

An Integrative Approach to Teaching Sociology: Merging Theory and Practice When Studying Women Offenders

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For the past five years, I have taught Sociology courses ranging from Introductory Sociology, Cultural & Social Change, to Valuing Difference in a college-level program at a maximum-security prison for women in New York State. This program is funded through private donations and by a consortium of colleges and universities. My goal in teaching these courses is twofold: (1) to provide community service for a cause which I support, and (2) to offer my Pace University Social Science students the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in prison facilities in order to experience the problems associated with these facilities firsthand. A major objective of my courses at Pace is to have students improve their critical thinking skills (see parenthetical statements throughout the paper) to facilitate their understanding of a wide variety of sociological theories/models which explain and discuss the reasons why individuals commit crimes. Through their experience at the facility, Pace students are able to apply to inmates with whom they interact these theories/models and begin to see parallels among them. The format of the courses for Pace students includes lectures and discussions on the Pace campus about theoretical perspectives related to crime, followed by several sessions with inmates at the prison either during college courses instructed by me or tutoring programs led by students under my supervision.

The majority of students whom I teach at Pace are majoring in Criminal Justice and have a strong interest in pursuing law school, graduate school and other certificate programs in Criminal Justice. They are considering careers in law enforcement, probation, parole, corrections, human services, and related areas. One of my intentions for these students is to dispel some myths/stereotypes associated with inmates and the criminal justice system. At the beginning of a course, prior to their interaction with inmates, my students typically demonstrated belief in two myths/ stereotypes: (1) that higher education for inmates costs incredibly large amounts of money and should not be offered to individuals who have committed any crimes and (2) that women behind bars should be treated in the same manner as men; gender should not be a factor in their treatment.

Pace students directly interacted with inmates either on a one-to-one basis or in small groups in college level Sociology classes, or as a tutor in reading, writing, or math. Their work as tutors of sociology and mentors in my classes at the prison has enabled them to develop relationships with inmates and function as research assistants. Because research material generally is unavailable to inmates, students

are able to offer them copies of on-line information, articles from journals, magazines, and newspapers, all of which supplement dated resources at the facility. This assistance creates an increased educational commitment on the part of my students and the students I teach at the correctional institution. By participating in this experience, my Pace students add very relevant information to class discussions and are able to integrate theory and practice.

The students at the facility are extremely motivated and take courses for the reasons that students at our colleges/universities register for our courses: «for the love of learning.» My research on women in prison is motivated by my interaction and concern for them.

STUDENT REACTIONS TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION FOR INMATES

MYTH #1: higher education for inmates costs incredibly large amounts of money and should not be offered to individuals who have committed any crimes

Students who have not been exposed to inmates have a «lock up and throw away the key» attitude. They take for granted that individual safety will be assured and that future levels of violence will decrease if criminals are behind bars (assumptions). However, my students who directly interacted with inmates appreciated the circumstances surrounding arrests and convictions (complexity). My Pace students were able to see direct relationships between increased arrest rates and impoverished neighborhoods, unemployment, substandard education, drug and alcohol abuse, psychological trauma, and other psychopathologies (correlations). Additionally, while the written material for my courses may clearly emphasize many of these items, only when students hear directly from inmates themselves do the conditions regarding their arrests become practically significant to them (reality testing). Moreover, my students initially had a difficult time understanding that when released from prison, inmates are ill prepared to face the demands and challenges that confront them. When they received some empirical data from textbooks and journals in the field, the students gained greater insight into the benefits of college level programs at prison facilities (factual information), namely, their provision of a competitive chance to be successful upon release from prison (substantiated inferences).

Furthermore, while education for prisoners results in lower recidivism rates, there is an extremely high level of public controversy about whether college-level courses should be taught at prison facilities at all. The public and political goal to eliminate federal support for inmate education stems from several major influences. Societal perceptions regarding convicted criminals or even those who are awaiting trial, are heavily influenced by the media's coverage of high profile violent crimes via radio, television, newspapers, and even online-resources. From these high profile cases, my students at first assumed that all criminals have the same potential for violent behavior. In fact, only 8.5% of the total arrests in the year 2000 were for violent crimes. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, *Prisoners in 2000*, 548,400 men committed violent offenses and are under State jurisdiction in comparison to 21,600 women or 25 times more men are incarcerated for violent offenses and serving time in State correctional facilities than woman.

Prior to their interaction with inmates, my students at Pace learn that in 1994 former President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act into law, which prohibited awarding Pell Grants to all prisoners, both violent and non-violent. This act eliminated hundreds of college level programs in the United States. During the last school year before the elimination of Pell Grant awards, 25,169 prisoners received federal assistance and in that same year a total of 3,755,675 Pell Grants were issued. Prisoners received 0.67% of the total number of grants issued. With an average grant of \$1,506 across the board for all recipients, inmates used less than 1 % of the total federal funding.

Regarding Myth #1, the perception held by some of my students is that a much more comprehensive amount of money has been spent to educate inmates from behind bars and inmates should not have the opportunity to attend college while in prison. The fact that an incredibly large number of students who attend Pace University on a full-time basis work at least twenty-five hours per week to supplement their expenses strongly contributes to their negative reaction of funding post-secondary education for inmates. However, once my students understood that only a small portion of Pell Grant money is utilized by inmates for college and when they observed the results of their interaction with them, then they were able respond more insightfully to the situation. Once this learning occurred, my students were able to see the value of providing financial support to fund inmate educational programs. This transformation of their ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information is ongoing and the more that students interact with inmates, the more they are able to understand the need to provide them with a college education. Moreover, inmates would also develop their critical thinking abilities perhaps in a manner similar to my students while they are incarcerated and after they are released. Also, direct interaction with inmates gives my students a much clearer understanding of the ideas associated with criminal behavior (theoretical perspective). When I introduced them to Emile Durkheim's concept of anomie during one of my in-class lectures on campus, students at first had a very difficult time applying the concept to the examples that I presented. Additionally, when I explained the concept of anomie applied to crime, as developed by sociologist Robert Merton who suggested that culturally defined goals and socially approved means interact to create an environment that could produce gnomic conditions (Siegel, p. 193), students were even more confused. They didn't understand my explanation on Merton that individuals who are unable to achieve financial success due to limited educational, economic and cultural conditions, may turn to crime as an alternative to achieve financial success (causal conditions). However, when students interacted directly with inmates and gained an understanding about the social circumstances that led these women to prison, then they were truly able to apply the concept of anomie to criminal behavior (theoretical applications). This insight provided students with the opportunity to understand that poor neighborhoods, limited educational opportunities, economic distress, and violence played a factor in contributing to a sense of anomie for these inmates.

STUDENT REACTIONS TO GENDER DIFFERENCES

MYTH #2: Women behind bars should be treated in the same manner as men; gender should not be a factor in their treatment.

Prior to their interaction with incarcerated women, my students had a difficult time understanding that the structure for prison facilities for women is based upon that developed for men (models). In order for my students to gain insight into this situation, I arranged tours of jails/prisons at the local, state, and federal levels so that Pace students had the opportunity to tour both male and female facilities to see firsthand the individuals and facilities that they are studying. Students are under the false impression that men and women in prison are both equally violent, yet they learn that many women in prison have had ongoing cycles of victimization throughout their lives by relatives, friends, boyfriends, and husbands. Also, because these women have been regularly abused either physically or sexually, the trigger for their violence may have been rage. During our visits to the various facilities, presentations from various professionals who discussed the profile of incarcerated women validated my class lectures and thereby created a positive forum for learning which resulted in greater insight and further improved their analytical and critical thinking skills.

Additionally, I introduced students to the concept of the male model of incarceration, as discussed by Chesney-Lind and other researchers on this topic. In one of her articles, *Women in Prison: From Partial Justice to Vengeful Equity*, Chesney-Lind points out that following the male prison model for incarcerated women is not a viable solution:

This is the dark side of the equity or parity model of justice-one which emphasizes treating women offenders as though they were men, particularly when the outcome is punitive, in the name of equal justice (Chesney-Lind, p. 68).

Regarding Myth #2, when they work with incarcerated women, my students begin to understand that the nature of the women's crimes is for the most part non-violent. When the crime is of a violent nature, my students are able to process this information based on the theories related to the cycle of victimization. Also, more importantly, Pace students are able to see the human side to these women, who, in many instance, are victims of their environments. Additionally, by becoming aware of the offenses committed by the women with whom they interact, my students understood that incarcerated women have different needs than men and, they realize through their interaction with incarcerated women that treating them like their male counterparts is not only unfair but also not rational. For example, mothers bonding with their children who reside with them at the prison for their first year of life.

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

Overall, providing my students with a setting in which to apply both theoretical and conceptual ideas to the population that they are studying has been incredibly successful. The outcomes in my courses taught in this format, rather than through lecture alone, include:

- increased level of participation

- strengthened critical thinking skills both analytic and synthetic in understanding controversial issues and expressing personal opinions increased interest in criminology theories and related topics
- Additionally, the following are student evaluations of their interaction with incarcerated women, which speak to their experiences.

«This course has provided incredible insight on crime by allowing us the opportunity to put theory into action. «

«I feel that I have a stronger analytical foundation to draw upon when studying criminal behavior. «

«My interaction with incarcerated women was incredible. Before my work with them, I believed that they did not deserve a college education. What I realize now is that particular social forces, may have contributed to their incarceration.»

«The women that I worked with made understanding the nature of their crimes and circumstances more real. Additionally, having the chance to develop a rapport with these women gave me chance to see their human side.»

«This was one of my best college experiences. My major is Criminal Justice and this was my first direct experience working with prisoners. The opportunity has changed my life. I have learned to look at crime and criminal behavior from so many different perspectives. «

The amount of time required offering a course at a prison facility is significant. It involves obtaining prior approval from local, state, or federal agencies well in advance for student visits. Students are required to complete a great deal of paperwork and must be screened at either the state or federal level, a process that can sometimes take three months or longer. Also, special attention needs to be paid to format and scheduling to gain the most contact time with inmates. Such a course is best taught when it meets once a week for at least three or more hours and should be offered during the evening. Nevertheless, a course taught in this way not only provides university students with firsthand experience in their communities; it also provides inmates the opportunity to re-examine their own (legitimate or non-legitimate) perceptions about the way in which they perceive how society perceives them.

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Special thanks to Greg Uhrlass, a Pace University Human Services major, for his research assistance.

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