



Research paper

Dealing food: Female drug users' narratives about food in a prison place and implications for their health

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ABSTRACT

Background: Prison is a major “place” for drug users in the US, yet remarkably little is known about the lived experience of incarceration. More information about prison life is needed to improve health outcomes for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people.

Methods: Thirty (30) formerly incarcerated women were interviewed about prison food. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Qualitative data analysis software was used to code and organize the data using thematic analysis.

Results: As described in these participants' narratives, prison food systems contributed to the construction of boundaries that distinguished the prison place from places and life outside the institution's walls. Participants also described boundaries within the prison that resulted in a patchwork of interior places, each with their own unique structure, meaning, and food system. These places, constructed by physical location, movement, and power, or lack thereof, included various micro-geographies that further defined women's individual prison experience. The boundaries that separated these places were not fixed: Women shifted and diminished internal and external borders by resisting food policies and reproducing their outside lives inside.

Conclusion: These findings call for public policy officials and prison administrators to reexamine the prison place in order to facilitate healthier eating behaviors and lay the groundwork for more positive communication between inmates and correctional staff and administration. More research is needed to measure how these types of changes to the prison food environment impact nutritional, mental health, substance abuse, and criminal justice outcomes.

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Introduction

In this paper, we discuss the concept of place and explore how female drug users' experiences in a prison place may affect their health. Specifically, we analyze women's narratives about food in prison to document and describe how the prison place shapes access to food and eating behavior and how food and eating behavior construct the prison experience.

Place, power, and structure

Place is an evolving concept that has been defined as a space to which meaning and experience have been attached (Cresswell, 2004). Place is constructed and reconstructed by the struggles for power enacted by its inhabitants. This is an iterative process: “Places are never finished but produced through the reiteration

of practices - the repetition of seeming mundane activities on a daily basis” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 82). Consensus about the boundaries of place is contested, and may not be dictated by bricks and mortar. For example, theory about the distributional geographies of incarceration suggests that prison places extend beyond facility walls to surrounding communities (Moran, 2013). In this sense, place is constructed not only by physical structures but also by cultural and social expectations that “are constantly being performed” (Parr, 2000, p. 37). The meanings assigned to place are created through processes of inclusion and exclusion; what is left out or outside defines and describes the place as much as what is inside. Further, micro-geographies within a place construct individual internal spaces that are heterogeneous (Parr, 2000).

The prison place

The emerging field of carceral geography seeks to understand, among other things, “the nature of carceral spaces and the experiences within them” by examining how the regulation of prison space and the movement of people through these spaces make

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place (Moran, 2013, p. 176). Indeed, construction of the prison place includes much more than high walls and barbed wire. This place is produced by legal and administrative policy and the negotiations and deliberations among the elected officials, community, staff, and inmates who create and enact these policies. In addition, the prison place has a particular transitory quality as inmates come to this space for various amounts of time, leave, and then often return, even though it is usually not their intention at the time of departure to come back. Meanwhile, staff move through the prison on a regular and anticipated schedule, spending more time inside the prison than the inmates who the facility was built to confine. The experiences, beliefs, and identity of both the people who move through the prison and those who never set foot inside the building impact how the place is experienced and performed.

Prison as a place for female drug users

Since the 1970s, prison has been a major place for drug users in the US (Mauer, 1999). The US has the highest per capita rate of incarceration in the world with over two million people behind bars, 7% of whom are women (Carson & Sabol, 2012; International Prison Centre for Prison Studies, 2011). Eighty-five percent (85%) of US prisoners have a history of substance use or addiction (CASA, 2010). This massive incarceration of drug users has come at tremendous human and fiscal cost. For prisoners, who are disproportionately poor and non-White, the experience of incarceration can exacerbate problems of health, under-education, and unemployment (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002; Mauer & King, 2007; Travis & Waul, 2003). Further, their removal from communities weakens the family networks and social fabric of these neighborhoods (Clear, 2007). Financially, the states spend approximately \$50 billion per year on corrections, on average, 2.5% of their total budgets (Kyckelhahn, 2012).

What is (un)known about prison

In spite of this significant, long-term investment in prisons, remarkably little is known about the lived experience of incarceration. Scientific attempts to understand what, if anything, about prison “works” have focused research on the evaluation of specific interventions and long-term trends. Women’s health-related prison research, for example, focuses on prevalence of disease (especially HIV, substance abuse and obstetrical care) and behavioral and medical interventions to improve health outcomes (e.g. Alleyne, 2007; Freudenberg, 2001; Grella & Rodriguez, 2011; Marshall, 2010; Springer, 2010; Staton-Tindall et al., 2011; Wingood, 2003). Similarly, existing literature about prison food and nutrition offers guidance on how to comply with nutritional standards, legal requirements, and budgetary and security issues (e.g. Brisman, 2008; Cray, 2001; Edwards, Hartwell, Reeve, & Schafheitle, 2007; Foster, 2006; Herbert, Plugge, Foster, & Doll, 2012; Stein, 2000; Tammam, Gillam, Gesch, & Stein, 2012; Wakeen, 2008), and describes interventions to improve prisoner diets and help inmates lose weight (Eves & Gesch, 2003; Khavjou et al., 2007; Nikolas, 2000; Robinson, Haupt-Hoffman, Stewart, Schneider, Hamm, & Garrison, 2006).

In this pursuit of empirical outcomes, descriptive social science research about what life in contemporary US prison systems actually entails has been lost (Simon, 2000). Today’s prison institutions have been described as a ‘black box’ because so little is known about “how individuals feel and act while incarcerated [and how the experience] may affect their attitudes and behaviors after release” (Visher & O’Connell, 2012, p. 386). As a result of the lack of information about this place, all prisoners, and especially female prisoners, experience a “hyperinvisibility” at the intersection of criminal justice status, gender, race and socio-economic class (Davis, 1998, p.

xi). Research about prison health overlooks the lived experience of incarceration and how this prison place affects health. Given the disproportionate representation of drug users among the prison population, more information is needed about this place in order to effectively respond to the health needs of drug users during and after incarceration.

Using food narratives to build knowledge about prisons and health

Here we analyze formerly incarcerated women’s narratives about prison food in order to build knowledge about the prison place and how their health has been impacted by the experience of incarceration. As described earlier, daily mundane activities – like those related to the acquisition, preparation, distribution and consumption of food – are critical to constructing and understanding place. While “the social and cultural uses of food provide much insight into the human condition” (Counihan, 1999, p. 24) and analysis of food and food-related behaviors has explicated culture, social relationships and place across a broad range of time periods and geographic locations (Wood, 1995), analysis of prison food systems is limited. The small body of research about prison food that does exist has been conducted primarily in male correctional facilities in England and Canada (Earle & Phillips, 2012; Godderis, 2006a, 2006b; Milligan, Waller, & Andrews, 2002; Smith, 2002; Ugelvik, 2011; Valentine & Longstaff, 1998). We expand on this existing body of work by analyzing the prison food narratives of women incarcerated in the United States in order to build knowledge about the impact of this place on health.

Methods

For this project, 30 formerly incarcerated women were interviewed about prison food. All of the participants had been imprisoned in the same women’s correctional facility in New England (US). Participants were recruited, using convenience sampling, from a community-based program that provides post-incarceration housing and re-entry services in a large urban area. In accordance with the approved IRB protocol, all respondents provided written informed consent and were compensated \$30 for their time and expenses. The sample was racially diverse: 40% White, 43% Black, and 17% Latina. The majority (67%) were between the ages of 25 and 45, but women over 45 (23%) and under 25 (10%) were also included. Seven of the women had been incarcerated only one time, 12 had been incarcerated 2 or 3 times and the rest ($n = 11$) had served from 5 to 32 sentences. For 21 of the women, the controlling offense for their most recent incarceration was a drug-related charge.

All of the interviews, which lasted approximately 90 min, were digitally recorded and transcribed. The data collection instrument was a 14 item semi-structured interview that asked about food and eating experiences in different parts of the prison (e.g. intake, cafeteria, and housing units), favorite and least favorite foods, and cooking practices. Each primary question had a series of probes that asked how, where and by/with whom food was acquired, prepared and shared. The semi-structured nature of these interviews meant that each interview evolved differently; the order of questions was determined by participant responses and each participant raised unsolicited comments and information. In addition to conducting all of the interviews, the first author transcribed the interviews, using this process as an opportunity to identify emerging themes and adjusting the interviews to incorporate and further explore preliminary findings (Bird, 2005). She then used qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) to code and organize the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study’s thematic analysis included the following steps: becoming familiar with the data

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