entertainment genre beginning at early as the late 1920s. Rafter identifies our first two films, *The Big House* (Thalberg and Hill 1930) and *Each Dawn I Die* (Wallis and Keighley 1939) as "classic films" to the extent establish "the staples of genre." Surette includes

these two films as "classic films" which serve as a source of correctional knowledge. *Hell's Highway* (Selznick and Brown 1932) presents a different image, one of a prison chain gang rather than a brick and mortar institution. We then left the 1930s for the late 1940s and *Brute Force* (Hellinger and Dassin 1947) which Rafter notes has the sometimes common plot twist of depicting the inmate as the hero and the prison staff as evil. It was also important to evaluate if the depiction of the inmate subculture had evolved over this time frame. We believe that these early films likely influenced both the prison cultures that early penologists were looking at and the cultures within prisons themselves. These movies contributed to the general cultural consciousness or metanarratives of society at the time (e.g., D. R. Loseke 2007; Spillman 2002) about what prison life was like, which in turn influenced the expectations of new inmates as they entered the system. We will briefly summarize all four films in chronological order before moving on to our findings.

Summaries

The Big House (TBH; Thalberg and Hill 1930)

Considered the prototype for prison movies such as *The Shawshank Redemption* (Lester *et al.* 1994), *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930) won two Oscars (Francis Marion for Screenwriting and Best Sound) and was nominated for two more, including Wallace Beery, who played the character of Butch, as best actor and best film. This film, drawn from a number of violent prison riots in the late 1920s, focused on the interaction between three convicts – Morgan, Butch, and Kent. Morgan, incarcerated for a non-violent offense, is the classic up-right convict who is housed with Butch, an illiterate killer (he killed several members of a street gang and poisoned his own wife), and Kent, a non-violent, weak young man in prison for manslaughter (killing a pedestrian while driving under the influence). Kent breaks the convict code by snitching on fellow inmates to staff, and costs Morgan his parole when he places a contraband weapon in Morgan's coat to avoid being caught with it and punished. In the end, Butch and Kent die violent deaths in the riot/escape that is the finale, and Morgan saves both staff and inmates from death, securing a pardon

from the Governor. Like subsequent prison films, *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930) is critical of society's willingness to use prison as a sanction, but then fails to provide adequate funding to safely house and rehabilitate offenders.

Hell's Highway (HH; Selznick and Brown 1932)

HH (Selznick and Brown 1932) focuses on the evil of contract labor, especially labor that relies on chain gangs for control of inmates. Duke Ellis (played by Richard Dix) is the hero convict who continually challenges the corrupt prison leadership. All of the inmates are incensed when the corrupt staff recklessly cause the death of Carter, a young, newly admitted convict who was punished by being chained by his neck in the "sweat box" for being physically unable to work. Duke and others make a daring escape (aided by staff incompetence), but he returns when he learns his younger brother has been sent to the chain gang for attacking the person who testified against Duke. Duke not only refuses to tell prison officials who assisted in the escape, but also refuses to implicate another inmate for an assault that Duke is wrongfully punished for in a corporal fashion. In the end, the corrupt prison officials are either righteously killed by inmates during the dramatic camp-burning scene, or ousted when the governor refuses to allow inmate labor to assist in the further construction of the "Liberty Highway."

Each Dawn I Die (EDID; Wallis and Keighley 1939)

This film focuses on two characters – Ross (played by James Cagney) and Stacey (played by George Raft). Ross is a crusading newspaper reporter framed for manslaughter by a corrupt district attorney and the criminals Ross was exposing in his reporting. Stacey is a murderer and robber serving 199 years with no chance of parole. Stacey and Ross become friends after Ross refuses to tell prison staff that Stacey possessed a prison weapon used to kill Limpy Julian, a notorious inmate snitch. Ross saves Stacey from an inmate murder attempt, and Stacey agrees to find the criminals who framed Ross and obtain his release if Ross will assist Stacey in escaping from the courthouse. Ross agrees to testify that Stacey committed the homicide of Limpy to ensure that Stacey is released

from prison to attend his trial for the new murder. During the trial, Stacey escapes from the courthouse where the trial was being held.

Believing Ross tricked him, Stacey declines to find who framed Ross. Ross, back in prison, is offered leniency if he will implicate those who assisted in Stacey's escape. Ross refuses, and is severely punished by being placed in brutal solitary confinement for five months. Stacey learns Ross did not break his word, locates who framed Ross (an inmate called Pole Cat Carlisle, who is now in prison with Ross), returns to prison, and during the dramatic riot ending, forces Carlisle to confess in the warden's presence, resulting in Ross' release. Stacy dies in fulfilling his agreement to assist Ross.

Brute Force (BF; Hellinger and Dassin 1947)

Joe Collins (played by Burt Lancaster) is the convict leader who battles to maintain the dignity of all inmates against the best efforts of evil Captain Munsey (played by Hume Cronyn). *BF* (Hellinger and Dassin 1947) begins with Collins being released from "the hole" after serving time when an inmate snitch, Wilson, plants a shank on Collins. Collins refuses to take direct action, carefully biding his time as he and others plan a daring escape. Wilson is confronted by other inmates in a prison factory, and is forced, by the use of blow torches, into the grasp of a metal press which kills him. Collins wins the trust and help of a respected inmate, Gallagher, following the denial of Gallagher's parole. A trusted cellmate of Collins' informs the Captain of the escape plan, and steps are taken to thwart the escape. When other inmates learn the plan is compromised, Louie, an inmate reporter for the inmate newspaper, is sent to warn Collins and the others. Louie is intercepted by the Captain, and withstands a savage beating, refusing to "rat" on Collins and reveal the escape plot. The escape fails, but in fulfilling the tragic hero role, Collins, though mortally wounded, succeeds in throwing the Captain to his death off the prison wall in the film's final scene.

In the next section of the paper, we will discuss our findings, beginning with images and themes in common between all four movies before moving on to the specific coding sites of

prisonization, resocialization, deprivation, and adaption and neutralization.

Findings and Discussion

All four films covered the "problem with prisons" in different ways and from different perspectives. However, all four had a common theme regarding the effectiveness of the "punitive" model of prisons compared to the "restorative" model of prisons. Inmates become mouthpieces for prison reform and show explicitly the ways the "punitive" model is not working. Given that the main perspectives for all four films are predominantly centered on the various inmates, this is surprisingly paired with sympathetic wardens who are also advocating for change. While the inmates are shown as dynamic and willing to take drastic action (e.g., rioting, escaping, etc.) when their needs are not met, the prison wardens are largely shown as ineffectual and weak, hampered by outside forces such as state legislatures that refuse to properly fund institutions, businesses and unions that advocate against the use of convict labor which would help with the problems of idleness and give the inmates a trade when they are released, and brutal prison guards which ignore or undermine the warden's actions and rules in their treatment of inmates. For the four themes were coded for, we found that each movie provided images of all four parts of prison life to varying degrees. For example, *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930) and *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939) show the most explicit examples of prisonization, as they both begin with characters (Ross, Kent) that were introduced to the system. In contrast, *HH* (Selznick and Brown 1932) offers few scenes which have to do with prisonization.

Prisonization

Prisonization, or the process by which a free man is turned into an inmate, appeared in all four films. *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930) and *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939) offer the most explicit scenes of prisonization, in which the characters of Kent and Ross, respectively, are introduced to prison life by the warden. In *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930), Kent is given his inmate number and the viewer does not learn his name until Kent is brought to his cell and

meets Butch and Morgan. In *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939), Ross is introduced to the rules of the prison by the warden, including such decrees as, "Keep your arms folded" when being addressed by the warden or a guard, that "talking is forbidden in this prison except during recreation periods," and even referring to Ross' first day in prison as "the first day of school." All of these rules serve to remind Ross and the other inmates that they are no longer free and no longer have control even over their own bodies. In *HH* (Selznick and Brown 1932) the inmates are constantly reminded of their status by their uniforms which have a target painted on the back of their shirts in case of escape. All four movies are fairly clear, whether there is an "intake" scene or not, that the process of prisonization is ongoing and the inmates are forced to participate in their own subjugation through conforming to the institutional rules and regulations.

Resocialization

Once the inmate has gone through the intake process, they are then introduced into the general prison population. This leads to a new form of resocialization. In our analysis, we coded prisonization as part of the formal process through which men become inmates. However, there are also several informal rules and codes that are part of the prison subculture. For example, all four films showed a disregard for collaborators or informants; that is, there is a subcultural norm among the prisoners that you should not "snitch" on your fellow inmates. In *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939), the two inmates that are known collaborators are both set apart even in their names. While the rest of the inmates are often known by first or last names, both "Limpy" and "Polecat" are referred to specifically by monikers. New inmates are both warned not to "rat" on others but also to avoid known informants. In *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930), when Butch and Kent first meet, Butch steals Kent's cigarettes and Kent attempts to call the guards to help him. Butch physically grabs him and says, "Well Mr. Yellowbelly you're about to get your first lesson right now– you can't squeal in stir." In *BF* (Hellinger and Dassin 1947), several inmates work together to kill Wilson, the man who had informed on Collins.

Another practice new inmates are socialized in by their peers is the informal power structure that dictates which inmates have more power, prestige, or authority among the prisoners. The rubric used to denote the powerful is different in each film. For example, in *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930) Butch and Morgan – career criminals – quickly establish themselves as higher ranking than the new inmate Kent based on the severity of their crimes. Butch implies that Kent is not a "real" criminal because of his manslaughter conviction compared to Butch's own murder charges. In *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939), connections seem to be the primary method of gaining the respect of other inmates. Stacey's connections both inside and outside the prison grant him a leadership position and ultimately ensure that he can both escape and find the information for Ross. *HH* (Selznick and Brown 1932) puts the characters of Duke Ellis and Matthew as high-ranking prisoners, for the knowledge they both have, and in the case of Matthew, for the respect he earns by way of his claim to having three wives (i.e., sexual potency). Matthew's claims are paralleled by Butch's in *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930), who lies about the numerous women he has on the outside and makes up a story about a letter he receives (that he cannot read) about the death of his mother really being from a woman named Gladys.

Interestingly enough is how three of the four movies treat social statuses that would presumably detrimental to inmates. In *HH* (Selznick and Brown 1932), there are representations of black inmates and a deaf inmate. The black inmates, while largely spending their time separate from the white inmates in the prison, are treated narratively well and shown with humanity, even while being tormented by the guards:

> GUARD: Hey, you baboons! Don't you know better than to leave those mules out?

> BLACK PRISONER: Yes sir, yes sir, mules are $40 a head and convicts don't cost nuthin'. (Selznick and Brown 1932: *HH*)

The deaf inmate is treated better by his fellow inmates, all of whom interact with the inmate and understand his sign language when the guards do not. Ultimately, this inmate is killed while escaping as he

cannot hear his pursuers calling for him to stop. Essentially, despite the differences in status or physical ability, all inmates within the films are socialized to help each other resist or fight against the oppressive prison structures, such as the systems in *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939), which inmates use to communicate with each other without the knowledge of the guards. The deviance of informing – punishable by death in *BF* (Hellinger and Dassin 1947) – is shown to be a heavy norm violation because it betrays the interlinking systems of subversion that inmates use within prisons.

Deprivation

Deprivation, which Sykes (1958) characterized as the loss of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security, is shown primarily through the losses of bodily autonomy, heterosexual relationships, and of security. The loss of liberty, or the act of being put in prison, is one the characters largely either accept fully (e.g., Butch, Morgan, Matthew) or reject either through an assumption of wrongful conviction (e.g., Ross), an attempt to leave the prison sooner through "good behavior" (e.g., Kent, Gallagher) or escape (e.g., Stacey, Collins, Gallagher, Ellis). All four films are, of course, premised on the idea of the loss of liberty by virtue of being set in prisons.

The loss of goods and services is largely mitigated within the prison cultures by the inmates' adaption and neutralization techniques. There are informal structures and systems that allow inmates to receive goods and services that might otherwise be restricted. However, even those may be controlled or restricted by the guards, such as in *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930) and *BF* (Hellinger and Dassin 1947) when the guards restrict inmate mail. A more serious loss of good and services occurs in *HH* (Selznick and Brown 1932), when the guards order soup served for lunch – without spoons – effectively depriving them of food. In *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939), inmates sentenced to "the hole," or solitary confinement, are kept on a diet of bread and water during their tenure.

The loss of heterosexual relationships is shown through the low number of women appearing in these films. While women provide

important impetuses in *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939) and *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930) for men to achieve parole or "go straight," the focus of relationships in all four films is on homosocial relationships. *BF* (Hellinger and Dassin 1947) offers the starkest example of this deprivation when one of the inmates asks Collins and his cellmates about a particular poster of a pin-up and the men explain the poster reminds them of the women they cannot have on the outside. Each man gives an individual narrative about women they have loved and lost in the past and the flashbacks are always begun and ended with a shot of the pin-up.

The loss of bodily autonomy is shown through various systemic methods, such as *EDID*'s (Wallis and Keighley 1939) regulations that inmates are not allowed to speak to each and must cross their arms when speaking to a guard. All four films give examples of the ways in which interactions are heavily controlled by guards. Captain Munsey, the chief guard and eventual warden in *BF* (Hellinger and Dassin 1947), even commands his men during the attempted escape to "Just remember there's no reward for bringing 'em back alive. Not in this jungle." The use of punishments such as the sweatbox in *HH* (Selznick and Brown 1932) when the inmate Carter is physically too sick to work shows the continual control the guards and warden have over the health and lives of the inmates. Ellis even confronts the prison authorities over this, saying "You can't strangle all of us so you're gonna starve us? Is that the idea?" The control over life and death are the ultimate form of the loss of bodily autonomy shown within all four films.

Finally, there is the loss of security, which Sykes (1958) characterizes as the anxiety of potential attack from the "vicious and dangerous" inmates (77). However, within our four films, the loss of security comes from two realms. First, the inmates whom are considered "soft," "weak," or "informants" feel less secure and primarily fear their fellow inmates. For example, in *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930), Kent's primary motivation at the end of the film is to escape Butch's wrath for informing on him. *BF*'s (Hellinger and Dassin 1947) informant, Wilson, begs the respected inmate Gallagher to intervene on his behalf prior to his death at the hands of Collins' allies. However, the inmates that are shown as afraid of

their fellow inmates are the ones that have been previously portrayed as deviant through their actions as informants. In contrast, the large portion of the inmates are portrayed with their loss of security at the hands of the guards. In *BF* (Hellinger and Dassin 1947), the prisoners are largely afraid of the brutal Munsey, who viciously beats Louie to coerce information about the upcoming escape attempt. *HH* (Selznick and Brown 1932) features guards that routinely chain inmates up by the neck in a sweatbox during the summer, a practice that kills an inmate at the beginning of the film. One of the guards even uses the confusion of Ellis's first prison break to sneak home and kill his wife, something the escaping inmates are blamed and then killed for doing. In *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939), Ross is pressured heavily by the warden and eventually sentenced to several months in the hole. When he is finally released from solitary confinement, Ross has finally accepted his status:

> I don't care what you thought! When I first came here, I believed in justice! I believe that someday I'd be released! Then I began to figure in weeks, then months. And now I hate the whole world and everyone in it for letting me into this! Buried in a black, filthy hole because I was a good citizen. Because I worked my head off to expose crime. And now I'm a convict. I act like a convict, smell like a convict, I think and hate like a convict. But I'll get out. I'll get out if I have to kill every screw in the joint. (Wallis and Keighley 1939: *EDID*)

Ross' character trajectory within the film – from "innocent man framed" to "convict" fully illustrates the totality of the prison institution and the ways in which the deprivations enacted upon him primarily by the guards have completely prisonized him.

Neutralization and Adaptation

The theme of neutralization and adaption, or the presentations of how inmates cope, is primarily shown in all four movies through various forms of resistance. However, when inmates are showing conforming to institutional norms, this form of adaption is usually shown through the act of becoming an informant. Kent in *TBH*

(Thalberg and Hill 1930) becomes an informant after the promise of being released more quickly from prison if he does. Limpy and Polecat in *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939) are likewise shown receiving special treatment and protection from the guards in exchange for their status as "informants." The other outlier, in terms of conformity, is the character of Matthew in *HH* (Selznick and Brown 1932). Matthew is not shown as either an informant or a resister. When given the opportunity to escape, Matthew remains in the prison. At the end of the movie, Ellis asks him why he did not leave and Matthew explains that "A man can escape from the strongest jail but tell me how can a man possibly get away from three wives? Prison is a pleasure." For Matthew, prison is a more comfortable alternate than his life "outside" and he is essentially adapted to see prison as a "pleasure."

However, the primary examples of neutralization and adaption come in the form of passive and active resistance. Passive resistance, or the undermining of rules and regulations rather than breaking them, is easily shown in *EDID*'s (Wallis and Keighley 1939) various methods than inmates use to talk to each. There are complex mechanisms and systems used to circumvent the warden's rules about inmate interaction. In *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930), inmates find ways to cope with the enforced idleness of prison by using the tools and items they can find easily, by telling each other stories of things and people on the outside or, at one point, betting on "bug races." Inmates also find ways to verbally retort, or "sass" guards and the warden, both with each other or directly to the guards, such as the scene with the black inmate in *HH* (Selznick and Brown 1932) in response to the command he is given to round up mules.

More active resistance comes in the form of violence, particular through escape attempts or riots. All four movies culminate with some sort of violence. In *TBH* (Thalberg and Hill 1930), the inmates riot and attempt to escape at Butch's urging; most are eventually killed during the violent action. *HH* (Selznick and Brown 1932) similarly ends with a riot and mass escape, the inmates leaving the prison camp burning as they run. Many inmates are shown subsequently caught or killed as they are being hunted down. The entire premise of *BF* (Hellinger and Dassin 1947) centers Collins's

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plan to escape. Though his plan ultimately fails and none of the inmates escape (all are killed), Collins is able to kill Munsey in a moment of restorative violence (Kimmel 2008; 2013) prior to his own death. *EDID* (Wallis and Keighley 1939) actually provides two examples of active resistance: Ross and Stacey. Ross, even when sentenced to solitary confinement, actively resists through continual "insubordination, violence, and hunger strikes." Stacey orchestrates a prison break to release Ross from solitary confinement and force Polecat to confess that he set Ross up for his crime. Ross, while still using violence and force as part of his resistance, is an outlier in these examples as his resistance is focused solely on himself. Stacey, and the inmates in the other three films, work cooperatively to escape or riot. Ross' active resistance is a solitary event unlike Stacey, Collins, or Ellis, whom all work toward a joint or group resistance.

Conclusion

As noted, the field of penology has failed to acknowledge that films focusing on prison that were popularized during post-Depression era Hollywood appeared about the same time the popular prison subculture models were developed by Clemmer and Sykes. An analysis of these movies through the lens of the established prison subculture models presents the pressing question whether the public – and thus, those individuals producing the movies – considered the reality of prison inmates and how they served their time. Specifically, were the films depicting inmate life during this time period an accurate representation of prison life as noted in studies by penologists such as Clemmer and Sykes? The preceding review of the classic subculture research and synopses of these films would lead individuals with an interest in penology to question the role that mid-20th century popular media played in the development of the academic literature that focused on the origins of the prison subculture. As these movies were quite popular with the movie-going public during this time, it can be inferred that the films potentially played a role in the data-gathering process and theoretical developments that characterized the prison subculture literature of this time period. As more attention has been paid to the role of

media in the criminological realm in the recent past, it may be pertinent going forward to examine the role of popular media on correctional staff, inmate behavior, and general penological field development.

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