

Challenging the ‘Social Death’ of Incarcerated People Through Storytelling and Advocacy

Marietta Martinovic^{1*}, Dwayne Antojado², Diane Kahn³, Tarmi A’Vard⁴

¹ Associate Professor of Criminology and Justice Studies, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, Australia

² Project Leader, Beyond the Stone Walls Advisory Collective, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

³ Executive Director, Humans of San Quentin, USA

⁴ Lecturer in Criminology, La Trobe Law School, La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to understand the impact of incarceration and the potential to reduce its unintended residual effects through the initiatives of a non-profit humanitarian organisation called Humans of San Quentin (HoSQ). Using a critical methodological approach supported by established academic scholarship we argue that social death occurs as a consequence of suffering pains of imprisonment. The results also indicated that HoSQ creates a counter-current and to some degree ameliorates the pains of imprisonment by establishing a platform for incarcerated people to convey their stories. When incarcerated people express and explain their life histories, these assist in bringing clarity to painful experiences, and in their individual healing process. The community also gains a greater understanding of the complexity and multifacetedness of criminal justice interactions.

1. Incarceration and Social Death

Social Death Theory (SDT) has been widely utilized by scholars within sociology. Most notably, it was used by Bauman (1989) in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* to describe the roles governmental institutions played in the social segregation of Jewish people during the Second World War. However, the concept of “social death” does not necessarily confer literal death within this paradigm, “social death” can mean death in a number of contexts where individuals experience isolation, such as nursing homes and mental health facilities (Bauman, 1992; Joralemon, 2013; Steele et al., 2015; Williams, 2007). Since then, Stearns et al. (2017) have contextualised the idea of social death within the penological realm, arguing that incarcerated individuals also face social death. However, their experience of social death is arguably far more extreme (Sowle, 1995). Although people in aged-care facilities and mental

* Corresponding author E-mail address: marietta.martinovic@rmit.edu.au

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health institutions are isolated from the general community, they still enjoy some degree of mobility and freedom to interact with their family and/or friends. Prisons, however, strictly regulate the quantity and type of persons the incarcerated are allowed to have as visitors. Further, incarcerated people can be moved hastily to unfamiliar and distant geographical locations at any point during their sentence, thus making the maintenance of relationships with their family/friends more difficult (Boudin et al., 2014).

Incarcerated individuals are under the complete authority and care of the corrections system from the period in which they are apprehended to the day they are relinquished from sanction. In fact, prisoners (especially long-term) can be conceptualised as theoretically enslaved - this is particularly relevant in light of recent scholarship equating mass incarceration in the United States to its historical pattern of subjugation, domination and segregation of African-Americans (Alexander, 2012). There are some clear connections with the process of slavery in the early 1900s and the plight of incarcerated people in contemporary society. Slaves were removed from their original communities, and placed into foreign environments, dehumanised and often referred to by the ruling classes as “non-beings.” The work of Patterson (1982) is particularly topical with this regard. Historically, the legal status of slaves were only recognised through the existence of their “masters”. In the context of prisons, if “masters” were to be replaced with the “Prison Industrial Complex” then the same process of commodifying and devaluing the human identity of incarcerated people can be seen (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Patterson, 1982).

In order to understand the way in which “social death” is experienced by incarcerated people, it is also important to consider the historical development of punishment in the United Kingdom - the birthplace of many Western legal systems. The object of penology in England was to bring about a sense of “civil death” through punishment. Incarceration would stigmatise the offender, in the hope of deterring them from further criminal involvement. Indeed, a significant number of post-Enlightenment theories of punishment are centred around the idea that offenders have a notional “debt to society,” as a result of a “breach of contract” between the individual and the state (Beccaria, 1764/1819). As a result, offenders are made to “pay back” their notional debt by suffering a proportionate punishment.

However, there is evidence which shows that the legal system in the United Kingdom did more to humiliate the bodies of offenders, even after death, questioning Beccaria’s (1764/1819) idea that punishment is dispensed proportionally to the offence. For example, the Treason Act of 1351 ordered the destruction of the offender’s body after execution (Bellamy, 2004), not affording the offender’s kin the opportunity to bury them. In many Christian traditions, the burial of a corpse is a necessary precondition for resurrection of the body on the final day of judgment (Abbot, 1996). In other words, offenders were not given the opportunity to enter a peaceful afterlife, as the state necessitated the disposal of offenders' bodies.

In contemporary society, death as a punishment at the state’s disposal is no longer common, but relics of this past tradition still exist. For example, it is well documented that the medical care provided to many individuals experiencing incarceration is poor, and often subordinate to the standard of care offered in mainstream communities (see Martin et al., 1984; Niveau, 2007; Vaughn & Carroll, 2006). In addition, social death is not experienced when a person enters the carceral space, rather it is continually perpetuated and in fact enforced, exercised and even sanctioned by the penal estate whilst individuals are incarcerated.

Dramatisation, simplification, titillation, conventionalism, and novelty are common themes often cited in research concerning crime reporting (Surette, 2010). Misrepresentations are often made about the individuals who commit crimes within the news headline, especially when the media pursues sensationalist narratives which exacerbate personal characteristics to match the undertones and timbre of the news report. These representations often attempt to compel

consumers into seeing incarcerated individuals as being demons, nefarious by nature and incurable beyond repair. Consequently, public perceptions of offenders are tainted by these misconceptions, which result in offenders seen as unrelatable, sub-human subjects of intrigue and caution (Surette, 2010). Therefore, a central element of social death is the very perception that individuals in contact with the CJS are perceived by the border community as subordinate-human entities - this is the ultimate qualifier, irrespective of individual circumstances.

2. Utilising Sykes' (1958) Pains of Imprisonment to Explain Social Death

We argue that the typology created by Sykes (1958) in his book *The Society of Captives* is useful in delineating the causes of social death experienced by incarcerated people. Sykes (1958) posits that individuals who are incarcerated experience various "pains" which he referred to as the "pains of imprisonment." According to this framework, these pains can be segregated into five categories, namely, loss of liberty, lack of material possessions, loss of heterosexual relationships, loss of autonomy and reduced personal security. We acknowledge that the "pains of imprisonment" concept has evolved and has been significantly expanded since Sykes' (1958) introduction into the criminological scholarship. In fact, some 50 academic works have been published on the topic (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020). Despite this, Sykes (1958) created a useful framework for understanding the causation of social death. Hence, we have still decided to refer to Sykes' (1958) version of the "pains of imprisonment," as these are the deprivations repeatedly experienced by most prisoners over time and are the most difficult to handle (see Rocheleau, 2013). We argue that these "pains of imprisonment," in isolation, and in combination can create circumstances which elicit experiences of social death.

2.1. Loss of Liberty

The inability of incarcerated people to move freely within and beyond the confines of prison confiscates their liberty, both in a physical and non-physical sense. There is ample literature which argues the need for liberty to be upheld as an essential human right (e.g., Ewing, 2010). It allows individuals to remain connected to one another, it expands cultural and economic cooperation between entities, but most importantly it recognises the need for continuous and unhindered human connection. These are all taken-for-granted provisions experienced by individuals outside prison. The exclusionary methods and practices enforced by holding captive individuals within small and unnatural spaces signals a shift in the way society views incarcerated people, enforcing the ideology that they are subhuman, and more cogently that society needs protection from these demonised social artefacts. Despite the purpose of prisons to punish individuals for committing a crime against another or society, confining an individual's liberty derails their prospects for reform and reintegration (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020).

2.2. Lack of Material Possessions

There are multiple factors which mandate the regulation of material items in prisons. Most salient of these rationales is related to ensuring and upholding the security and safety of people in prisons - both staff and incarcerated individuals. However, personal items like clothing, technology and furniture are inherent aspects of individual identities. Materialistic items have symbolic meanings, creating a sense of identity and persona intrinsic with social life. The removal of these provisions takes away people's ability to pursue and create their own individual identities. It has been said by Dunn (1997) that identities are important to the function of society; these allow people to be part of groups and gain a sense of belonging in their social world. Unsurprisingly, the symbolic association with wearing a "prison jumpsuit/uniform," also forges a sense of "prisoner identity," often depicted in a negative light. The creation of these "prisoner identities" establishes certain personas and characteristics antithetic to the utility of prisoner rehabilitation and reformation (Smiley & Middlemass, 2016). The prisoner identity is often subjugated and associated with a cohort that is undeserving and detached from human values - as per social death outcomes for incarcerated people.

2.3. Loss of Heterosexual Relationships

The value of heterosexual relationships, especially marriage/partnership, has been a significant determinant of status in many cultures. For example, Marcus (2007) highlights the way associations of class, wealth and power are highly contingent on familial unions through marriage. The segregation of incarcerated people based on biological sex clearly impinges on their ability to pursue heterosexual relationships, but it also makes it difficult to maintain those relationships established before incarceration (DeClaire et al., 2019; Hairston, 1991). The deprivation of this cultural tradition for those incarcerated signals a form of subjugation which renders incarcerated people as ineligible to pursue heterosexual relationships. It is worthy to mention that this deprivation of self-expression for many people causes self-image and confidence issues.

2.4. Loss of Personal Autonomy

An obvious implication of incarceration is that individuals lose their ability to decide for themselves. The life of an incarcerated person is dictated by correctional policies, regulations and rules. They are instructed to wear certain clothes, are told when to eat, are physically limited in terms of freedom of movement, and most importantly, they are held captive beyond the view of society. Inability to engage with community outreach agencies also fails to provide incarcerated people with interventions which could help them achieve legitimate goals and motivations upon release (Chin and Dandurand, 2018). Further to the point, Haggerty & Bucerius (2020) expand on the impact of removing personal autonomy, impacting social connections through bureaucratic interventions with visitors, devaluing the incarcerated person and the visitor/s. This subjugation is tolerated because the plight of incarcerated people is blind from society, and narratives in mainstream discourse continuously perpetuate a cycle of blame against offenders, without interrogating social, economic and environmental factors which lead people to crime.

2.5. Reduced Personal Security

The utilitarian purpose of prison historically and contemporaneously is the eradication or reduction of crime by incapacitating those who commit crime. Interestingly, containing individuals rendered "dangerous" by society into often small and inhumane spaces poses risks

to these very individuals. There are implications documented by Sykes (1958) which make prison somewhat redundant through the process of “prisonisation,” whereby individuals adhere to underground subcultures that often valorise crime and deviance. Therefore, the strict containment of individuals perceived as “bad” or “malevolent” also results in them being exposed to risks which impinge upon their right to personal safety and security. Society’s ignorance to this fact is a clear sign of the low position incarcerated people hold within the broader social spectrum (Rocheleau, 2013).

A powerful and possible mechanism to ameliorate the process of social death experienced by incarcerated people could be to utilise restorative justice practices, which empower incarcerated individuals to see themselves beyond the stigma attached to criminal justice involvement. These processes would not only influence the individuals interacting with the criminal justice system (CJS) but also the society at-large, by involving them in the criminal justice process, and quashing misconceptions about the diversity and multifacetedness of identities. The HoSQ initiative provides such an opportunity.

3. ‘Humans of San Quentin’ Initiative

HoSQ, a humanitarian non-profit, was established in 2018. The aim of HoSQ is to give a voice to incarcerated people by illuminating vulnerable narratives from within prison walls. These narratives appear on the organisation’s website and social media channels, revealing the humanity of incarcerated people. Story by story, person by person, community awareness is raised and empathy is fostered. Hence, HoSQ becomes a collective place to share resources, beliefs and to promote restorative justice principles.

The HoSQ website combines a blog and a video podcast platform. It provides the community with access to interviews with incarcerated individuals and provides hundreds of written personal stories from people who are incarcerated. The use of blogs has grown exponentially over the last decade (see Dowling & Miller, 2019). Whilst the vast majority of blogs are essentially regularly updated websites and online journals, HoSQ is unique because it takes the audience behind the walls of the prison and brings out the voices of incarcerated people who are often silenced.

Under the section ‘Live from Inside’ on the HoSQ website there is a collection of video interviews. In one video interview a woman, Gheisel, is sitting in a room with a window behind her, her hair tasselled in a half-head ponytail and wearing a beige V-neck t-shirt. The only suggestion that she is in a carceral space is women walking by in blue tracksuits, synonymous with prison garb, and a prison officer who is visible in the background. During the interview Gheisel is asked, “has being in here made you value things more deeply?”- she responds (as per translation):

You value family. [Before incarceration] one might have said “Oh my son is driving me nuts”. But now I want to hear his cry. I want to hear “Mommy, Mommy, Mommy.”

In another story featured on the HoSQ website under the ‘Stories’ section, Antwann (who is incarcerated at San Quentin) writes:

My day started as any other. I was checking in on a patient when the manager asked if I would live in the medical unit. Nurses and medical personnel who cared for ill and dying inmates with COVID needed assistance. At first, I felt reluctant, this virus was still a mystery. Moments later, I was informed that my cousin and two of my close friends had tested positive. [My] decision to work in the medical unit was to face and confront my greatest fear, dying alone (see: <https://humansofsanquentin.org/stories>).

Gheisel and Antwann's stories connect to their audience through a common experience, missing loved ones and the COVID pandemic. This connection generates compassion and empathy just by hearing/reading the story (Zak, 2015; Zak, 2014). Storytelling is a therapeutic process through which the incarcerated person discusses and explains their life trajectories, often bringing clarity to painful memories and assisting in the healing of trauma; thus somewhat lessening the pains of imprisonment experienced (Abraham, 2019). It enables the listener to gain a greater understanding of the complexities faced by people in the CJS (Abraham, 2019; Adams et al., 2002; Lawrence & Paige, 2016). Through stories we connect on a human level, we can empathise and be compassionate for others who have experienced trauma and relate to one another on a fundamental level. This allows the community to also heal from the trauma and harm inflicted by others, as per restorative justice principles (Abraham, 2019; Dennis & Minor, 2019; Friskie, 2020). These outcomes thereby help those incarcerated somewhat resist the impacts of 'social death'.

4. Utilising Sykes' (1958) Pains of Imprisonment to Explain the HoSQ Initiatives

We again utilise Syke's (1958) Pains of Imprisonment typology as a heuristic device to illustrate and quantify the way in which the initiatives of HoSQ reduce the symptomatology associated with incarceration and subsequent social death.

4.1. Loss of Liberty

Most commonly occasioned with the loss of liberty is the loss of an individual's freedom of speech. In fact, it is common policy within the correctional realm to control the transaction of messages, text and information leaving and entering prison grounds. Indeed, there is rationale for these, including security, for example, to ensure the safety and security of incarcerated people as well as the protection of victims of crime; however, these come at the cost of the liberty for incarcerated people to speak freely as well as maintain unhindered social connection with the community. The initiatives established by the HoSQ redress these freedoms to people who are entangled in prison by giving incarcerated people the freedom to express themselves via digital platforms not otherwise available in prisons.

Moreover, incarceration is a mental journey which can be experienced as a form of entrapment within incarcerated people's own psyche. HoSQ ameliorates this by allowing narratives to transcend beyond the confines of imprisonment, connecting incarcerated people with the broader community, signaling a shift away from viewing the incarcerated population as othered and isolated, to one that is accepted and still very much part of the composition of society. Thereby incarcerated people's views, values, and experiences contribute to the plethora of stories which create symbolic societal narratives.

4.2. Lack of Material Possessions

By participating in HoSQ initiatives participants do not gain access to actual material possessions, but it could be argued that they gain symbolic possessions - feelings of value, care and empathy from the community. These possessions have greater personal meaning than those quantified by physical or material particulars. They elicit a sense of pride, instilling dignity, self-actualisation and self-worth among incarcerated people.

4.3. Loss of Heterosexual Relationships

While incarcerated people may not be able to freely exercise their liberty to pursue heterosexual relationships, HoSQ does provide a mechanism or a medium in which incarcerated people can

remain connected with their family, friends and networks through the organisation's readily available digital platforms (social media, website). These provide incarcerated people and their non-incarcerated counterparts a method of nurturing communication beyond the provisions ordinarily provided by the prison. Furthermore, as incarceration is often a source of embarrassment for families, they often choose not to disclose the plight of their loved ones or significant others in prison. HoSQ provides a counter-current to this by allowing people who are incarcerated to see the meaning and value of the incarcerated person's predicament. These narratives thereby shift family positions and perspectives, from shame to acceptance and nurturance, relieving relational strains often occasioned with the incarceration spell.

4.4. Loss of Personal Autonomy

Research shows that effective policy initiatives are those that are targeted with clear and enunciated goals and aspirations (Heckman & Garcia, 2017). Unfortunately, the mitigation of loss of personal autonomy is beyond the scope of HoSQ's initiatives. The position of HoSQ is to amplify voices, present counter-narratives, and ultimately humanise persons experiencing prison. That is not to say that the value of HoSQ is negated or reduced simply because it does not simultaneously alleviate all pains of imprisonment articulated by Syke's (1958), rather there is scope here for other initiatives to complement the work of HoSQ in specifically responding to the pain of loss of personal autonomy. However, it might be pertinent to highlight here that a central feature of the carceral archipelago, as articulated by Foucault (1975), as the "carceral archipelago," is to take away the very humanistic freedoms believed to be imperative and perpetuate the commission of crime and deviance. Hence, the very construct of prison makes this pain particularly difficult and complex to relieve, not unless there is fidelity to abolitionist perspectives argued within criminology (e.g., Brown & Schept, 2016).

4.5. Loss of Personal Security

Being a part of the HoSQ initiative enhances incarcerated people's personal security. There is relative consensus among scholars that camaraderie is often heightened, although frail and strained, in prison (Thaler et al., 2022). The way in which HoSQ encourages participants to "own their story" by broadcasting it to the initiative's various platforms, gains the respect of the 'men,' because there is a silent appreciation, and a level of understanding that it takes courage to be open and honest, and most importantly, vulnerable. A willingness to share personal narratives shows readiness to be transparent and not lie, building trust among peers. These are commodities within the prison environment, as it is a transient place where many people enter and exit, creating a social dynamic in which constant unfamiliarity is the norm. Therefore, being able to establish personal identities, and divulge experiences gains 'prison credibility,' and peers are more likely to engage with participants, improving prison's social conditions.

The cumulative effects of mitigating, ameliorating and responding to the pains of imprisonment, as conducted by HoSQ, has capacity to result in a reduction in the experiences of social death among incarcerated people. The initiative has shown promise in reducing isolation, despite the walls of prison remaining a constant feature of the lives of those participating in HoSQ initiatives. moreover, community members viewing these narratives on the organisation's platforms are provided with an opposing perspective on the identities of those incarcerated, showing humanity despite the dehumanised representations of incarcerated people in mainstream discourse. Simply stated, the reduction of isolation and the purveyance of positive identity and symbolic constructs reduce the pains experienced by incarcerated

people, which in turn revives them from being considered “socially dead,” to a collective seen as “intrinsic and contributing.”

5. Conclusion

This paper has indicated that the ways in which the correctional system treats incarcerated people and the mainstream media depicts them can be conceptualised by using Social Death Theory as an analytical framework. Social Death Theory describes the identity of incarcerated people as being subhuman or subordinate. These have visceral and long-lasting effects which impact upon the utilitarian objectives of the CJS. By using Sykes' (1958) framework on the pains of imprisonment, Social Death Theory's effects and implications for those incarcerated can be understood. It is postulated that social death is in fact an occurrence following the experience of Syke's (1958) pains of imprisonment. The key finding of this paper is that HoSQ ameliorates the social death of incarcerated people by creating a platform in which a counter-current is cultivated through storytelling, empowering them to see themselves beyond the stigma attached to their criminal justice involvement. Additionally, the community gains a greater understanding of the complexity involved with being imprisoned, re-creating a more humanised image of incarcerated people. Through this storytelling, both the community and incarcerated people collectively heal from the trauma and harm, as per restorative justice principles. More global initiatives which echo the objectives of HoSQ need to be established to drive discourses away from punitive rhetoric.

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