



## RESEARCHING PRISON – A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL SYSTEM

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*Conference paper*

*Received: 9 December, 2005. Accepted: 15 December, 2005.*

### SUMMARY

The assumption that society is a complex system is a common and trivial in sociology. Most of the great sociological theories treat society as a complex system explicitly or implicitly. Because social system is always multidimensional it is easier to build such a theory than to apply it to practice. Therefore, it is still not fully explored issue, especially when theory meets empirical data. The aim of this article is to examine the complexity of a social system on the example of prison. The main issues discussed here are: the interplay of elements of the system and its consequences, dynamics of social process, influence of social change and interdependence of microsystem and macrosystem. The article presents the sociological perspective on social system.

### KEY WORDS

social system, complex system, interdependence, social relations, prison

### CLASSIFICATION

PACS: 87.23.Ge

## **WHAT IS SOCIAL SYSTEM**

Social system is a concept used relatively early in sociology by functionalists. And from the very beginning a social system was considered as complex ('the father' of sociology, August Comte regarded society as the most complex level of reality). The concept of a system indicates the society is an entity. It also points out the intrinsic social forces that rule the system and prevent it from collapsing. At the same time the systemic approach to society has been strongly criticized in sociology mainly because of organic analogies and psychological terms used to describe specific social phenomena.

To understand what it is the complexity of a social system different aspects and different levels of social phenomena must be considered. Explanation of the system might point out the dynamic or static aspect of a system. The dynamic approach to social system explores such phenomena as equilibrium, relations of the elements, conflict, development etc., while the static approach deals with such notions as structure, normative system, social control, individuals, groups, institutions, culture, and collective actions, however many of these can be analysed in both perspective.

Let us assume that society is a system. What does it mean? And what is a complex system?

At least few features are important in the definition of a social system:

- System is the entity consisting of elements which are bounded which means that components constitute a system. The relations among the elements are themselves important parts of the system. Elements of the system might be quite heterogeneous and yet they are interrelated. The relations also may alter. Interdependence of the elements in the system is one of the most important assumptions for the systemic approach in sociology.
- Social system is an emergent structure, a new type of social order appears on a particular level of structure (individual, group, institution). System-level properties are of a new quality: "system-level exists solely as emergent properties characterizing the system action as a whole" [1, p.28]. Macro-level outcomes are often the result of interdependence of social actors. The interdependence of social actors (microlevel) means that the systemic level is not merely the outcome of aggregated individuals.
- There are many sub-systems on different levels (e.g. micro and macrolevel) or areas (e.g. economic, political, religious institutions of a society). The relation between individual (micro) and systemic level (macro) is one of the crucial in sociology. The question is whether each subsystem has its own specificity and to what extent it must be taken into consideration in explanation.

## **COMPLEXITY OF SOCIAL SYSTEM**

Complexity of social system represents different types of social phenomena and at the same time emphasises the multidimensional nature of the social world. Social system is formed by the characteristics of its components. One of the typical definitions of a complex system is as follows: complex systems are systems with multiple interacting components whose behaviour cannot be simply inferred from the behaviour of the components. This definition precisely points out the constitutive features of a complex system. James Coleman proposes to explain "the behaviour of social systems by means of three components: the effects of properties of the system on the constraints or orientations of actors; the actions of actors who are within the system; and the combination or interaction of those actions, bringing about the systemic behaviour" [1].

In order to show how complex is the social system I would like to analyse few aspects of complexity. There are many forms and types of social relations and they can generate different social forms: one can distinguish so called weak and incidental interactions, more petrified relations, up to social ties and social structure. If the system is complex then its elements are numerous and they are in mutual relations.

One can see it analysing the relations of the system. Let's examine 'few' important features of social relation itself:

- the size of the group,
- the type of relation (mutual and no mutual relations, unilateral, bilateral, multilateral relations),
- recurrence, durability and stability of relations,
- the formal and informal aspect of relations,
- the communicational aspect o relations,
- the power, dependence, and control as the dimension of relations,
- the aspect of emotional ties, interest ties etc of social relations and much more.

This particular example shows how complicated may be analysing the social relations.

Other elements of social reality may take also diverse forms. Each subsystem consists of various levels of social organisation: from simple through more complicated: individuals, social entities, groups, communities, institutions. One of the most typical examples showing how parts of a system give rise to the collective behaviors of the system is to compare the individual actions and collective actions.

The interrelations of collective actions are usually more complex and the effects of such activity are different. It must be emphasized that most sociologists would agree that action takes place at the level of individual actors and the more complex level exist as emergent properties characterizing the system of action as a whole [1 – 3]. "It is only in this sense that there is behavior of the system" [1]. If one considers the institutional aspect of social system then, again, one has to deal with patterns of behaviour, system of norms and social rules. At this point culture as a object of analysis appears. Culture is always an important part of each social system and sometimes is treated as a separate system by sociologists (it is a complex entity consisting of subsystems of values, norms, patterns of behaviour etc.).

Thus, complexity of a social system represents a multidimensional social reality. Researching social system is to answer the question which elements of that complex entity play the main role in explanation of some aspects of social reality.

## **A PRISON AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM**

A prison as a social system is a special subject of research for several reasons. First, a prison is a relatively isolated social system and may be analysed much easier in terms of social system than other cases, especially a society as a whole is too complex system to research it directly. Second, the correctional institution is an example of total institution which consists of two communities or subsystems: the inmates and the staff. Third, this kind of institution is relatively separated and differs from other organizations in degree of control mechanisms, but it has also connections with outside environment. A macro scale perspective shows the connection between the mega system and subsystems and its consequences.

Two levels of analysis are proposed here: medium scale social system, specific social relations in prison community, and the relations between super-system (macrosystem) and sub-system (prison). The nature of the relations themselves is a separate issue. The aim of the

article is to present several examples and brief analysis on social system and discuss the issue of system complexity. I believe such an investigation allows to understand the specificity of social reality and enables better research.

Researching the complexity of prison as a social system demands to explore the organisational aspect of system first. At least three aspects are important:

- type of prison,
- size of prison and prison community,
- spatial distribution and arrangements of space.

Depending on conditions of imprisonment and type of sentence there are different kinds of prisons: closed and open (in fact there are two types of open prisons: semi-open and open, but for this analysis I will ignore the difference).

The grade of confinement is crucial because it supports various type of structure, group relations and communication system. Thus one can see how one single feature (open/closed organisation) influences the system. There is diversity in connectivity among the individuals. The open system makes it easier, while the closed one does not. Consequently, the communication channels in open system are numerous and in the closed system are limited.

The other issue is the role of communication in forming collectivity, for instance community. It must be emphasised that the conditions of communication have further consequences. The quality of space distribution and social interaction generate different type of social relations and groups. In result, in closed system there are stronger social ties in cell-groups, weak ties in prison community and little mobility whereas in open system there are less integrated community, weak ties, lack of trust. Moreover, these set of conditions are conducive to specific style of behaviors of the system, for instance the probability of conflicts, the strength and resolution of the conflicts would diverge. All these features are the consequence of communications system. Figure 1 illustrates the whole process that is how the open or closed communication channels form diverse social ties.

Relation between an individual and group is of great importance. The action of the individual in group are under the influence of more complex level, that is group level. Individuals actions are determined (to some extent) by the groups. It means that “the members of solidary groups act in ways that are consistent with collective standards of conduct, norms, because they are obliged to do so” [4].

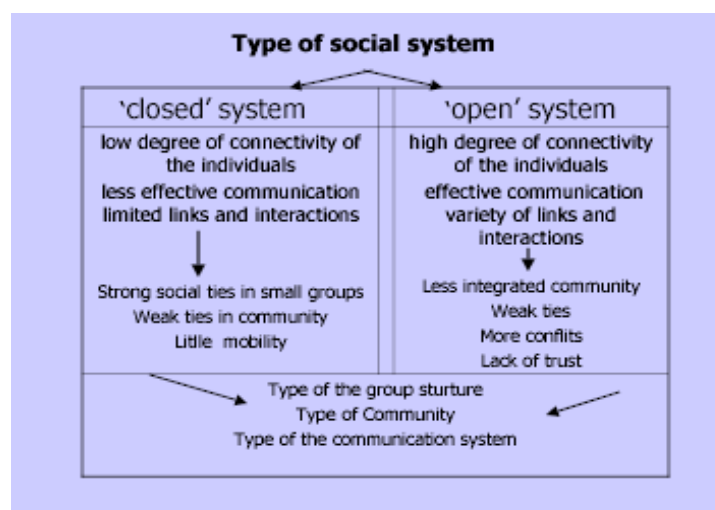
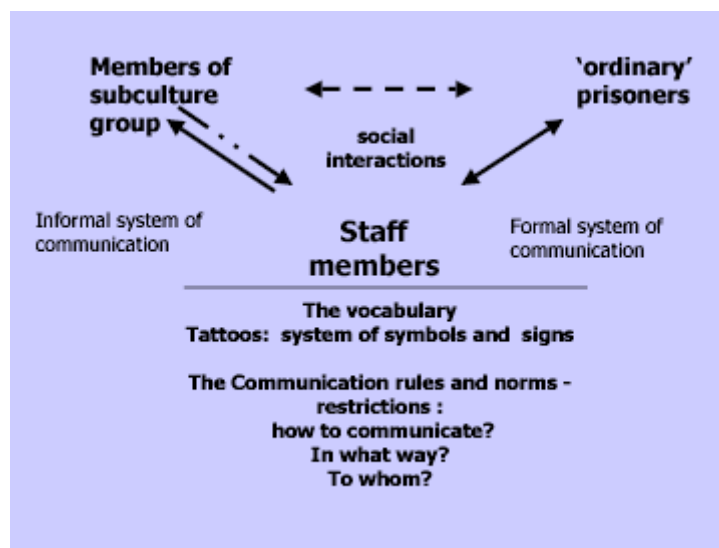


Figure 1. Forming social ties through communication channels.

All these following features are bounded to each other and this is one of the important criterion of system.

The structure of prison community is another interesting aspect of complexity of the system. The structure is one of the most important element of the system because it has the capacity for structuring other aspect of the social reality. The structure gives the interdependence to the individuals' actions and it is not only the feedback processes [1]. Actions of social actor have systemic character thanks to the interdependence.

The societal organization of prison consists of two groups: the inmates and the staff. What is more, the inmates are not homogenous collectivity, several groups may constitute it. This is in fact some simplification, but let us assume that there are two groups of inmates: the members of subculture group and the 'ordinary' prisoners who do not belong to subculture groups. Figure 2 shows the structure of community inside the prison system.



**Figure 2.** Prison community structure.

It is often underlined that social world being a complex system is multidimensional. It can be observed inside the prison community where the mutual relations and the structure develop several elements of the system. The social interactions among members of the subculture groups are different than the interactions between non-subculture members and the staff. There are numerous norms that rules their relations and communication.

How complex is the communication subsystem? Prison communication system contains informal and formal subsystem. Moreover, the system of communication consists of – at least – several elements such as tattoos, set of symbols and signs, the social norms that control contacts. The norms inform how to communicate? In what way? To whom? And all those elements may vary depending on type of prison system (closed or open).

The list of elements is not complete, I do not intend however at this point to analyse the whole system, thoroughly. This limited presentation is to emphasise merely the complexity of societal system.

Concluding, if complexity is a research problem it is necessary to consider several variables that determine the human behaviour and the significance of these elements for the system.

## **DYNAMICS OF COMPLEX SYSTEM**

Social change is an example of complexity of societal system. First of all, the dynamic approach to the system reveal the connections among the elements and the results of their interplay – interdependence. Second, it enables to follow the change of the system which probably is visible only if one treats the social entity as a system. A single element may react to other element of a system starting the chain reaction in a social process. “Actions of each actor are somehow connected to those of others at an earlier point in time. This sequence of effects can continue into the future” [1, pp.29-30].

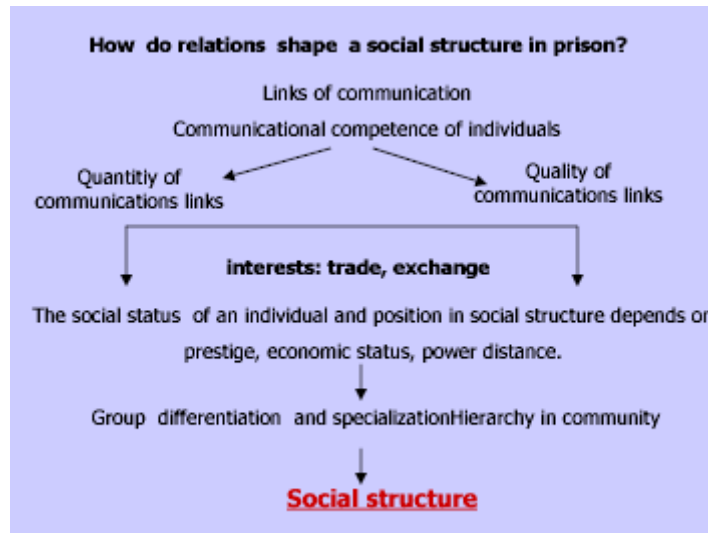
An example that illustrates how system may change is the process of adaptation to the environment. Let's consider the relations between communication system and other elements. Communication system creates several elements of social system such as the social structure, the group identity and group solidarity. An interesting phenomenon is ‘prison life within the language’. Language must be consider here in boarder sense as an area where verbal acting replaces ‘real’ behaviours. It is of course the result of adaptation of the system to the given conditions i.e. numerous constraints. It is obvious that free acting is restricted. In such conditions inmates use verbal act as real behaviors, e.g. stigmatisation in closed small community or group is much stronger and more effective than in open society where individual mobility is high. The secret language (or precisely: vocabulary) of prisoners is another example of adaptation to environment. The reason to create such a language is the inmates’ need to communicate without control of personnel in prison.

An interesting issues is how does spatial distribution affect the communication channels and change the social system in the end. Communication and language as a main area of social life become more influential as a part of the whole system. For instance the rumours, the stigmatisation, the ascribed social role or opinions would create the social structure and impose the execution of social norms. Generally, communication especially verbal contacts are the area of social action much more developed because they take over the functions of social actions [5]. The case proves that social relations, especially communication have an effect on different forms of social life and processes. Communication practices and language uses play an important role for they construct social reality within the language and beyond the language reality. The tattoos have the same role as the signs, they denote the social roles and social identities of prisoners. The subculture norms also can be treated as the effect of adaptation, most of the norms are suited to specific living conditions in the prison. Concluding, in general the prison subculture is the result of adaptation of the system.

Let us analyse closer another example: the process of the influence of the relations within social structure. Social relations form the social structure in prison. The type of the structure depends on:

- type of communications links,
- the formal structure and organisation of prison, and
- spatial distribution.

The communication competence of individuals is also important factor. For instance if an individual who has a high communication competence exchange different kind of goods (cigarettes, coffee, or even very rare goods as narcotics) such an exchange starts the process of building social position of an individual. Successful exchange and good relations generate the high position and prestige. All these variables interact in forming specific type of social structure. These factors construct the system of distribution of interest and the structure of power. Thus, social interactions form the social system. The frequency of contacts determine the quality of social relation. Frequent interactions may turns into social ties, and consequently, if there is unequal distribution of power and control, into social structure, Fig. 3.



**Figure 3.** Role of relation in shaping prison social structure.

## INTERDEPENDENCE OF MICRO SYSTEM AND MACRO SYSTEM

One of the crucial problem for sociological theory is to explain the relation between the micro and macro level. This kind of relation is understood as the connection between (macro)system and subsystem.

Let us assume that the outside social environment is the macro system and the prison is subsystem (the sub-system of prison) and that there is dependence of microsystem from macrosystem. One of the primary assumption is that the sub-system reflects the mechanisms of macrosystem, as it is its part. The dominant factors of the macrosystem become dominant in subsystem, too. And this is the case of the correctional system in Poland.

The influence of the macro-system on the prison as social system is complicated itself because the macro system consists of several subsystems: society, economic and political institutions, culture, law etc. Which sub-system might be important for prison sub-system?

Among many features the free market economy and political change would be the main factors that changed the macro system and consequently changed the subsystem of prison. The market economy altered the circumstances that govern the structure, which means that money is the main resources that redistributes the power, and influences the social relationships. As to political change, the democratisation of the system is also the feature of subsystem. The attitude towards the criminals, the politics of punishment and the law are the subject of political decisions. All these changes of the outside environment determine the conditions of imprisonment.

Political change was performed on the macrolevel by administrative decisions. The conditions of living and the rights of the inmates improved significantly after 1990 as a consequence of new regulations implemented as the macro-to-micro transition. Whereas the market economy was much more the area of micro-to-macro transformation of the prison subsystem. Gradually, new resources (money) started to shape the social reality and formed the social structure, changed the social ties, and above all introduced conflicts that destroyed group solidarity.

One of the significant and widely recognised result of free market is the change of social solidarity. Free market promotes erosion of social solidarity because it causes very often the conflicts of interests. This sometimes is perceived as the threat to social order, which is

wrong. Free market supports rather new kind of social ties, and it is responsible for social change. It stimulates the new social order that implies more conflicts and less collective actions but still it is some social order.

The relation between the prison and the environment is at first glance simple: the sub-system takes over the features of the mega system. But if one follows further consequences it appears that new elements may appear as the result of the specificity of the subsystem. Why is that? The particular set of features inside the prison interact with each other and can generate the specific feature of subsystem that can not be predictable merely from the features of environment. Therefore one can distinguish the two types of system that are formed by different outside environment (mega system): totalitarian prison vs free-market prison. This clear distinction illustrates the great social change of macro system. Here are the characteristics of totalitarian and democratic prison subsystem that reflects the conditions of the outside environment:

### **TOTALITARIAN PRISON**

- the restricted system of institutional control,
- the limited access to the material goods,
- the social status depends less on one's economic status and more on social identity,
- the high level of deprivation of economic, social and psychical needs,
- the group interests and individual interest converge,
- the mobility in population of criminals is little.

### **'DEMOCRATIC' PRISON**

- less restricted system of institutional control,
- wider access to goods,
- the social status of individual depends on one's socio-economic relation with other member of community,
- the social distance increases that divides community in much distinct way: the poor – the rich,
- the individuals' interest and group interests are in contradictions,
- the social mobility population of criminals increases (new kinds of crime).

This brief presentation specifies the main differences of subsystem that are the consequences of the macrosystem.

In democratic prison subculture gradually disappears because it is hostile environment that supports the appearance and development of subculture strong community. The main function of that community was to survive. In comparison with totalitarian prison democratic prison takes over the function (or rather takes much more care) of supplying goods for the inmates. The interdependence of microsystem to macrosystem causes the change in subsystem.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

I tried to demonstrate the complexity of social system by using example of prison. The multidimensional social reality might seem a chaotic, not systemic but in fact it has an order (which sometimes is hidden) that rules the social world. The social reality has numerous regularities. If we look at society in systemic way we are closer to discover that order. It is not easy to examine complex social system. Sociologists always are capable to research it only to some extent. So one can explore merely some aspects of complex social system. This conclusion may be not satisfying for the Reader but it is closer to truth about complex social system.



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# PROUČAVANJE ZATVORA – SOCIOLOŠKA ANALIZA SOCIJALNOG SUSTAVA

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## SAŽETAK

Pretpostavka da je društvo kompleksni sustav uobičajena je i trivijalna u sociologiji. Većina velikih socioloških teorija razmatra društvo eksplicitno, ili implicitno kao kompleksni sustav. Socijalni su sustavi uvijek višedimenzionalni, zbog čega je jednostavnije izgraditi odgovarajuću teoriju nego je primijeniti. Odgovarajuća problematika nije dovoljno istražena, posebno u usporedbi teorijskih rezultata i eksperimentalnih podataka. Cilj ovog članka je ispitati kompleksnost socijalnog sustava na primjeru zatvora. Glavne razmatrane cjeline su: povezanost elemenata sustava i njihove posljedice, dinamika socijalnih procesa, utjecaj socijalne promjene i međuovisnost mikro- i makro sistema. Članak postavlja sociološku perspektivu socijalnog sustava.

## KLJUČNE RIJEČI

socijalni sustav, kompleksni sustav, međuovisnost, socijalni odnosi, zatvor