

Winter 1961

Sociology of Confinement: Assimilation and the Prison Rat

Elmer H. Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Elmer H. Johnson, Sociology of Confinement: Assimilation and the Prison Rat, 51 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 528 (1960-1961)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

SOCIOLOGY OF CONFINEMENT: ASSIMILATION AND THE PRISON "RAT"

ELMER H. JOHNSON

The author is Assistant Director of Prisons, North Carolina Prison Department. Prior to assuming this position, he was Associate Professor of Sociology, North Carolina State College, Raleigh.

In this article, Dr. Johnson reports on a recent study of fifty prison "rats," i.e., prisoners who were at odds with their fellow inmates, usually because of a willingness to give information to prison officials in return for personal advantage. The prisoners studied are first divided into a number of sub-groups under two general headings—assimilated "rats" and unassimilated "rats." Then, by means of detailing the infraction records of those involved, Dr. Johnson attempts to provide a rough index to the response of the various categories of "rats" to their assigned roles and to the social environment of confinement.—EDITOR.

Through physical and social psychological isolation from free society, confinement creates a prison community which requires the new inmate to adjust to unfamiliar traditions, values, and social relationships. The role of prisoner "rat" can be seen as a product of this assimilative process.

This paper is based on a study of fifty inmates denounced by fellow prisoners as "rats" during the years 1958 and 1959 in a state-wide prisoner population averaging 11,000. These fifty were referred to the Central Classification Committee, the "supreme court" of the state-wide classification system, on the basis of an official's description of the case as one involving actual threats to the inmate.

The "rat" usually is seen as a turncoat against the inmate code who exchanges information for personal advantages. Although this definition covers the majority of "rats," it does not include all situations blanketed under the empirical use of the term by inmates. The communication of information to officials is not the only prohibited behavior which qualifies an inmate as a "rat" in the eyes of his peers. For example, refusal to join in action against officials can have similar effect.

There is the further problem that the inmate definition of a fellow as a "rat" involves more than the simple matter of prohibited behavior by the subject. Sometimes the informer is not labelled as a "rat." Sometimes, the non-informer is labelled a "rat" even though accusers concede his innocence. Part of the answer to this apparent inconsistency lies in the relationship between the personal characteristics of the subject inmate and the social expectations of his peers.

These characteristics are involved in two ways.

First, they function in a manner similar to victim proneness wherein certain individuals unconsciously invite theft, rape, and other crimes against themselves.¹ The sociology of confinement creates a climate of inmate suspicion whereby the possession of certain personal characteristics deviating from inmate expectations render an inmate prone to being judged a "rat." These characteristics range from middle class qualities similar to those of certain prison employees to qualities of the dependent personality vulnerable to pressure of others, including officials. On the other hand, other inmates are able to preserve links with officials without alienating fellow prisoners because their overt behavior and personal characteristics coincide with inmate expectations. Secondly, the personal characteristics of the subject inmate affect the quality of his response to the experience of being assigned the "rat" role.

Obviously, the "rat" serves the prison's formal organization as a communication link with the inmate informal groups. Moreover, as a target for aggression, he serves two major functions for the inmate informal groups. First, the aggression integrates these groups by dramatizing loyalty to their code, by dissuading potential transgressors through demonstration of the power of inmate sanctions, and by strengthening in-group ties through opposition to an enemy previously within the group. Secondly, the "rat" serves as a "drain" for "free-floating" aggression of prisoners stemming from the restraints and social deprivations of regimented confinement. This is similar to the process of "displacement" described by Allport.²

¹ See RECKLESS, *THE CRIME PROBLEM* 24-25 (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955).

² ALLPORT, *THE NATURE OF PREJUDICE* 337-38 (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1958).

The "rat" is a substitute target for releasing pent-up tensions.

The "rat" is particularly useful for these purposes because prison officials are uncertain in their attitude toward him. In fact, the officials share some of the distaste for the traitorous member of the opposition, even when he asserts loyalty to the officials' own values. His dependability and reliability as an ally are questioned, but the possibility should not be ignored that the official finds the "rat" a useful target for his own hostility and irritation arising from the effects of the sociology of confinement on the keeper.

The aggressive prisoner uses the "rat" to vent hostilities in a manner drawing at least tacit approval of his peers and unlikely to invite retaliation from officials if institutional order is preserved. Thus, the extremely anti-social prisoner can enjoy the role of inmate champion, rather than the penalties given the self-seeker, if his aggression is directed against the "rat."

The "rat" is defined by inmates in terms of his non-assimilability within the prisoner groups according to inmate norms. A prisoner's assimilability involves his acceptability by the inmates and his acceptance, at least overtly, of the values and traditions of the inmate informal groups. Therefore, "assimilation" as a concept is appropriate at this discussion.

ASSIMILATION AND THE "RAT"

Clemmer uses the concept in the sense of a more or less unconscious process during which a person, or group of persons, learns enough of the culture of a social unit in which he is placed to make him characteristic of that unit. He presents "prisonization" as an adaptation of this concept to the taking on by the inmate "in a greater or less degree of the folkways, mores, customs and general culture of the penitentiary." He describes the general patterns of many newcomers' integration into prison life from initial external accommodation toward internalized assimilation of the values and attitudes characteristic of the prisoner culture.³

The effects of confinement press the newcomer toward affiliation with prisoner culture. Confinement subjects him to a repressive environment wherein protection of free society and maintenance of institutional order take precedence over his

individualized goals. Confinement involves the compulsory nature of his admission to this abnormal community, the restriction on his spacial mobility, and assignment to him of a subordinate and restricted social role. Inmates share the experience of rejection by outside society, with its consequential feelings of guilt, remorse, resentment, or hostility.⁴

Sharing with other inmates the experiences of confinement, the newcomer is encouraged to affiliate with informal, congeniality groups of prisoners bound by conduct codes, a communication system, and a structure defining rights and obligations. Through the emotional support of colleagues sharing the feelings of rejection and repression, the affiliation promises him a degree of protection against the blocking by official restrictions of his immediate wish-fulfillment. It appears reasonable to assume that a high proportion of the new prisoners enter this group life. Clemmer estimates some sixty per cent do so.

A clue to the nature of this group life lies in the characteristics of its leaders. Schrag found them to have served more years in prison, to have longer sentences remaining, to be more frequently charged with violent crimes, to be more likely to have been diagnosed officially as homosexual, psychoneurotic, or psychopathic, and to have had a significantly greater number of serious rule infractions.⁵ It would appear that the preferred personality characteristics stem from values emphasizing reaction against authority and presumed competency in various deviancy roles. However, beyond such values personified by preferred behavioral and personality models, Clemmer has noted that the inmate leader must have a reputation for reliable action according to prisoner values and must be "right." The latter was defined as "being faithful, trustworthy; opposed to tale bearing or 'snitching.'"⁶

Inmate groups define the "rat" for ostracism, and perhaps as a target for active aggression, because of violations of the inmate code in a manner deemed serious. It is not necessary always that such violations have been committed provided the subject has a reputation for not being "right" or if his personality characteristics open

⁴ For fuller evaluation, see SYKES, *THE SOCIETY OF CAPTIVES* ch. 4 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1958).

⁵ Schrag, *Leadership Among Prison Inmates*, 19 AM. SOC. REV. 40 (1954).

⁶ CLEMMER, *op. cit. supra* note 3, at 136-43.

³ CLEMMER, *THE PRISON COMMUNITY* 87, 299-301 (New York: Rinehart, 1958).

him to suspicion of special vulnerability for "rat" behavior.

Our study found the fifty "rats" to fall in two general categories: (a) Assimilated "Rats"—those who had been assimilated within the prisoner informal groups and had been accused of violating the inmate code; (b) Unassimilated "Rats"—those who had not been assimilated within these groups and nevertheless had been threatened because of alleged violations of the inmate code. Therefore, all "rats" had been found wanting relative to a code even if the subject had not accepted the code or had not been found acceptable for assimilation into inmate informal groups.

ALTERNATIVES TO PRISON ASSIMILATION

If the rehabilitation purposes of a correctional institution are to be achieved, this assimilation process must be challenged by a relatively homogeneous "official culture" to which the newcomer is to be assimilated through mutual effort of prisoner and official. Some aspects of this matter are treated in another paper.⁷

The custodial technology and concentration of power in officials would appear, at first glance, to give the formal organization complete control over inmates necessary for such assimilation. Even casual examination erases this impression. Sykes documents the failure of custodians to maintain institutional order in their skirmishes with the inmates individually and in informal groups. He points out the lack of essential ingredients for effecting compliance by the rules: The sense of duty as a motive for compliance and an effective, consistent system of rewards and punishments.⁸

The lack of a consistent set of organizational goals is a further handicap. Disillusionment with strictly punitive objectives has failed to bring philosophical unity among those who man the correctional bureaucracy. The prison is a hybrid among social institutions, a shot-gun marriage of dissimilar institutions: The army at war in terms of custody, the factory in terms of prison industries, and the school or hospital in terms of rehabilitation. This groups within a prison bureaucracy dissimilar professional personality types, each personifying dissimilar value systems and each assigning dissimilar roles to the inmate.

To affiliate with this formal organization, the

new inmate must overlook, or be unaware of, this philosophical disunity among his keepers. He must evaluate himself in terms of the role assigned, *i.e.*, as one who must be guarded and regarded with custodial suspicion, or one whose major deficiencies require rehabilitation, or one whose function is to work efficiently with minimum personal rewards. Furthermore, he must accept the restrictions and social stigma of confinement as a prerequisite.

The newcomer must express with care any affiliation with the formal organization in order to avoid inmate definition as an agent of officials. He must be at least tolerated by those with whom he lives in close physical proximity. If enmity of fellows is aroused, his assignment to the "rat" role can cause officials to suspect his motives in defining himself as a proper candidate for rehabilitation programs or as an ally of the custodial meriting special consideration and protection.

A third general alternative for the newcomer is alliance with a faction created as a form of accommodation between some inmates and some members of the lowest level of the status hierarchy of the formal organization. Harper describes these factions.⁹ Von Mering and King discuss the traditional custodial role which lends itself to this form of accommodation.¹⁰ Here formal organizational goals of a progressive correctional system are subverted in subtle fashion. Membership within these factions usually subjects the inmate to the role of dependent personality in his relationships with officials. Rehabilitation objectives may be served, but the opposite is just as likely. This alternative is a form of accommodation for purposes of reducing conflict and of achieving a measure of security for individuals, rather than learning of the culture of a social unit. Therefore, this does not qualify as assimilation.

The same assessment can be made of a fourth general alternative for the newcomer. He may avoid commitment to any grouping by assuming the role of a social isolate. If marked and habitual isolation from all social groups was not characteristic of the inmate's earlier life, this requires unusual self-reliance and moral independence when incarceration is prolonged. Clemmer's discussion of

⁹ Harper, *The Role of the "Fringer" in a State Prison for Women*, 31 SOCIAL FORCES 53-60 (1932).

¹⁰ VON MERING & KING, *REMOTIVATING THE MENTAL PATIENT* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1957).

⁷ Johnson, *Bureaucracy in the Rehabilitation Institution: Lower Level Staff as a Treatment Resource*, 38 SOCIAL FORCES 355-59 (1960).

⁸ SYKES, *op. cit. supra* note 4, ch. 3.

the "Semisolitary Man" and the "Complete Solitary Man" is pertinent.¹¹

VARIETIES OF "RATS"

Assimilated "Rats" were found to include three sub-types: Quislings, Cornered "Rats," and Accommodated "Rats." Quislings are considered by their fellows to have accepted a formal or informal role within the official organization for personal gain in a manner which threatens the achievement of inmate informal group goals or the achievement of inmate-approved personal goals of other individual prisoners. This may involve a formal role whose essential function within the official organization requires open opposition to inmate-approved values. An example would be the formal role of "Dog Boy" found in Southern prison systems for bloodhound handling on prisoner escape chases. Other formal roles, such as inmate clerk, places the inmate within the formal organization where he may serve as a communication link between officials and inmates. However, he may remain neutral as a social isolate or he may pervert his formal role to serve the ends of inmate informal groups. He may be subject to definition as a Quisling when he supplements this formal role with the informal role of regular informant for officials.

Cornered "Rats" and Accommodated "Rats" make up the remainder of the Assimilated "Rats." They differ only in the quality of their response to the experience of being defined as outcasts by their fellows. Usually all Assimilated "Rats" become outcasts on the basis of some specific incident which reverses their previous acceptance among inmate informal groups. The Cornered "Rat" reacts to this experience with extreme anxiety, inviting further inmate threats because of his unusual qualification as a target for aggression and, thereby, increasing the seriousness of his plight. In contrast, the Accommodated "Rat" employs his wit and/or physical strength to attempt control over his new situation for creating a new equilibrium in his interrelationships with other inmates. He strives to postpone or prevent overt conflict, at least mitigating inmate opposition. Sometimes he solicits officials for sanctuary if these efforts fail. One such inmate wrote an official:

"I have been labelled an informer. I am aware of my present status and have made every effort

to amend it. I have cooperated with officials in every way. Word has been sent to my camp by one of the prisoners who was at the camp where I was attacked. I am to appear before the Grand Jury against the two prisoners who attacked me. It won't be long before the same thing happens again. I am at the end of my rope. I am partially crippled in my right leg. I am not able to fight any more. The only recourse I have is the official side, so I would appreciate your intercession. I have turned to the officials after all these years. I can't go back to the convict side. I am trusting you to find me a place comparatively safe. I admit my past has been pretty bad but from where I stand now I can't go back."

Unassimilated "Rats" also have three sub-types: Unsocialized, Mentally Maladjusted, and Flaccid "Rats." The lack of assimilation to the inmate culture does not necessarily indicate either a high rehabilitation potential or the absence of criminal personality qualities. The lack of assimilation may stem from a general inability to integrate themselves within any social grouping or accept social norms requiring at least minimal consideration for the interests and values of peers. When these disabilities are combined with a specific incident which causes the inmate to be defined in the informal inmate groups to be an enemy, the "rat" role becomes pertinent.

The Mentally Maladjusted subtype has an unusual degree of persecutory ideation which would not appear substantiated by facts. It is not necessary that the degree of this ideation qualify the subject as a psychotic. His habitual suspicion of others deludes him into the assumption that he has been labelled a "rat." Since confinement creates an environment pregnant with suspicion and because he lacks skills in interpersonal relationships, the subject already has been defined by inmates as a marginal individual. Therefore, his delusion and protestations of innocence against a role to which he actually has not been assigned is likely to be interpreted as "rat" behavior.

A dependent personality, the Flaccid "Rat" is characterized by lack of firmness and elasticity of personality, requiring guidance and support of others to afford goals and resources for attaining them. Inmates call him the "Sorry Rat." Confinement thrusts him into a social situation magnifying the effect of his weakness. Unable to choose sides in any value conflict, he is vulnerable particu-

¹¹ CLEMMER, *op. cit. supra* note 3, at 117-133

TABLE I

TYPE OF "RATS" REPORTED IN ONE STATE-WIDE PRISON SYSTEM BY TYPE OF INFRACTIONS BEFORE AND AFTER BEING SO DEFINED, 1958-1959

Type of "Rat"	General Type of Infraction of Prison Rules			
	Before Being Called "Rat"		After Being Called "Rat"	
	Disciplinary	Custodial	Disciplinary	Custodial
ASSIMILATED (23).....	43	56	9	12
Cornered (9).....	20	16	7	11
Quislings (9).....	18	25	2	1
Accommodated (5).....	5	15	—	—
UNASSIMILATED (27)....	59	31	16	3
Flaccid (8).....	24	11	9	2
Mentally Maladjusted (7).....	14	6	4	—
Unsocialized (12).....	21	14	3	1

* Statistic in parentheses is number of inmates so classified.

When the "disciplinary" columns are combined and the "custodial" columns also are combined, a chi-square value of 19.68 is obtained. This is significant at less than the 1 per cent level.

larly to pressures, tossed helplessly between contending forces because of his inability to accept firm allegiance to any group. He is selected out from the dependent personalities in the inmate population on the basis of some specific incident or because of his clumsy efforts to gain emotional support from officials. His personal weaknesses already have caused his peers and officials to define him as an appropriate candidate for the informer role. An incident finds him ripe for definition as a "rat." Resembling the Cornered "Rat" in his quickness to fear and his reluctance to retaliate, he is particularly appropriate to serve as a "drain" for "free-floating aggression."

The Unsocialized subtype has personal-social characteristics which alienate him from inmate informal groups. Sykes discusses the "Center Man" as the inmate who too blatantly takes "on the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of the custodians."¹² It is from this segment of Clemmer's "ungrouped" prisoners that the Unsocialized "Rat" is selected on the basis of an incident which

¹² SYKES, *op. cit.* *supra* note 4, at 5, 89-90.

TABLE II

NUMBER OF INFRACTIONS PER YEAR BEFORE AND AFTER DEFINITION AS "RAT" BY TYPE OF "RAT"

Type of "Rat"	Total Infractions per Year	Number of Infractions per Year*		
		Before Being Called "Rat"	After Being Called "Rat"	Percent Decrease
ASSIMILATED.....	1.15	1.21	.73	39.7
Cornered.....	1.45	1.61	1.21	24.8
Quislings.....	1.08	1.23	.40	67.5
Accommodated.....	.65	.82	.00	100.0
UNASSIMILATED.....	1.23	1.66	.56	66.3
Flaccid.....	1.85	2.30	1.14	50.4
Mentally Maladjusted..	.98	1.58	.34	78.5
Unsocialized.....	1.00	1.33	.32	75.9

* The total number of infractions committed during the period by prisoners in each category is divided by the number of years the prisoners were confined during the period either before or after they were recognized by officials to have been defined by the prisoners as "rats."

sparks latent inmate enmity. The subtype may violate the inmate code through ignorance of prison life, because a high proportion of them are first offenders. In other cases, the vocabulary, recreational interests, and personal tastes of a middle class prisoner may arouse ethnocentric prejudices of prisoners who stem largely from lower socio-economic strata. If the prisoner lacks flexibility in adjustment to new circumstances, he may indicate aloofness from, and disdain for, his peers and their values. Superior formal education or vocational experience may give the prisoner an advantage in competing for strategic formal roles with the prison's formal structure. In the performance of such roles, the prisoner may indicate his preference for certain officials with similar social class qualities as against his fellow inmates. On the other hand, his personal maladjustment may cause him to rebel against institutional authority but in a manner which indicates his disdain for fellow prisoners and their values. Again, as a personality already found by inmates to be marginal, he is particularly vulnerable to definition as a "rat" if an incident places him in serious conflict with inmate values. The following letter from an inmate describes the effects of such an incident

on a bad check writer ignorant of the patterns of prison life:

"This is first time in my life to be in any trouble or any prison. I was stupid to the ways of prison life. I did not feel very good one day. A convict told me he could get me something for \$1.50 so I would feel better. I never heard of a whammy nose inhaler before. So stupid me, I holdly carried it in my pocket. I found out how the whammies were getting in. The officials wanted to know where I got mine. I broke down and cried and told everything. Convicts call this a rat. But I was doing my duty. In doing so, I know I prevented three convicts from overpowering a guard to escape. . . . I also told of a convict planning to rob a grocery store when he was released. I wasn't trying to get by with anything under the watchful eyes of this prison system. . . . I have learned my lesson well and never no more will I commit a crime. I am truly ashamed for the disgrace I brought on myself and my family."

Although infractions suffer from the unreliability characteristic of most criminal statistical attributes, the infraction records of the fifty "rats" are summarized in Table I to offer a crude index of their response to their assigned role. To eliminate the extraneous influence of variations in the length of the period of confinement, annual infraction rates are presented in Table II.

We hypothesize that assignment to the role of "rat" causes an inmate to court official protection through reduction of behavior likely to incur punishment. Therefore, the infraction rate should be less after such assignment than previous to it. Table II supports this hypothesis. The smallest decline is for Cornered and Flaccid "rat." This might be explained by the probability that the anxiety-ridden prisoner would solicit punitive segregation as a refuge.

Differentiation between "disciplinary" and "custodial" infractions appears to support the view that Assimilated "Rats" differ from Unassimilated "Rats" in their reaction social environment of confinement. "Disciplinary" infractions are defined as non-violent violations of work, moral, and other behavioral norms deemed by officials to be essential to orderly life within an authoritarian community. "Custodial" infractions involve violence, escapes, and other direct assaults on institutional security. Assimilated "Rats" had a proportionately greater share of "custodial" infractions as one might expect of the "prison-wise" inmate. Unassimilated "Rats" reflected their inferior success in adjusting to the regimented environment with their emphasis on "disciplinary" infractions.

Confinement thrusts the prisoner into a situation characterized by the conflict between two major value systems. In theory, the values of the formal organization support resocialization of the inmate and press him toward "good citizenship." The values of the inmate informal organization center around opposition to the objectives of the formal organization and gaining of personal objectives. Through confinement, isolation from outside society subjects the inmate to this value clash in unfamiliar situations. Although the new prisoner is likely to be deficient in the maturity and self-insights required for effective decision-making, the conditions created by confinement require that he take a personal stand of fundamental importance in determining the ultimate significance of his imprisonment. The existence of the "rat" indicates the risks involved in avoiding or reversing this decision. Furthermore, the "rat" as a product of the assimilation process illustrates the cost to the individual prisoner of the sociology of confinement.