

# Prison subculture: a study on the adaptation of prisoners in Italian prisons

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**Abstract-** Through numerous theoretical contributions, this study addresses the delicate problem of prison culture; i.e., the subculture that develops among members of the prison community, but outside the institutional prison rules. The subculture aims to make the prisoner a characteristic member of the prison community, guiding him in his behaviour towards other prisoners and pushing him to total submission and obedience to those in power, all of which has repercussions on psychological balance and health. Acculturation to this internal culture involves symbols, gestures and forms of encrypted communication among inmates to prevent prison workers from understanding the contents.

**Index Terms-** restricted, prison, culture, detention, security.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Adaptation to prison models, such as subcultural structures, does not represent the primary objective of normalisation for every inmate because, as highlighted by Chantraine (2004), Irvin and Cressey (1964), there are different forms of adaptation to the prison environment such as those of the strategist, the tactician and the submissive. Through the analysis of numerous theoretical contributions, the aim of the study was, therefore, to delineate the likely "structural" profile of the so-called "restricted" - identified by Sellin (1938) as a social category in continuous interaction and by Lewin (1948) and Tajfel (1985) as a "group" - in an attempt to understand the dynamics of personal adaptation and the problems related to the prison reality (Clemmer, 1940), (Sykes, 1958), among others; and to identify the mechanisms of the birth of a subculture in the penitentiary system to establish, moreover, the why, the how and the when. According to some authors, this birth can be traced back to the presence of an initial normative void to regulate life in penitentiary institutions, subsequently, in part, filled by the extension of the benefits provided by the Gozzini Law (1986). The study has also deepened both the contents of the prison subculture, which, according to Rossi (1998), are based on strong and stable values in both space and time (such as respect and silence) as well as, forms, models of verbal and non-verbal communication, differentiated codes, symbols, and internal jargon. As is known, a prison produces within it a system of inflexible rules that become an internal subcultural form learned immediately upon entering the prison, at the start of the sentence to be served, thus inducing every individual in the prison to become a characteristic member of the penal community. The rules of the penitentiary subcultural model may be demanded by the inmates already present in that establishment, as a form of obedience, normalization, and exercise of power; or, such adhesion can be instinctive on the part of the "newcomer", to ensure their personal safety and to avoid contravening the rules of the system. All this is combined in a temporal phase of "adaptation" that Clemmer (1940) defines as the "process of imprisonment", divided into stages culminating in a more or less complete identification with the environment; that is, with the prisoner's adoption of the customs, culture, and codes of honour of the prison. In, *The Prison Community*, Clemmer (1940) analyses the socio-environmental and family factors that conditioned the personality of the offender before the crime was committed, in an attempt to identify the elements that influenced the offender's conduct. The investigation focuses on three aspects: 1) "broad social trends", i.e., the trends in society that indirectly influence the personality of individuals living in a given historical moment; 2) the link with the region of origin; 3) the intimate ties and social relationships that people have before being arrested. The latter, according to Clemmer (1940), are among the factors that most influence the personality of the offender, also largely affecting the process of adaptation to the prison culture. Sykes (1958), in *The Society of Captives*, analyses the great suffering to which prisoners are subjected (pains of imprisonment); despite the dating of the studies, the analysis can be considered of great relevance. The sufferings of the prisoner are divided into genres: 1) *loss of personal freedom*: the possibility to move and decide autonomously where to place oneself in space and, above all, the possibility of interweaving affective relationships with other subjects (or maintaining relationships already established) vanish. Even if there is no predisposition in this sense, and in free society this facet of freedom had not previously been given value, detention quickly forces one to realize how restrictive the lack of affective relationships is (both love and friendship); 2) *deprivation of daily goods and services*: much of what has now become an integral part of everyday life outside prison, inside is taken away or rationalized, even though the State, as guardian of the prisoners and administrator of their needs, guarantees the fulfilment of all the fundamental functions of the individual; 3) *deprivation of heterosexual relations*: this expression is intended to highlight the psychological pain caused by isolation from the other sex, which prevents the prisoner, whether a man or a woman, from feeling as such; 4) *deprivation of autonomy and independence*: the need to

establish rules that govern prison life irreparably clashes with the psychological dimension of the prisoner, who sees his life regulated in every detail, often in compliance with rules that either he does not recognize, or of which he does not understand the purpose. The outcome of this repression has, once again, repercussions in terms of self-perception: the detailed and often inexplicable provisions coming from the prison bureaucracy imply a profound threat to the prisoner's self-image, because they reduce him to the condition of weakness, impotence and dependence of a child; 5) *deprivation of personal security*: as is well known, the prisoner serves his sentence by sharing the period of imprisonment with individuals who, often, have been guilty of violent and aggressive conduct, and which generates in the cell mate a state of persistent alarm over his security. According to some scholars, "the prison" does not simply represent a physical place of detention, but a "disorganized community" that tends to power, dispensing at the same time (outside the institutional prison rules) knowledge. Prison jargon, for example, represents a sort of password that tends to exclude those who do not understand its meaning, while becoming, at the same time, a fundamental method of identifying those who belong to the system. This vocabulary is the means through which not only relations are established within the prison confines, but is also a useful tool for underlining the differing visions and attitudes towards external society and life.

## II. CULTURE AND SUBCULTURE: THEORETICAL NOTES

Tylor (1871) defines culture as "the environment that springs from human action, and therefore as a learned reality (not biological or innate) it is the result of human experience in constant evolution, as well as of both practical and (perhaps to a greater extent) symbolic learning". Culture thus ends up including within it knowledge, beliefs, art, morality, law, custom and all those other skills or habits that have been acquired by members of society. From an interactionist perspective (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969), culture is the product/result of the relationship between human beings, whose principles are transmitted in the task of socialization with other subjects belonging to the same group. The subjective identity represents, therefore, the result of a relationship with other individuals, scrutinizing their behaviour, in order to acquire a positive recognition of their own. Therefore, one cannot disregard the importance that interpersonal relationships have for the individual: certainly the definition of culture belongs to a social plan, but it is with equal certainty that the importance of the peculiarity of the individual is highlighted, which, as part of a whole, must be valued in all its dimensions. The definition that sociology and in particular Durkheim (1971) provides of the concept of culture can be traced back to four dimensions: 1) *values*: individuals conform to the dominant culture, as an expression of high ideals; 2) *legislation*: always the expression of the guiding principles of the subjects, characterized, however, in this sense, by the character of cogency; any violation is therefore punished through a sanction. The set of rules governing an organized society are characterized by different levels of formalization, starting from legal prescriptions to arrive at the rules governing daily action (Goffman (1969) defines the set of these rules as the "micro-ritual", that is, the set of relations and moral tensions proper to society), from which, however, very severe punishments can derive; 3) *cognitive*: the set of beliefs through which individuals perceive the world, society, and men; 4) *symbolic*: characterized by symbols that are valid for the entire social structure and cannot be changed or arbitrarily eliminated, since their meaning does not relate only to the profile of communication, but to the most deeply rooted profile of understanding and explaining events.

Parsons (1965) in his work *The Social System* defines culture as "made up of structural or ordered systems of symbols that are the objects of the orientation of action, of components internalized by the personality of individual agents and institutionalized models of social systems". The author, rather than focusing on the ordering character, focuses on the normative character of culture. It is defined as the set of models of behaviour that the community considers valid, on which, therefore, there is a social consensus and a sharing, and which the members of this society are obliged to respect and transmit to the next generation. According to Malinowski (1971) culture is, instead, essentially an instrumental apparatus with which man is placed in the best position to solve the specific problems that he finds in his environment in the course of satisfying his needs. Culture is a system of objects, activities and attitudes in which each part exists as a means to an end. It is a totality in which the various elements are interdependent. These activities, attitudes and objects are ordered around important and vital tasks in institutions such as family, clan, local community, tribe and organized groups of economic cooperation as well as political, legal and educational activity. From a dynamic point of view, that is, with regard to the type of activity, "culture can be analysed in a number of aspects, such as education, social control and economics, systems of knowledge, belief and morality and also in creative and artistic modes of expression". It is to the Chicago School that merit is due for first highlighting the importance of the interpretation the individual elaborates regarding the objective situation in which he finds himself: accordingly, there is an objective social reality that, however, is understood by each subject according to their own scheme, which, in a personal sense, differs from subject to subject and can, for any particular individual, change during the course of life. The different perceptions of contextual reality among individuals contributes to the need to verify the presence of different cultures within the dominant one: great importance in this matter is given to the work of Park, Burgess and McKenzie (1999), which provided a cultural image of the city, understood as a set of networks of social relations endowed with their own feelings, traditions, and history, within which there are the ghettos, considered cities within the city, whose respective groups are the result of a selective process of moral differentiation as well as physical distances that will form the basis for the concept of subculture. According to Parsons (1965), culture also includes a normative aspect within it, since it can be defined as the set of models of behaviour considered positive by society (on which, that is, a consensus has been formed) capable of giving meaning to the behaviour of individuals. Even if starting from different assumptions, both Park et al. (1999) and Parsons (1987) came to highlight how one of the possible factors of inhomogeneity and crisis of culture could be the birth within of a different and autonomous micro culture. An important contribution to the degree and potential for interaction within a society of its members comes from research by Merton (1959), which underlines the variability of the social system in terms of being functional or dysfunctional.

a) *Subculture in groups*

The presence (in a culture) of differentiated subcultural forms very often assumes the function of subverting or compromising the stability of the dominant culture. The subculture, as such, is not typical of the whole collectively but only a part of it, generally identified by the term "group"; that is, "a set of individuals in social interaction relationships that share a common purpose and a corpus of norms" (Sellin, 1938). Within the prison institution, prisoners represent a social category organized in groups: the values at the basis of prison life are almost uniform in large geographical areas and are the result of the interaction between the inmates themselves. According to Lewin (1948) groups can be differentiated according to certain properties, variously present within each of them: a) the degree of commitment required of each member of the group: with this formula the intention is to indicate the impact of the rules of the group on the life of the individuals, with the aim of determining their entire existence or only certain aspects (a group of inmates, according to this parameter, can be classified as totalitarian, in the sense that all aspects of life, according to experience, are regulated and conditioned by the rules of the group itself); b) the duration of belonging to the group when they are able to influence its structure and hierarchical composition. A group of inmates, from this point of view, has peculiar characteristics, since the subculture that characterizes them develops only within the prison institutions: the values that are the basis of it are transmitted among those who take turns in prison, so that the power relations change quite rapidly depending on the composition of the group; c) exclusivity, represented by the openness or closure of the group: in the case of prisoners, a group can be defined as closed in the absence of specific requirements that differentiate the subject from free society and its rules; d) the degree of social differentiation: an expression of the different social roles that individuals play within the culture of reference. Bales (1950), after having studied small groups, came to state that it is possible to draw a profile of the existing roles within the group itself: 1) the leader, able to influence the other subjects of the group, of taking initiatives and having privileged access to the goods and services pursued by the group, and capable of resolving conflicts between members and giving orders, so that the group continues to exist and comes as close as possible to the set goal; 2) the newcomer, who, in order to prove his suitability to enter the group, assumes a passive attitude, of absolute conformity to the requests of the leader and other members of the group; 3) the degree of cohesion of the members of the group itself; 4) the degree of compliance with the rules of the group and, consequently, the threshold of tolerance of deviant behaviour (the group of inmates, in this regard, appears to be very strict, not tolerating in an absolute sense behaviour that differs from that prescribed by the values of the group itself); 5) the degree of visibility of the rules and functioning of the roles; 6) the autonomy and independence of the group from other groups and from the institutions that make up the same society (the group of prisoners, from this point of view, tends to be in absolute opposition to the values of free society, creating a fracture that is difficult to heal); 7) the degree of stability; 8) the importance that the society attributes to the group itself and the power it holds. Starting from the concept of modern societies of Durkheim (1971), whose main characteristic is differentiation and inhomogeneity with regard to religion, language, race, social class, generations, politics and countless other elements, Mead (1934) divided the groups into two types: on the one hand, abstract social groups, which operate only indirectly as a group (for example, creditors); and on the other, concrete social groups, in which the members relate to each other. The existence of factors that strengthen some relationships and, at the same time, sever others, favours the formation of subgroups, which are often governed by values different to those of the paradigmatic group, which they oppose, trying not to be influenced by them. From a modern point of view, one thinks of the case of prisoners: the group, which is substantially homogeneous, can, instead, enclose within itself differentiated pockets constituted, for example, by foreigners and those belonging to certain sectors of criminality; their presence renders the same group of prisoners fragmentary and feeds a relationship of strength which could unhinge the existing equilibrium and hierarchies. As is well known, the term subculture was coined around the 1940s by the exponents of the Chicago School, to indicate its subordination to the dominant culture and accentuating, with the prefix sub, the aspect of understanding within a whole (the subculture, in fact, by definition, does not completely sever the ties with the dominant culture of those who are part of it). According to Arnold (1970), each group is endowed with its own subculture that can act both as an antagonist to the dominant culture, as a factor of innovation within the latter, and, finally, as an element of challenge towards its supremacy. The subculture of a group is recognized as such both by the group itself and by others, thus clearly showing a form of deviance from the culture; moreover, in most cases, groups endowed with their own subculture are based on lasting relationships that present profiles of cohesion: individuals learn its values from the subjects who already share them and, through this passage of information, the uniformity of lifestyle that makes the group easily identifiable is developed. In order to explain the phenomenon it is necessary to refer to the emulative process, either limited to certain areas of the lives of individuals, or extended to all aspects of existence, pushing, for example, the newcomer (prisoner) to identify with the other members of the group to the point where he loses his individual characteristics.

b) *The processes of prison "acculturation"*

The modern concept of acculturation is closely linked to the presence and coexistence of numerous groups that transmit their dominant culture to their affiliates (Kalica, Santorso, 2018). It should be noted if the clash is intentional or forced, irreconcilable elements and values will coexist: it should also be pointed out that the position taken by a controlled group is not that of perceiving itself as a minority, but, on the contrary, it aims to manifest and claim its independence and vigour with respect to the dominant culture and with respect to the cultures of the other groups, while, for the *dominant culture*, the presence of other cultures is configured as an element of disturbance and contradiction: the dominant culture will in fact tend to relate to such deviations as if they were normal factors connected to its existence (Bormioli, 2017). A typical example of this aspect is *the prison environment*, in which prisoners who do not identify with the institution's own values claim their autonomy and identity, circumventing as much as possible the rules of the prison administration (Ciambriello, 2020). According to Tajfel (1985), once one has become part of a group, the abandonment of the latter

presents numerous critical profiles, especially with regard to the psychological aspect: for a long while, exit from the group, although desired, leads the subject to live in an uncertain way, pushing him to carry out hostile actions towards the environment left behind, even if the latter still falls within his moral dimension. A similar survey could be conducted with regard to the behaviour of the group towards the former affiliate, who will perceive him in a worse light than subjects who had never been part of the group. It has been found that exit from a group can be determined through comparison of two orders of variables: internal, represented by the difficulty of adherence to values, and external, that is, referring to relations with other groups if the clash is intentional or forced, irreconcilable elements and values will coexist: it should also be pointed out that the position taken by a controlled group is not that of perceiving itself as a minority, but, on the contrary, it aims to manifest and claim its independence and vigour with respect to the dominant culture and with respect to the cultures of the other groups, while, for the *dominant culture*, the presence of other cultures is configured as an element of disturbance and contradiction: the dominant culture will in fact tend to relate to such deviations as if they were normal factors connected to its existence (Natoli, 2020). A typical example of this aspect is *the prison environment*, in which prisoners who do not identify with the institution's own values claim their autonomy and identity, circumventing as much as possible the rules of the prison administration. According to Tajfel (1985), once one has become part of a group, the abandonment of the latter presents numerous critical profiles, especially with regard to the psychological aspect: for a long while, exit from the group, although desired, leads the subject to live in an uncertain way, pushing him to carry out hostile actions towards the environment left behind, even if the latter still falls within his moral dimension. A similar survey could be conducted with regard to the behaviour of the group towards the former affiliate, who will perceive him in a worse light than subjects who had never been part of the group. It has been found that exit from a group can be determined through comparison of two orders of variables: internal, represented by the difficulty of adherence to values, and external, that is, referring to relations with other groups (Borghini, Pastore, 2020).

### III. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRISON SUBCULTURE AND PRISON CONDITIONS: CRITICALITY PROFILES

From a temporal point of view, it is very difficult to establish when the prison subculture first arose, even if the first rudimentary forms, according to some theorists, may refer to an original regulatory void with regard to the management of prisoners and life in prisons. As is known, the existence of laws presupposes the existence of someone who enforces them: strong subjects completely homologated by the rules themselves (Gonnella, 2014). It does not matter whether or not, before entering prison, the person exercises this power in their own context: what matters is the homologation to the subculture once you become a prisoner, and the loyalty and respect that you show to it within the prison. Certainly, for any newly arrived prisoner, it will be easy to identify which individuals hold power (Telesca, 2019). The way they pose themselves, their language, and the way other prisoners relate to them immediately puts them on a different level to the others. In any non-utopian context there will always be weak and strong and before the advent of subculture, the discriminant was certainly to be found in physical prowess and psychological strength. In Italy, as is well known, counter to the presence of the prison subculture there was an extension of benefits as provided by the Gozzini Law (No. 663, 1986), under which each prisoner, in order to obtain as soon as possible the benefits that allow release from prison, is led to look after himself, seeking not to commit actions that could compromise his path with a view to reintegration (Bianchi, 2017). Consequently, there is little room left for collective claim and hegemony over others, factors undoubtedly negatively evaluated by those managing such a system. The individualistic stance, even though it has put a brake on the proliferation of solidarity among prisoners, has not, however, *overcome* the subculture, which has evolved and adapted to the prescriptions of the law. It has, in fact, made itself appear less evident in the eyes of prison staff, while continuing to exercise its supremacy (Buffa, 2019). The prison subculture, according to Rossi (1983) is based on strong and rather stable values, both in space and time. The main rules of the subculture are *respect* and *silence*. From these originate the principles governing community life in prison, which can be divided into *prescribed* and *proscribed*. The first group includes those concerning everyday life (good manners, hygiene, rules to be observed with regard to meals and waking, rules governing common spaces, in particular the hours out in the open air). The second group includes all the prohibitions that must guide prison behaviour (relations with prison staff, relations among prisoners and use of language). In general, the penalties for violations of the prescribed rules are lighter in view of their lower value. According to Thomas's Theorem (1928) "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"; that is, the individual acts according to the environment he perceives and the situation he has to face. He can define every situation in social life through the mediation of his preliminary attitudes that inform him about this environment and allow him to interpret it. The environment in which each subject finds himself therefore conditions him, both for how it is objectively structured and, perhaps above all, for the attitude of the individual himself with respect to the context. Usually, the prison is perceived by those who find themselves within it as a place where everything is decided by the Institution, where the prospects of life are limited and within which everyone is deprived of their autonomy and subjectivity. Prison as such leads to side effects that deconstruct the *recluse's* personality, causing it to regress to a stage of infantilism (always told what to do on every occasion), and capable of depersonalising him. Modern psychology has made important contributions to the processes of radical change to the self during detention, with significant repercussions when the prisoner, after serving his sentence, returns to the social space, reliving its rules. The reaction that follows such a strong restriction on the personality of each individual can be found, at the group level, in the construction of a new and different social reality, which allows the individuality of each to continue to exist (Bruni, 2014). Prisoners tend not to accept the rules and regulations of the Penitentiary Institution and seek refuge in the prison subculture, where, instead, there is greater flexibility. Over time, however, they realize that the subculture is not able to offer them a valid model of prison life and they delude themselves that they are serving their sentence with the same deviant rules that characterized their life before entering prison (Capparella, 2019). According to Resta (1992) there are two paths that can be taken in this mechanism of detachment from the Institution (understood as a mere

dispenser of rules) and rise of self-awareness: a) *the prisoner*, once he or she understands (but hardly shares) the purpose of the Prison Administration, while suffering its harshest and most dehumanizing effects, understands the value and importance of the proposals made to him and sees, in these, the possibility of building, already whilst in prison, the foundations for a better life once he is released. In this case, the reality that the prisoner will try to build will be represented by a maximum and constant commitment in work, study, a hobby, reading, or any activity that increases his self-esteem; b) *the prisoner* almost never shares the complex system of rules governing Prison Institutes, since to counteract "the enemy, the jailer", he carves out a world that brings him closer to the other prisoners, making him feel he is not alone. Only by creating a group identity do prisoners who find themselves aligned with these reflections continue to perceive themselves as their own masters (rightly or wrongly). According to Esposito (2016) the prison subculture can therefore be defined as the set of attitudes, customs, values, behaviours and representations that contribute to realizing the reality in which prison social actors live and operate. The prisoner's culture soon becomes an understandable defence reaction, both from the Prison Institution and from society. This protective mechanism arises from the prisoner's willingness to blame the society that rejected him. One of the repercussions of this attitude is that he will not carry out a personal analysis in search of an understanding of his crime (which usually results in accepting his guilt and assuming responsibility). The reaction quickly turns into opposition and self-exclusion from that social fabric which, in turn, has not given that individual another chance. The first manifestation of this opposition is represented by indifference to the culture of society, which he seeks through all means to oppose. The intolerance towards the outside world leads him to justify (at least a posteriori) the crime he has committed, deciding to rebel and make society itself pay dearly for the treatment he is suffering during detention by committing new crimes as soon as this again becomes possible. The alternative power imposed by the subculture on the members who are part of it pushes them to actions of opposition to the institution, justified by the subculture itself, which legitimises the use of violence and discrimination. According to recent studies, many of the rules of the subculture disappear as soon as the prisoner leaves prison: "they are born behind bars and remain there". If, therefore, the subculture of the prisoners is perceived in this way, it is easy to understand how much its presence influences social recovery, often making it difficult. Even the mitigated harshness of the detention, if not supported by the predisposition of instruments that oppose this cultural structure, does not seem sufficient to calm the hostility and produce fruits (Bettiol, 1964).

#### IV. THE DETAINEE AND THE INTRAMURAL CODE

Prisoners live in a condition of severe deprivation and suffering, which they may remedy by applying the prisoner's code; that is, a set of unwritten rules and conventional values summed up in the so-called "opposition solidarity" of prisoners towards the institution. According to Clemmer (1940), the rules of this code establish the primary form of internal regulation among the detained population. Sykes and Messinger (1960) analysed this detailed and informal regulation, highlighting its most important aspects, including: loyalty among inmates, refusal to fraternize with representatives of the institution, silence, and the ability to maintain control without harming oneself or other inmates. Transmitted mainly through example and learned from experience, the prisoner's code is the primary instrument of integration within the prison community. Any failure to comply with the strict principles of the code of honour carries with it a number of penalties ranging from minor abuse to actual physical violence, sometimes so severe that it is necessary to isolate the prisoner. Sykes (1997) is confident in stating that *the prisoner's code* allows the individual to develop a new status within the prison, capable of providing him or her with a solid frame of reference for the interpretation of his or her situation. As the normal symbols of social status have been completely dismantled, new hierarchies with new symbols emerge within the prison. The prisoners' defensive responses to the prison environment result in different models of adaptation and survival that create more than one prison subculture. In this sense, Irwin and Cressey (1964) have outlined three major schemes of reference, to which the attitudes of prisoners can be traced:

1. *Criminal subculture*: adopted by habitual outlaws, those for whom going to prison represents a necessary stage in their deviant career. To adhere to the criminal subculture means to mark your stay in prison with the strict standards dictated by the unwritten rules of the captive population, directing your behaviour towards absolute secrecy, loyalty to comrades and cold bloodedness;
2. *Detention subculture*: this is the case for those who exploit everyday life in prison to maximize the benefits that can be granted to them. It is the strategic and utilitarian attitude of those who do not fully adhere to the dogmas of the prison population;
3. *Legitimate subculture*: Prisoners falling into this category totally reject informal internal regulation, also avoiding utilitarian behaviour. This is the case for those who occasionally violate the law, even though they are far from the usual pattern of deviance.

This subdivision is reinforced considerably by the general theoretical approach of Cressey (1964) who, in his studies on delinquent behaviour, has always supported the "import model", by virtue of which the experience of individual deviants assumes considerable importance. He also argues that the prisoner's code is in fact strongly based on external criminal careers: the hierarchical groups that form within the prison walls depend on the relevance of external delinquent gangs. In this sense, the struggles between external gangs are reproduced in prison, according to the American "street rules". The intramural leaderships do not arise from the forced cohabitation, but depend on the external hierarchies. Also, Chantraine (2000) proposes a classification of the forms of adaptation to the prison context, speaking of: a) the *strategist attitude*, which concerns inmates who take part in prison activities, becoming a point of

reference between inmates and the Prison Administration with the sole purpose of obtaining advantages; b) the *tactical attitude*, a situation in which the prisoner's conduct is geared towards normal cohabitation with prison officers and other inmates; c) the *submissive attitude* that, as the term itself indicates, involves subjection/prostration on the part of certain inmates, who scrupulously observe the rules of the Prison Institution and the impositions of other inmates. Here too, prison careers are certainly influenced by the experiences of the subjects prior to incarceration: professional offenders are more inclined to adopt strategies aimed at manipulating prisoners and officers in charge of control, while those who are not professional or habitual offenders maintain sometimes exemplary intramural conduct. According to Clemmer (1940), with changes over time to the social composition of the detained population, it is likely there will be a revision of the prisoner's code. Although internal codes of honour continue to be handed down among criminal generations, the criteria on which to build prison hierarchies have been progressively modified by the ethnicization of prisons Serra (1998). Forms of altruism and solidarity, sometimes motivated more by convenience than by sentiment, often arise in the different ethnic groups in order to consolidate a collective identity. However, on many occasions, the urgency of facing the severe suffering of life as a prisoner makes it possible to overcome the rigidity of identity. At the same time, the racist and xenophobic approaches frequent in free society are reinforced within the walls of prison institutions, justified by the difficulty of living forcibly among people with divergent customs and habits.

## V. SYMBOLS AND COMMUNICATION IN PRISONS

### a) *Internal and external communication*

Interpreting the prison as a real social system endowed with a peculiar internal culture, it becomes fundamental to analyse the modes of communication that emerge among the members of this closed community, both from a linguistic and extra-linguistic point of view, dwelling on the influences that the forms of communication have on vertical and horizontal relationships. The interruption of contact with the outside world corresponds to the atrophy of previous emotional ties, with consequent hypertrophy of the intramural interpersonal relations Sarzotti (2004). At a general level, communication must be broken down into: *communication within the prison*, which takes place according to three circuits of prisoner- prisoner, prisoner-staff and staff-staff; and *communication from the prison towards the outside*, directed at links with civil society as well as the judicial, political, administrative and legislative world. Notwithstanding this brief differentiation, it is important to underline the extent to which external communication is limited by bureaucratic quibbles and the stigmatizing perception of the common understanding towards penal institutions (Pirè, 2014).

### b) *Intramural verbal communication*

When analysing the internal communication systems, it is useful to distinguish between: *horizontal communications*, which can be traced back to the relations among prisoners, such that the newcomer, for example, will tend to relate to his peers, for instance, by forging links with subjects similar to himself; *vertical communications*, being those established between prisoners and officers, but also between prisoners belonging to different hierarchical levels (Benucci, Grosso, 2017). Referring to this last aspect it is important to underline how the inmates create a group identity inside the prisons, giving life to an informal organization endowed with an obscure language and an authentic code of honour Santaloni (1981). The vocabulary used has a specific glossary of words that is difficult to interpret except by insiders.

## VI. THE TYPES OF PRISON COMMUNICATION AMONG MEMBERS OF CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS

### a) *Intramural information*

In the case of organised crime, the exchange of intramural information takes on unique characteristics, given the excellent infiltration capacity of these criminal organisations (La Piana, 2010). The considerable leverage of mafia associations inside prisons translates into a coercive and intimidating power that operates on two dimensions (Lo Verso, 2008): 1) *at an individual level*, where the individual mafia inmate, by virtue of the considerable weight of the association to which he belongs, is able to take advantage of the informal internal networks in order to mitigate the discomforts associated with imprisonment. Criminals of this type are able to exploit negotiations to their advantage and, often instilling terror in the custodial staff, receive benefits and privileges that allow them to raise their quality of life compared to the other inmates; 2) *at a managerial level*, where members of organized crime are particularly skilful in the management of illicit activities within the Prison Institute. At the same time, hierarchies, conflicts and intergroup alliances are often marked by the importance of external criminal careers (Gebbia, 1983). Exponents of petty crime, without hitherto belonging to the vast underworld, become possible recruits for the mafia, as a way of strengthening the power they enjoy within the prison. The man of honour, (Ladeluca, 2010) in fact, makes a continuous selection from among the prisoners, aimed at creating a circle that can offer him protection, reliability and small favours. What strengthens the communicative capacity of these criminal organizations is the fact that, for these associations, there is no clear separation from the external community, the concept on which the logic of imprisonment is based. The mafia systems keep alive the contacts between imprisoned members and members on the loose, especially if the penal institution is located in areas where organized crime holds sway (Ciconte, Forgione, Sales, 2016).

### b) *Non-verbal communication*

The prison shapes the personality of prisoners, homologating them according to a series of rules and prohibitions. In an environment subject to constant surveillance, symbolic and indirect communication becomes the best tactic for the exchange of information, avoiding the risk of arousing suspicion. Sometimes prisoners formulate trivial, apparently harmless sentences to avoid being understood by prison officers, but often minimal gestures, looks or movements are sufficient to transmit important news or make decisions (Mastronardi, 2016). The Penitentiary Institution is endowed with strict regulations, whose transgressions, even if only verbal, can involve heavy penalties. In this scenario, non-verbal communication becomes an excellent ploy to express contents that in their linguistic manifestation would be completely hindered. The main signals adopted by the prisoners are: particular accents and pronunciations, specific gestures, ingeniously oriented musical tastes, ways of doing and dressing, and use of certain objects such as rings, necklaces or hats (Ghiandelli, 2019). All these behaviours allow the inmate to establish interpersonal relationships that would otherwise be forbidden, to express their emotions, and, at times, to express the need for aggression that often burns in the prisoner's soul in the absence a chance to let off steam. The period of detention affects the predisposition to adopt this type of language, whereby those with longer sentences are more likely to assimilate these communicative strategies, which are mostly used in peer relations. Non-verbal communication, in fact, appears to have a significantly lower weight between the detained population and prison officers. Once again it is possible to ascertain how what is latent, in reality exerts an enormous weight on daily prison life. Facial mimics, symbols and bodily signals allow prison culture to expand and consolidate, maintaining the balance of the facade unchanged (Serra, 2002).

### c) *The symbolism of tattoos*

Tattooing has been popular in the past in prisons. Today, prisoners continue this practice, though the gesture takes on a completely different value in view of its now fashionable status in free society (Camphausen, 1999). The meaning given to the symbols engraved once upon a time was different: inmates would mark their skin with figures that reaffirmed the importance of family affection or belonging to a clan, a geographical area, or a religious belief. For some prisoners the engraving was a form of self-harm, aimed at procuring physical pain in such a way as to reduce the pain arising from detention (Gnocchi Ruscone, 2006). The tools used were mainly the straw of a ballpoint pen, the motor of an old tape recorder and a sewing needle. The ink was obtained by melting razor blades and mixing everything with a few drops of bath foam. Today, the need to protect one's identity remains alive among prisoners: for this reason, tattoos, today as then, represent in fact a defence of the personality, crushed by the passing of the days in detention (Castellani, 2014). Since these indelible signs correspond to symbols, drawings and figures, it is possible to interpret this trend as a type of *non-verbal communication* (The most frequently reported drawings are: *the butterfly*, as a symbol of freedom; *the cross or coffin*, which means "better dead than infamous"; *the woman*, in honour of a wife or girlfriend; *the rose, the sphinx or the lion*, connected to the clans of the underworld; *the ace of clubs* to indicate the boss, the leader to bow down and pay respect to; *the dots*, near the eye to indicate "I see nothing" or the mouth in the case of "I don't talk". Also of importance are the five points of the underworld, on the back of the hand: the four external points indicate the walls of the cell and the central point the prisoner, to underline the condition of imprisonment. Furthermore, prisoner tattoos are often related to the subculture of drug addicts. Some research has highlighted the tendency of habitual cannabis users to tattoo themselves with oriental-inspired symbols, such as the Tao "yin-yang", the OM or the peace sign. In contrast, the favourite figures of hard drug users seem to be knives, swords, the face of Christ and erotic images such as a woman's buttocks or pubis. The tendency of serious drug addicts to reproduce images invoking violence and aggressiveness could be associated with the sense of omnipotence resulting from manic drug abuse (Maglie, 2020).

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

To understand the meaning of "prison life" it is necessary to look at each prison institution as a *society within society*. Individuals locked up together for long stretches of time give life to a social micro-system capable of developing - within the limits of the social order imposed by the institution - its own organization, its own subculture, and its own language. The "inmates" formally belong to this social micro-system, which is capable of developing its own set of unwritten rules (verbal, nonverbal, symbolic), shared by all and addressed to all. In prison, respect and adaptation to extra-penitentiary rules represent a sort of imposition, which is concretized in a continuous "behaviour" that the prisoner must maintain towards those who are stronger, as if to say "I do not offend those considered superior by the community". In practical terms it means "obedience". Another important "intra-mural" value is represented by the *omertà*, or code of silence, identified as an understanding that binds the members of the underworld to mutual protection, silencing or masking any clue or evidence useful for identifying culprits. Usually a prisoner is "omertoso" - that is, silent - out of fear, solidarity, defence of personal interests, and so on. In the southern culture it is a fundamental value as it implies submission to the rules of the various mafia organizations. Many scholars maintain that the prison subculture finds its highest expression in the "informal code of conduct", functional to the satisfaction of immediate needs and to impose an alternative power to that exercised by the institution so as to affirm a cultural identity opposed to it. This code can become a means to legitimize violence and discrimination. It should also be pointed out that for those who do not belong to the world of delinquency or organized crime, coming into contact with "a prison subculture" during the period of detention exposes them to the so-called "identity of conversion," which can also represent a distance from the previous public identity, a dissociation from previously acquired ethical, moral, political, religious or ideological beliefs. It is a frequent response in extreme situations, causing the dissociated part to organize around a new core of beliefs: the subject assumes as his own the judgement of the environment, becoming used to living in a way that is not his own, or rather to survive a system that has

absorbed him and of which he cannot but help be a part. This ideological revolution and the new lifestyle could lead to illnesses of psychological interest, in some cases psychiatric, or to real somatizations.

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