



Research report

Acceptance or refusal of convenience food in present-day prison ☆

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ABSTRACT

Food in prison is an insufficiently researched topic. However, prisoners often highlight problems with and criticism of their prison meals. This article aims to further develop this topic by giving closer insight into the use and attitudes toward ready-made meals in the Tilburg prison. In this prison, prisoners receive ready-made meals. This is in contrast to Belgian prisons, from which they were transferred, where meals were made from scratch. This change in the food system led to commotion and complaints. To understand the situation, interviews with prisoners and staff were conducted and observations in the Tilburg prison were made. The results showed that a food system can have considerable influence on prison experiences. In addition, and contrary to what earlier reports have mentioned, the ready-made meals also have some advantages, especially for the organization of daily prison life. However, most prisoners had negative attitudes toward these meals.

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Introduction

“Belgian Prisoners Do Not Like Dutch Food” was the headline of a newspaper article reporting on the living conditions of Belgian prisoners in the Dutch prison of Tilburg (Belga, 2010). Due to the overcrowded Belgian prisons and the overcapacity in The Netherlands’ prisons, cooperation between both countries has been established (Beyens & Boone, 2013). Although a Belgian prison regime was introduced in Tilburg, some differences remained. One of these differences was the food system. In Belgian prisons, meals are cooked on the spot, while in The Netherlands, ready-made meals are distributed. Because Belgium pays an annual price to the Dutch government for all of the services in the Tilburg prison, including the food service, introducing a Belgian food system would be very expensive.

Under huge media attention, the first prisoners were transferred in 2010 from Belgian prisons to The Netherlands. Prisoners took advantage of this attention to criticize the ready-made meals. In 2011, a delegation of the Commission for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) visited the Penitentiary Institution in Tilburg to verify if the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners were being upheld. Members of the CPT also “received a large number of complaints about the quality and method of preparation of the food served in the establishment” during their visit (European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or

Punishment (CPT), CPT/Inf (2012)19§18). However, the meals were found to fulfill the minimum quality levels.

In this article, we aim to contextualize and to nuance earlier reports on this topic. In addition, we aim to develop insights into prisoners’ attitudes toward the food systems in prison and how these may influence their prison experience. First, we explain prisoners’ reactions when they faced the change in food preparation after their transfer. Second, we highlight the specificities of the two different food systems within these two prisons. Finally, we elaborate on the insights into attitudes toward convenience food and ready-made meals.

What do we know about prison food?

According to the World Health Organization (2013), “The quality and quantity of food available in a prison has a major influence on the quality of a prisoner’s life.” Research has shown that the importance of food in prison must not be underestimated. In tackling the problem from the sociological, anthropological, criminological, medical, and a human rights perspectives, researchers have explained possible reasons for this importance through many different points of view.

Criminologists and sociologists have found that food can play many different roles within a prison context. Food possesses a symbolic power and is a means of communication in a closely controlled environment (Brisman, 2007; Godderis, 2006a, 2006b; Smith, 2002; Ugelvik, 2011, 2014; Valentine & Longstaff, 1998). For example, Godderis (2006b) explained how food practices represent overt and covert displays of institutional power. Prison guards’ arbitrary decision-making when distributing the meals, the economic restrictions imposed on purchases in prison shops, and the inconsistent

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implication of prison regulations are only a few examples of how power can be imposed through food. Next to these forms, prisoners experience an even more extensive and intrusive control when they lose choices about their own food intake. The prison staff and the state in general decide what, when, and how prisoners eat (Cate, 2008; Godderis, 2006a; Ugelvik, 2011). As a consequence, some prisoners lose control over their own bodies (Smith, 2002).

However, power and hierarchical relationships can be open to change and can even be converted. In prison, this conversion of power is often explained as resistance. Resistance can be described as behavior that challenges existing power relationships. Food and food-related activities appear to be among the few activities people can try to control in highly supervised institutions (Brisman, 2007; Dusselier, 2002; Godderis, 2006a; Smith, 2002; Ugelvik, 2011). In prison the most obvious food-related form of resistance is the hunger strike. Prisoners on hunger strikes mostly protest or try to enforce their demands by putting the prison organization under pressure (Gétaz et al., 2012). But also mundane activities have been defined as forms of resistance. Smith (2002), for example, explained how eating unhealthy food can be a relief and form of resistance against a system that promotes healthy eating. In addition, Ugelvik (2011) explained how prisoners' legal and illegal ways of cooking helped immigrants to resist Norwegian eating habits and Norwegian society. Rubin (2014), however, challenged Ugelvik's (2011) research that defined these everyday activities as resistance without clarifying the prisoners' intentions. According to Rubin (2014), resistance has to be a consciously and intentionally political act, which is not necessarily the case when prisoners cook their own food.

Next to food as a means of reflecting and converting power relationships, cooking and eating can be methods to connect, bind, and create individual as well as group identities in prison (Cate, 2008; Earle & Phillips, 2012). For example, Kjær Minke (2014) explained how prisoners in Danish prisons receive their own money and are responsible for their own purchases and cooking. These circumstances may create positive identities in the sense that prisoners are acknowledged and respected as a "chef de cuisine" by their fellow inmates. Smoyer (2014) explained how women can construct a positive identity by representing themselves as healthy eaters who take care of themselves and their bodies.

Eating and cooking are often group activities, and such things may ameliorate social relations among prisoners. Since most prisoners in the Danish system cook together, they have to organize, take responsibility for, and share their food (Kjær Minke, 2014). Smoyer (2014) also explained that food sharing and taking care of each other can be experienced as important activities for the construction of positive identities. In addition, Earle and Phillips (2012) illustrated how cooking areas in prison serve as a display for the cultural diversity between prisoners as well as a place where they learn to negotiate, organize, and work with each other. This conviviality may exist within as well as between cooking groups. Furthermore, prisoners from the same cooking group may protect each other in case of trouble (Kjær Minke, 2014). However, in some cases, the hierarchical structure within or between cooking groups may inflict oppression toward prisoners with lower positions (Kjær Minke, 2014). In addition, food can be used in a barter system that can demonstrate economic inequalities between prisoners (Valentine & Longstaff, 1998).

Another perspective that sheds light onto the importance of food in a prison environment concentrates on the nutritional value of prison food and its effect on prisoners' health. The results of this kind of research may differ between countries and prisons (Edards, Hartwell, & Schafheitle, 2009; Collins & Thompson, 2012; Stein, 2000).

Finally, research has focused on different food systems (Johns, Edwards, & Hartwell, 2013) and prisoners' attitudes toward differ-

ent forms of food preparation (Williams et al., 2009; Cross & MacDonald, 2009). Cross and MacDonald (2009) discussed several food preparation and distribution systems in five types of institutions, including prisons in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. They explained that the raising of standards of food quality since 1990 has led to prisoners' having more favorable views toward their food.

This article will expand the literature on food systems in prison as well as on prisoners' and staffs' attitudes toward these systems.

Methods

The prison of Tilburg and its detention regime are very unique. Since the 1980s, Belgium has faced major problems with prison overcrowding. Almost no action was undertaken to alleviate this overpopulation until the situation became unbearable in 2009. The Belgian minister of justice found a short term solution to diminish prison overcrowding by asking help from the neighboring country, The Netherlands. The prison of Tilburg (situated in The Netherlands, close to its Belgian border) faced closing and staff's dismissal due to the diminishing prison population in The Netherlands. Clearly both countries could take advantage of a cooperation. In 2010, the first prisoners convicted on Belgian territory could be transferred to Tilburg. In this penitentiary institution, a Belgian prison regime was introduced, while prison staff remained mainly Dutch.

In 2012, the Dutch Ministry of Justice wanted to conduct a research study in this particular prison to find out what The Netherlands could learn from a Belgian detention regime. As a consequence, a research under the supervision of Beyens and Boone (Beyens & Boone, 2013) was set up. The research elaborated male prisoners' detention experiences by drawing upon 36 interviews that were conducted by the author of this article in 2012. In this research (Beyens & Boone, 2013), we used a purposive sampling method to ensure the maximum variation. Prior knowledge about prison populations allowed us to focus on prisoners' particular characteristics.

The prison of Tilburg consists of different units. Therefore the sample ensured that a proportional number of prisoners from every unit were represented. In addition, the sample consisted of prisoners with different detention durations and detention experiences (i.e. they were transferred from a wide variety of Belgian prisons to Tilburg). Finally, we should note that an important characteristic of the population was underrepresented in the sample. At the time of the research, more than 50% of the prisoners in Tilburg did not have legal permission to stay in Belgium, while only six out of the thirty-six respondents (16.7%) did not have legal permission. Because detention experiences between prisoners with legal permission to stay in Belgium and those without the legal permission may greatly differ (Kox et al., 2014), the principal chose to focus on prisoners with legal permission. Based on these characteristics, we developed a list of prisoners.

Before the start of the interviews, prisoners were asked if they agreed to cooperate with the research and to have the interview recorded. The interviews were conducted in a closed room in the prison where prisoners could not be heard by staff or by others inmates. During the interviews, a topic list was used. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed and they were uploaded to the computer program MAXQDA. MAXQDA is a computer software program that assists with qualitative data analysis, and it is ideally suited to analyzing data according to the grounded theory approach (Gibbs, 2013).

According to this approach, the coding process consisted of two or three phases. The first phase was "initial" or "open coding." The codes created in this first phase allowed us to "stay close to the data and remain open to exploring what is happening in the data" (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013, p. 156). In light of this research, the

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