

Self-Management and Meal Experiences in Swedish Prisons

Inger M Jonsson and Marianne Pipping Ekström

Department of Restaurant and Culinary Arts, Örebro University

marianne.p-e@telia.com, inger.m.jonsson@rhs.oru.se

Prisoners are given a greater responsibility for their daily living. When introducing the self-management system concerning food (planning, cooking and eating), problems occurred, which were not expected by the staff. We were invited to visit a prison for women, where the self-management system had been introduced, to meet their daily living and discuss problems with the prisoners and the staff. We also gave some lectures and together with employees discussed the problems. Although the prison is a closed system, we found equal episodes and feelings as in society. We found fight for positions and identity with the help of food. Food is not feed. Food is a system of communication, as Mary Douglas once stated. Power, gender, ethnicity and culture are key symbols for understanding the problems. Self-management appeared to be a much more complex project than just to learn or practice cooking, which was the original idea of self-management.

Self-Management and Meal Experiences in Swedish Prisons

In Sweden there is an ongoing discussion about how to prevent prisoners from being institutionalised and how best to prepare them for life outside prison once they are released. To that end the everyday self-maintenance activities of daily life in prison, such as cleaning, washing and feeding, are organised in a way that they relate to the manner in which they are carried out, outside of prison. With the completion of a small-scale project on Self-management in prisons in 2001 the Swedish Prison and Probation has continued to work on developing a programme for self-management. In the Government budget proposition from 2006 it was decided that this programme should be developed further and introduced in all Swedish prisons.

Self-management concerning food is described as follows: (our translation) with the aim of instilling greater individual responsibility in different stages prisoners take responsibility for daily life concerning living, work and leisure time and cook all their own meals every day of the week. The purpose of self-management is to increase individual's care for themselves and respect for others and also give responsibility to prisoners for a 'household' budget. This is intended to counteract the damages of institutional living. For the staff this means not acting as leaders. Therefore they require both supervision and training. The prisoners' ability to handle everyday life should not, it is argued, deteriorate during their time in prison. Rather, the prisoners' personal responsibility for daily life and care practices should be developed and improved, for example by introducing self-care and self-management systems concerning cleaning and washing and also food planning, cooking and eating. This applies not only to their time in prison but also is seen as important in improving their living conditions in future life after they leave prison.¹ (Kriminalvården 2006a; Kriminalvården 2006b).

How We Were Involved

As researchers of family and food we, Inger M Jonsson and Marianne Pipping Ekström, were invited in September 2006 to give a lecture to an audience of people involved in self-management programmes in Swedish prisons. In order to become more acquainted with the environment we spend a day at a Swedish prison for women. There are five prisons for women in Sweden; the one we visited is one of the largest with about 100 inmates. There are in total 250 women in prisons in Sweden, which means women make up around 5-6 per cent of all prisoners in the country (Kriminalvården 2006). At the prison we met both staff and inmates. We spent the whole day with one of the chief inspectors and the project leader. The latter is responsible for the implementation and development of self-management throughout Sweden. They took us on a tour of the prison. We met the chief inspector on the upper level and the ordinary prison staff (both men and women). We spoke with and observed them both in the different prison departments where the prisoners live and also in a 'round table talk' with the inspector and the project leader. We would label this study a minor field study with observation from the inside (Bosworth 2005).

Intentions of Public Health

A Swedish study of everyday life conditions in prisons shows that most prisoners come from highly disadvantaged sections of society. As a proportion, the figures are much higher than in the population as a whole and particularly in relation to women/female prisoners. (Fritzell and Lundberg 1994; Nilsson 2000). Another study of 100 Swedish imprisoned male offenders examined relevant social factors such as criminal records and addiction, quality of social networks, lodging situations, economic status, work and leisure time (Rydén-Lodi

1 Kriminalvård 2006, Självförvaltning, information och vägledning.

2005). Both studies ignore the factor of food. An article written by Catrin Smith, in UK, raises the question of whether it's possible to promote healthy living in prisons. Her article is titled "‘Healthy Prisons’: A Contradiction in terms?" (Smith 2000). She continues:

Imprisonment, almost by definition, has an impact on health and wellbeing. Individuals are taken out of society and away from the people and places that characterise their daily lives. In prison they are subject to processes of control which, beginning with reception procedures, represent tangible sources of suffering that threaten physical, mental and emotional health.

Although food is not mentioned in the research on prisoners' health, *Kriminalvårdsstyrelsen*, in their health promotion programme for self-care and self-management, focus on food, cooking, meals and housework (Kriminalvården 2006a). We found this to be very identical to the style of work in the compulsory school subject 'Home Economics' (Skolverket 2002).

Women prisoners have been identified as a group for whom health promotion is seen as especially important, not merely for their own benefit, but also because of their assumed responsibility for the health of others. In a thematic review of women's prisons it is suggested that imprisonment offers a unique opportunity to "reach the female population and through them their families" (Smith 2002). So, as is stated for example by Chris Shilling in his book *The Body in Culture, Technology & Society*, women are expected not only to take care of their own bodies, but also other people's bodies and hunger (Shilling 2005).

Impressions from the Visit at the Prison for Women

On the way to the women's prison we drove through beautiful countryside with green fields, cottages and small villages nearby. We arrived at the prison where we had to leave our cell phones and identity cards at the checkpoint. After being searched more rigorously than at an airport we were welcomed with coffee and a small talk from the project leader and the two chief inspectors, who then also gave us a tour of the prison, focusing on areas where food is stored and prepared and meals served.

Walking around we found that the kitchen and dinner table were in the centre of each living department. Also in the centre there was a 'room in the room', a room with windows where the staff could sit and watch the activities. We met the prisoners 'in action' as they were preparing dinner, laying the table and so on. We asked them about their opinions of Self-management and their experiences of food and meals in prison. They showed us how they stored the food that their group had decided to order from the communal store. We then had lunch in the prison canteen together with some of the staff. There was also a small shop, we were told, for the prisoners stocked with a few food items as well as candy, cigarettes, magazines etc. We did not visit the shop.

We found that amongst both the staff and prisoners there were some very different opinions about Self-management. Some were very pleased with it whilst others questioned the whole idea. Some were almost euphoric about the possibility of giving the prisoners an opportunity to prepare their own meals and eat together. We found that meals in the Self-management programme (Kriminalvården 2006a; Kriminalvården 2006b) were seen by staff and proponents/supporters of the programme as social events, as part of building a social community. However, as we saw it, this position on meals paid little consideration to the fact that people from different cultures and with different problems are put together, locked into a limited, enclosed space. In the prison we visited, it had not worked out as expected. Far from being an inclusive social community sharing social events the female prisoners quarrelled, became hostile and developed enemies. Furthermore, the staff pointed out that what they called 'racism' was a big problem.

The idea is that the group that lives together in one prison department should plan their household menus, shopping lists and so on together. They should cook and have meals with each other. They were supposed to take turn but in reality there were often just a few women who took the whole responsibility, all the others having to give in and accept the food choices that had been made on their behalf. We were told that sometimes when a group of prisoners realise which person had been the “chef of the menu” for the day it could start group rejections and eating protests. It could be discussions about the hygiene in the preparation. Some people refused to eat the food prepared by others. This could be linked to discussions about food as a gift and how, by eating, you incorporate another person in your body (Fürst 1995). The staff looks upon the Self-management system as a kind of reward system “something good for you”, “a reward expressed as the gift of making your own food”. This could be compared to an interview with a long time female prisoner that states “I am so tired of being grateful” and concludes:

In a prison you lose control over most of it, you fight for what you can control, for instance your body, what and when you eat. When you do your physical exercise, actually it is not strange at all (Björling 2006).

We were also told that the staff had found out that food is heavily connected with feelings: “We are going crazy! They suffocate us with divergent diets. They all get their own little pot”.

This meant, as we saw it, a lot of often quite emotional discussions (ie. ‘with feelings’) between the staff and prisoners about such issues as allergic symptoms and cultural traditions. A fight for power with food as the weapon!

The prisoners told us about problems with the purchase lists. Once a week they wrote purchase lists, based on the planned menu. One example was when they had ordered low fat milk. They just get half of the ordered amount, because the kitchen staff judged it as an unnecessary amount of milk. Without the milk the prisoners thought it wasn’t possible to cook what they had decided beforehand. The ‘kitchen’s’ opinion was that low fat milk and ‘Kesella’ were food items they had not used earlier. “Why not take water instead!” they said. And then the female prisoner cried. The staff considered this a fight for power.

The prisoners are far from homogeneous in their relations to food and food preparation. Some are interested in cooking others are not. Some of them know how to cook, they have had a household of their own, but others have never in their life had to prepare food before. “My mother did all the cooking, I never had to”, said one of the prisoners. She also refused to go to school during the cooking lessons in compulsory school.

The staff gave examples of what they called ‘queens’. This means women, who set the frame for what is the right way of cooking. They act like leaders and command the others to serve them. There are also some women, who think cooking is boring and prefer to work in the ‘industry’ or go to school (special educational programmes at the institutions).

As we see it ‘food in prison’ makes the inmates both subjects and objects. Here we see the contradiction in terms (Smith 2000) as Smith said about healthy food programmes in prison. Here it can be seen in the female prisoners’ feelings of being objects of rehabilitation and education etc whilst at the same time being the subjects of a programme, which is expressed as a gift and an advantage, which they should be grateful for. As subjects, the prisoners use food as a tool in fighting for power.

Impressions from Meeting the Staff at the Seminar

At the seminar there were presentations of the Self-management system from various prisons in Sweden. In one open institution the Self-management programme works has worked out

well. The prisoners do the shopping themselves. They handle the money and make notes in cashbooks. In this prison they have their own budget and, for example, have saved money for special occasions like Christmas etc.

Some examples were given from male institutions. They were rather pleased and worked hard to solve everyday problems concerning the Self-management system. Some departments had to redesign the kitchens and the storage systems. As we observed, and as we have noticed before in our research, men have a different relationship with food than that which women have. Food for men is an individual concept while for women food is 'for me and for others'. Women are supposed to be responsible for food both for themselves and for others too. One woman from the staff, who had worked in both male and female prisons, said:

Men really are something different in their relation to food. Among men it is very calm compared to an apartment for females. Women are constantly nagging.

One of the staff said:

"In my opinion it's important to teach men how to make porridge, so that they can make their own breakfast, cheaply and healthily. But most important is that they can cook a cheap meal and don't have to go to a gasoline station and steal some sandwiches for breakfast".

We can conclude that there are huge ongoing changes in the Swedish penal system in regards to the Self-management programme. Food and meals have really been put into focus. This makes it interesting to follow. We would like to look at gender aspects, ethnicity and the power relations connected with food. Therefore we have decided to search for funding to carry out a further, more developed study.

Referenser

- Björling, S. (2006). "Jag är trött på att förväntas vara tacksam". *Dagens Nyheter*. Stockholm: 24-25.
- Bosworth, M. (2005). "Doing Prison Research: Views From Inside." *Qualitative Inquiry* **11**(2): 249-264.
- Fritzell, J. and O. Lundberg, Eds. (1994). *Vardagens villkor. Levnadsförhållanden i Sverige under tre decennier*. Stockholm, Brombergs.
- Fürst, L. E. (1995). *Mat - et annet språk. Rationalitet, kropp och kvinnlighet*. Oslo, Pax förlag.
- Kriminalvården. (2006). "Kvinnor i fängelse"
http://www.kvv.se/templates/KVV_InfopageGeneral_2207.aspx.
- Kriminalvården (2006a). *Självförvaltning.Information och vägledning*. Norrköping, Kriminalvården.
- Kriminalvården (2006b). *Riktlinjer för självförvaltning*. Norrköping, Kriminalvården.
- Nilsson, A. (2000). "Gå direkt till fängelse utan att passera Gå. Välfärdsproblem bland fångar." *Nordisk tidskrift för Kriminalvårdsvetenskap* **87**(4): 289-301.
- Rydén-Lodi, B. (2005). *Inför frigivningen. Livssituationen inför frigivningen och egenbedömning av framtida återfall*. KVS rapport 2005:17. Norrköping, Kriminalvårdsstyrelsen.
- Shilling, C. (2005). *The Body in Culture, Thechnology & Society*. London, Sage
- Skolverket. (2002). Skolverket, Kursinformation 2001/02. Grundskolan. Hem- och Konsumentkunskap
http://www3.skolverket.se/BAS_CACHE/0102/D5SHSZX.htm." Retrieved 2002-05-06, 2002.

- Smith, C. (2000). "'Healthy Prisons': A Contradiction in Terms?" *The Howard Journal* **39**(4): 339-353.
- Smith, C. (2002). "Punishment and pleasure: women, food and the imprisoned body." *The Sociological Review* **50**(2): 197-214.