

learning from the inside out

by tasha galardi

“The criminal no longer seems a totally unsociable being, a sort of parasitic element, a strange and unassimilable body,” Emile Durkheim wrote. And after nearly 10 hours with my Inside classmates, I’ve come to learn that he’s right.

My experience in prison was through a sociology class that was part of the national Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Fifteen “outside” students from Oregon State University spent a full quarter sharing class with fifteen inmates (“inside” students) in a medium-security state prison. I enrolled in this class at the recommendation of a few fellow students because it provided a unique chance to explore a world I would otherwise never experience and to challenge the stereotypes I held about people who commit crime.

One of our small group discussions revolved around the causes of criminal behavior in relation to our class readings on criminology theories. My group consisted of me, the only Outside student, and three inmates. They came from varied backgrounds and paths into crime, so it was the perfect opportunity to get a range of perspectives. I asked them what they thought of the theories we had read and whether they agreed with the causes of crime presented in the book. While there wasn’t a consensus among them, I found that their experiences related well to the theories about why people commit crime and taught me some things I hadn’t known.

Joshua* described growing up in a generally stable, middle-class home. His father had been an avid Hell’s Angel biker when Joshua was quite young, but otherwise he felt that his home environment was nurturing. While his home was in a solidly middle-class neighborhood, a group of public housing projects was right across the street. The allure of that neighborhood proved to be his entry into a life of crime. Joshua spoke about our reading by Jack Katz and how he personally identified with the theory that there are “often wonderful attractions within the lived experience of criminality.”

This was something I had never really considered before. My sociology classes have generally covered why certain neighborhoods have higher crime rates or why unequal access to resources leads certain groups of people to crime. It was profound to have a person in prison admit there had been no reason he needed or was compelled to become a criminal beyond

his enjoyment of the illegal act. Joshua’s perspective gave me an appreciation for Katz’s seduction of crime theory and taught me that there can truly be a “genuine experiential creativity” within crime. Katz explains that individuals can be innovative in their deviant behavior and sometimes commit crime simply because the act itself is seductive and fun.

Sam, like Joshua, described his family as warm and nurturing. He was raised in a “well-off” neighborhood and never wanted for anything as a child. As a teenager, Sam found he lacked a motivation to conform, which is one of the things Travis Hirschi describes as being an important deterrent to deviant behavior. Hirschi’s theory states that a belief in the values of conformity and an investment in a conforming future

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generally keep people from committing crime. Without these values, Sam was easily drawn to deviance and he hooked up with other kids in his neighborhood who felt the same. They started doing drugs and getting into trouble together. Sam told me nothing about his neighborhood could have been different to keep him from becoming a delinquent. He thinks he chose to get involved in crime out of boredom.

His perspective was a real eye-opener for me. I’ve always believed there must be things we can do to prevent people from turning to crime, and it hadn’t really occurred to me there might be people who have every opportunity for success but choose to get involved in crime anyway. I have to admit, this realization was a bit disheartening. I so wanted to hear that an after-school program or a quality school or consistent, affirming adults would have made a difference in Sam’s life, but he told me he had access to those things and they simply didn’t matter. It seems Durkheim was right, crime is inevitable in any society.

William’s childhood was very much a confirmation of conflict theory—that structural inequality leaves those in the lower

classes without the resources to protect themselves from life's cruelties, so they are left with few choices beyond crime and deviance—and the inadequacies of our juvenile justice system. His dysfunctional family was poor and he suffered physical abuse at the hands of his step-father. William was removed from his family many times over the years and bounced around to various foster homes, most of which he described as no better than his parents' house. He ran away at age 15 and began living on the streets, where his only means of survival was theft. The system (his community, his family, the government) had failed him so many times over the years he had no faith it would protect him, so he didn't even try to conform at that point.

To me, William's experience clearly shows how, as Robert Merton wrote, "some social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in society to engage in nonconformist rather than conformist conduct." I learned from William that all people, even those who've made enormous mistakes, have the potential to overcome incredible odds and turn their lives around. By being willing to truly examine his personal motivations for becoming involved in crime and actively working to alter any unhealthy patterns, he has done the hard work necessary to truly change the trajectory of his life. His is an example of a childhood lacking almost all the resources that help a person become successful followed by an adulthood spent in prison. Yet, despite (or because of) this, he has chosen to take responsibility for his personal failings and become a better person.

Of the inmates I've met in class, William is one of the most sincere in his desire to really examine his life and the choices he's made. He is the reason this class has so inspired me to believe in the need for prison reform. I now understand that we as a society should be providing people like William the tools they need to become healthier during their imprisonment so they can come out and contribute positively to our society.

Another thing I've learned in this class is that any social group can label people in their midst as "deviant." I had heard about the stigma attached to sex offenders in prison, but was interested to learn from the inmates first-hand whether or not this was true. In our very first class, Robert confirmed that he was told from the beginning of his prison term to avoid the sex offenders. He also admitted that although he has encountered a few inmates he considers "decent" among the sex offenders, he has a strong prejudice against them as a group.

In various small group discussions over the three weeks of our class this issue came up, and every time I was amazed

at the vehemence of the inmates' distaste for sex offenders. I find it interesting that a group that has been labeled "deviant" by conforming society, and consequently must know how it feels to carry that stigma, has gone on to stigmatize a group within their own prison society. When I first read Howard Becker's theory about creating deviance in a society, it didn't occur to me that the phenomenon he described could occur within a "deviant" group. All humans carry the potential to

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A year ago I would have said prison inmates are dangerous people who need to be locked up for the protection of the general public. I had never given a thought to whether my stereotype was accurate or representative of all inmates. This class has shattered my perception of people in prison and helped me see that I must be slower to judge others. I need to question the images of various kinds of people put forth by mainstream society and realize that within any group there are only individuals. My Inside classmates have shared their personal stories with me, and I find that I now see them as individual people with varied life experiences who happen to be incarcerated, instead of dangerous criminals who happen to have some life history.

Tasha Galardi is a senior at Oregon State University. She wrote a version of this essay for her sociology class on Crime, Justice and Public Policy, which was taught by Michelle Inderbitzin.

*All inmates' names have been changed.

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