



Can a prison be self-managed? A study of the informal organisation of a bolivian prison

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the unique prisons of Bolivia. Their main features include the presence of wives and children, self-management of activities within the prison and the opportunity for inmates to take part in various activities. In particular, the general organisation of the prisons and the inmates' experience, especially on an interpersonal level, is described in this study. The obtained data shows that functional and effective experiences of social rehabilitation can be promoted even under extreme conditions and, in some cases, this provides important insights into the prison systems of most developed countries.

Keywords Deviance · Prison · Prison organization · Grounded theory · Self representation · Qualitative research

Introduction

In the field of public institutions, prisons are a permanent subject of study. In some countries, however, it is not easy to conduct researches in prisons for various reasons, including fear of data emerging which may be embarrassing for governments, difficulties organising interviews and questionnaires, and a general lack of access to prisoners or prison officers [1]. These aspects were also noted as making it difficult to carry out research in South American prisons [2].

Our firm was concerned with the organisational dynamics of prison treatment that involve a level of direct participation by inmates. This is firstly because the international literature shows that treatment that does not involve prisoners has no positive impact on relapse and reintegration.

A study by Lowen and Isaacs [3] shows that a long period of solitary confinement in prison can have a severely negative impact on return experiences. In this

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regard, Colvin [4] argued that chronic criminals emerge from a development process characterised by recurrent and erratic episodes of coercion. Lutze and Bell [5] found that most programmes use a hypermasculine paramilitary prison facility to deter, punish and rehabilitate. However, the approach used in the present study reinforces a discussion of hypermasculine behaviours which were found to be highly correlated with criminal behaviour. In a study on the New Mexico Penitentiary, Colvin [6] also found that a tough coercion regime can maintain order but produce prisoners who are docile and unprepared to become productive citizens.

In addition, the international literature has also highlighted that participation of prisoners in programmes has always been considered extremely important in enabling social rehabilitation. External institutions can have a major impact on social reintegration, reducing detention costs and making prison institutions more humane [7]. It is also known that external rehabilitation activities seem to effectively encourage greater prisoner autonomy and a less restrictive prison environment [8,9]. Christian et al. [10] pointed out that there are several benefits in allowing the prisoner to maintain family ties during the period of detention and especially after release. The results show that the level and type of contact with family members while being in prison can have a positive influence on the quality of the prisoner's relationships outside the prison. This is corroborated by the findings of the study of La Vigne et al. [11]. Further, the study of Bales and Mears [12] indicated that constant family visits reduce and delay recidivism and make it less harsh. In a research on entrepreneurship related to activities in some Bolivian prisons, Downing [13] found that the need for small business activities allow a mechanism of rehabilitation of successful prisoners.

A combination of data (family ties and visits, exercise of collective responsibility, decision making, autonomy of prisoners) is present pertaining to the unique Bolivian prison model, where the participation of prisoners is maximum, i.e. the prison is self-managed. However, to the extent of my knowledge, there is no empirical research that has studied this organisation.

From the few existing essays on the subject, it is evident that the Bolivian prisons are self-managed, i.e. managed by the inmates, including their spouses and children, and that the regulation of activities is similar to the conditions in the external world. Wives, children and pets can live in the cells in these prisons. Detainees and their loved ones move freely within the prison and are not required to wear uniforms [14, 15]. Article 26 of the Criminal Law in Bolivia allows children under 6 years of age to live in prison [16]. However, children beyond this age also stay. In December 2017, the Bolivian Penitentiary reported that 550 children were living with their parents in various prisons across the country [17].

These specific characteristics make it extremely important to deepen the understanding of this organisational model, more so because this approach has been described as a spontaneous product and occurred with a low level of investment [14,18].

In fact, Bolivia is the fourth most overcrowded country in Latin America after Haiti, El Salvador and Venezuela. Globally, 51 countries have an occupancy rate that is 150% above their capacity, which causes extreme overcrowding. Bolivia is one such country with varying percentages in different prisons and an average overcrowding rate of 225%. According to the data, there are 19,120 prisoners in

the country. Moreover, overcrowding is increasingly worrying due to the excessive growth of the prison population mainly due to specific measures taken against coca growers, who are an integral part of the country's cultural and economic tradition. In Bolivia, there are 54 prisons with a total capacity of 5800. The number of detainees was passed from 7782 in 2006 to 19,000 in 2019, while the number of places stayed the same [19].

Bolivian prisons are part of the common tradition of penal systems in Latin America that are based on ideological and repressive models that have little to do with the identity and ideals of justice that are specific to Western society. Believing criminals to be unworthy of any attention – a colonial vision inherited from the past – this approach has involved a very low investment of state public resources to such an extent that the prison regime has taken shape based on the practices implemented by prisoners for their survival. This regime can be defined as "semi-open" since all prisoners, regardless of the offence, live together in the same penal space [18].

The combination of these factors has shown that the gap between the explicitly stated objectives to legitimise the punitive model and the actual level of functioning of the penal system is immense [20]. The so-called rehabilitation contained in all penal laws as a target of imprisonment with the various ethical considerations for the human being and their resocialization does not seem to be in force due to the claimed lack of state resources to improve infrastructure or have specialized personnel for the execution of the process to accompany the rehabilitation (Pinto Quintanilla, 2004). Except for maximum security prisons, built ad hoc according to different standards, most prisons (prizon and carceles) are improvised rooms – sometimes old houses or monasteries – with various structural dysfunctions.

The present reserach aims to study two prisons in Bolivia whose features seem unique compared to other prisons worldwide. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate the uniqueness of the Bolivian prison and enhance its visibility.

The main intent is to describe the general organisation of the prisons and the implications of this type of organisation for detainees, adult relatives and children. In the global context, it is necessary to study self-managed prisons' organisation, attempting to conceptualise some organisational requirements and, in the local context, to understand whether this 'natural' organisation has socialisation value. Another added value of this research arises from having directly interviewed the inmates involved in the prison's organisational government.

Methods

The researcher's interest in Bolivian prisons was motivated by the fact that research on them is limited. The few studies on this topic [14, 15, 21] seem to suggest that prison self-management and the presence of wives and children produces 'natural' conditions of social rehabilitation and not merely punitive ones. Therefore, this study aimed to conduct an in-depth study on such forms of prison organisation and how they influence prisoners.

The present study utilises qualitative research methodology aimed at investigating meanings, contexts, rules of interaction and viewpoints that cannot be generalised. The epistemological structure of qualitative research is grounded in the social field, holding that there is no single objective universal truth [22] and that above all there is no truth separate from the narratives that people provide or the meanings given to events. Reality, therefore, is process-based and as such depends on the perspectives of those who live the experiences and especially on how they describe them. In this sense, events have different meanings for different people, according to the symbolic contexts they are placed into [23]. For this reason, through qualitative research, people's experiences of their social worlds and their usage of certain social rules for living in the context which they are placed into can be determined [24].

Furthermore, the complete absence of a priori knowledge about such prison regimes prompted us to use the methodology of grounded theory to capture the voice of the prisoners, whose reality of living in prison and subsequent theories about the same are captured. Grounded theory seems appropriate to bring out the process of social interactions within this type of a prison due to the lack of studies and validated theories on this topic.

Additionally, the research design was supported by forming the research questions based on their significance, the sampling method, research objectives and data collection as well as analysis using the grounded theory.

Research questions and significance of research

A literature review revealed that prison organisation in Bolivia is significantly different from the traditional regimes. In particular, the studies on the subject explicitly identify self-referential management, including activities inside the prisons that are very different from those in traditional prisons. Another important feature is that the prisoners' wives and children are allowed to live in the prison with them. Therefore, the research questions were formed as follows to highlight this organisation on a general level:

1. How do prisons that have self-organisation function? How are the daily activities carried out under such an organisation system?"
2. What is the lived experience of prisoners in a self-organised prison, especially with regards to its interpersonal aspects?"

Data collection

For this study, a total of 23 detainees were interviewed who were recruited through the snowball sampling technique, i.e. the existing self-generated sample of one person is interviewed who then spreads the word among acquaintances. Snowball sampling was chosen for several reasons: first, it was not possible to include all detainees in the research; second, since prisons are not a common research subject, word of mouth fosters prisoners' confidence in the researcher; third, time was limited for

this research; and lastly, open access to interviewees allowed researchers to capture more aspects of the process, in line with grounded theory.

The inmates who were interviewed had been imprisoned for more than three years and were all male. They were aged between 30 and 55 and each interview lasted approximately 15–25 min. The participants received complete information about the research, the identity of the researcher and other required information in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration, as revised in 1989. Moreover, anonymity and ethical conduct were ensured to the participants. For example, each of them was informed that no personal references would be made, nor would any recognisable elements be shared. The author also ensured non-disclosure of the name of the prison and explained the interest behind the study was solely in the organisation of the prison, rather than in the detainees themselves. Additionally, they were informed that this research intended to study the importance of the socialisation resulting from self-management. As described above, this research fits in with the studies undertaken by some prisons on the significance of social reintegration. Bolivian prisons are self-managed and allow families to be present, unlike traditional models; thus, it is useful to find out whether these features have an ‘internally’ re-socialising value.

Sampling method

The literature review revealed that there is not much research on Bolivian prisons. Moreover, it seems that they are little known worldwide. This research was made possible by contact with individuals operating inside the prison – affiliated with non-governmental organisations – who offered to volunteer to share their experiences. The high regard in which some volunteers held some of the detainees created a climate of trust, giving us the opportunity to conduct this research.

Research objectives

The research objectives are as follows:

1. Describing the prison’s general organisation.
2. Discussing inmates’ experience of self-managed prisons, especially with regards to interpersonal aspects.

Tools

For the first objective, the author used field notes, which is a process of direct observation on field [25]. For the second objective, the tool considered most relevant for the present study was semi-structured interviews. As is well known, the interview is a tool of choice for those involved in research in the social sphere using a qualitative approach [26]. In this case, the author defined a set of general and flexible guidelines, allowing the detainees to express themselves freely. Notably, flexibility here suggests that the approach was modified as needed to allow for a smooth flow of

responses, in accordance with the guidelines proposed by Strauss and Corbin [27] and the recommendations of other authors such Minichiello et al. [28].

The interviews were semi-structured and covered the following subject areas (based on our objectives): description of prison organisation; description of daily activities (work, leisure and study); description of the roles and the dynamics between these roles; and description of the internal management system of the prison. Due to the peculiarities of this prison's organisation, significant data was obtained through general questions. The interviews were conducted one-on-one.

Data analysis

Audio recordings were made of the interviews, then transcribed in order to provide a more precise description of the contents. The data were analysed using the grounded theory methodological approach [29, 27].

Many studies, in fact, consider grounded theory to be supported by a constructivist paradigm [30, 31]. Charmaz in 2000 coined the phrase "grounded constructivist theory," later used by several authors and applied in different disciplines [32]. The underlying belief of these authors is that the data does not provide a window on reality, but can be "built" from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural and structural context. In this sense, the procedure involves observation, collection, coding, categorizing data and theoretical references, which are in constant interaction. Subsequently, the content of the interviews was read several times to give familiarity with the contents of responses, the reading being performed within 4 months.

The data were then divided into themes and "units of analysis" based on what had emerged from the interviews. Within the areas identified, the process of identification of key issues [33] was carried out by finding the properties and issues most frequently reported by respondents. The description of the organisation of the context and the general purpose of the whole work was also emphasised. In order to convey correspondents' viewpoints precisely, many responses were reported verbatim [34]. In this way I have attempted to pass on experiences as evoked by participants [35].

In order to ensure a high level of quality research, Reid and Gough [36] have systematised certain criteria on the basis of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability [37]). These criteria were also used in this research. To these I used the criterion of reflexivity [38], i.e. the process of reflection was carried out by the researcher on the contingencies that arose during the process of the interview and analysis. As regards credibility [39] in our research, one of the critical points was the language used (Spanish) to conduct interviews, which was then translated into English for publication. I carried out the translation process with great care, for example, describing the question in detail to ensure it was understood. The questions were formulated to avoid technical terms. In addition to this, initial questions were all open to allow for full and free responses.

Another critical point was the fact that interviewees were not accustomed to answering these kinds of questions and were reluctant to express views about prison organisation. However, I made considerable efforts to protect anonymity, also implementing some basic conditions such as the choice of location: a meeting room used

by delegates. Meetings were then carried out in a very peaceful atmosphere, which favoured the production of detailed data. At the end of the interviews, I read and shared the meaning of what prisoners had expressed. Research data credibility was first confirmed by research participants. Regarding transferability [33], given the atypical nature of this prison organisation and the goal of describing it at a general level, I believe that such results can easily be obtained by other researchers. As for dependability [39], I prepared a short list of general questions that I intended to ask and collected data using an interview grid on general themes related to the research. I did, though, point out that each participant could freely express what they wanted to communicate, even on other issues. As concerns conformability [39], I adopted strategies to manage the risk of personal interpretation. Firstly, each interview was individually analysed, identifying the emerging themes and listing them in several categories. For example, the interviews, first individually and then jointly, were analysed by another researcher, with whom I provided examples in order to contradict previous observations. The unshared observations were not considered.

Results and discussion

Describing the prison's general organisation

With reference to the objective of describing the prison's general organisation, I list below the following field notes and descriptions obtained from detainees during interviews.

At the prison in Cochabamba, there are no guards or prison officers. The inmates hold the keys to the cells and can also buy a cell if they have disposable income. As the property of the prisoner, the cells are decorated according to the tastes of the owner, so in some cases there are private bathrooms, carpets and satellite TV. In most cases the cells are still crumbling, are called "coffins" and are rented out to other prisoners, many of whom pay rent to the owners. Those who cannot afford the rent, sleep in the prison corridors or courtyards. One of the prisons was designed to hold 250 people, but at the time of our research, there was an estimated population of about 1,250. The inmates try to rent or buy a cell and, in some cases, have restored a cell at their own expense to live in. In many cases, services are provided by inmates for other inmates. For example, some inmates who are carpenters use their craft to carry out work in the cells of other inmates. The same applies to detainees who are tradesmen, electricians, and doctors.

There is complete freedom over time management and activities, so that some take advantage of this to work, learn a trade or to attend university courses. Others continue to do what they did before going to prison. This is not about services offered by the prison administration, but about voluntary activities provided by international PVOs (private voluntary organisations) and ONGs (non-governmental organisations). Detainees reported that some have completed their studies in prison, some even managing to graduate, becoming lawyers, some of whom then return to serve inmates still in prison.

In the prisons there are chapels, restaurants, stalls, carpentry workshops, barber shops, small shops, an educational center, other workshops, pool halls, laundry rooms, classrooms, a pharmacy and a small football field. Many prisoners have different jobs and do various daily activities, not unlike the ones found on the streets of the city. Some of the products produced are sold outside the prison through family members, brokers or displayed in a small showcase placed immediately outside the prison.

Most of the rules of coexistence are managed by the "delegates," prisoners elected by all the other inmates through democratic elections. These are just like elections in any state, including lists of candidate with electoral programmes. In order to be eligible, candidates must own a cell and have been prison residents for at least 6 months, and cannot have contracted debts. Immediately after the election, representatives of specific committees are elected, such as housing, culture, sports, education, health, plus secretaries and regulatory control representatives. In the regulatory control committee, decisions are made regarding controversies and punishment for misconduct. Here it may be decided to send prisoners to solitary confinement for a pre-arranged time. Those held in these solitary cells do not have access to commercial activities and restaurants in the prison. The isolation cells are located immediately outside the area occupied by detainees, at the entrance of the prison and resemble those of traditional prisons. They are patrolled by guard officers (not detainees), who also have the task of providing the inmates with their daily food. The guards are placed at the entrance of the prison and have as their sole purpose the job of keeping the inmates in the prison and controlling people who enter. Only in very serious situations, such as suspicious deaths, may the administration decide to transfer elected delegates to another prison, thus creating the opportunity for new elections.

Children and spouses can therefore come and go as they please, although they pay a small fee to the guards. The commission that deals with children living with their parents in prison controls the behavior of prisoners towards children, and "in the event that some harm is done to a child," the prisoner is punished. The rule is not to involve children in situations of conflict between adults. In some cases, the inmates said they tried to protect the children. For instance, there is an agreement among prisoners not to argue in front of children. In cases where there might be a fight, '... the children are placed in a safe place'.

According to a report published in 2012 by the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, some women identify coercion by their partners and drug addiction as reasons for participating in illegal activities. Many of them have talked about physical, psychological or sexual violence at the hands of their partner or a family member. As has been documented in other Latin American countries, poverty and economic necessity have led some women, particularly single mothers, to become involved in the drug business [40]. In 2016, 75% of women over the age of 15 in Bolivia reported experiencing domestic violence, and 81% of single women were victims of some form of domestic violence by their former partners [41]. In times of economic hardship, poor women who care for children, the elderly or other dependents may resort to drug-related activities to support their families. The arrest and imprisonment of these people brings more pressure on families and also leads to the

need to find basic resources for dependent people, who may in turn be likely to be involved in illegal activities [42].

It emerged from interviews that although delegate elections were absolutely democratic, detainees with greater wealth and influence over others had better chances of winning. Previously delegations had been formed which used violent and repressive methods against detainees, extorting them and their families depending on their social and economic status. Often these were rich people who promised prisoners better living conditions, a promise that was almost always broken.

The prison administration receives a sum of money for each inmate from the relevant government ministry, which it uses to purchase the food they need for a daily breakfast (tea plus bread) and communal lunch. According to delegates, for some years this daily allowance has not reflected the actual cost of food, resulting in a fall in food quantity and quality, and they claim that the communal lunch provided by the state is considered "inedible" by prisoners, "animal fodder", so much so that inmates organise themselves foodwise either by their own means. Due to this situation, prisoners feel compelled to increase their income, often by working for other detainees, for example cleaning toilets or cells.

The activities of delegates are funded in part by a contribution paid by prisoners when entering and when leaving the jail. A contribution is also paid by family members whenever entering or leaving the prison. At the time of this study, the fee was two Bolivian pesos. A fee is also paid to get out of jail when their sentence comes to an end or when the judge, for lack of evidence, acquits the defendant. In some cases, detainees, despite having served their sentences, are unable to get out because they have not paid the exit fee. In Bolivian prisons, the recidivism rate is about 45% after leaving prison. The phase that is defined as most critical is the post-prison period, because ex-prisoners lack a social network to support their reintegration with society. Society seems to be guided by prejudices against ex-convicts, which contribute to stigmatisation, making a biographical and narrative turning point difficult [43, 44].

This major social problem has been addressed through two regulatory interventions that have attempted to systematically promote the social rehabilitation processes. The first is the Plan Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana (Ley No. 264 of 31 de julio de 2012), which developed an action plan for city security, crime prevention and the promotion of respect for human rights. In this plan, coercion is abandoned at the legislative level, giving more power to the institutions and raising the co-responsibility of the community through the construction of a "culture of peace". Given the number of prison facilities, Bolivia appears to be one of the most dangerous countries on the South American continent and the third country because of the high prison overcrowding index. [43]. This situation puts at risk the security of prisons where many prisoners die, with high levels of violence and corruption within the institutions. Internal professionals are responsible for a disproportionate number of users and guarantee their presence for a few days a month [43].

As for drug use, Bolivia has one of the highest drug use rates in the world [40]. In prison, about 30% of the prisoners have committed crimes related to drug use. In the past, this figure was over 45%. Among the explanations, there is a development of tools to produce drugs and the involvement of children and young people, who are

"untraceable" and against whom there are no legal proceedings [18]. The presence of children in prison exposes them to acting as couriers and corruption makes prison a place where drugs are used or sold [45]. An additional element of complexity is that there is an ancient tradition of growing and using coca leaves in the country.

In fact, the economic activity revolves around coca leaf, both legal and illegal, involving about 45,000 farming families making a living from coca leaf cultivation, as well as thousands of people arrested each year for involvement in the processing and transportation of illegal coca leaf derivatives [46].

How do the inmates experience this self-managed prison organisation?

Five significant aspects were identified.

The idea of reuniting with wife and children is crucial to a better life in prison.

A general theory of the respondents was that the family provided fundamental support in surviving at the prison, specifically to, first, manage everyday life better and, second, mitigate feelings of jealousy and concern related to the wife being outside, leading to fears of the wife starting a new life with another man, especially as many prisoners' wives would decide not to stay with their husbands in prison. Wives are given the task of helping their husbands during the difficult period of incarceration. Some detainees claimed that '... wives relieve the pains of this infernal prison' and '... if it wasn't for her, I would have killed myself'.

The idea is that wives are healthy for inmates in prison and for the whole jail is perceived as a 'source of happiness for moments of conviviality' and also as a 'cause for conflict reduction'.

The role of the wife, as per the respondents' discourses, is predominantly that of help and welfare. These were derived from answers on what women do for their husbands and how they help them survive the harsh reality of prison. In some cases, they talked about wives providing them with company and entertainment. Notably, there was no mention or implication of how the wives they can live upon reuniting nor of their experiences of personal or professional lives. This suggests that there are also gender differences in the Bolivian society, with subordination between the husband and wife. For instance, it is known that families are often led by women, both administratively and in general management (La Razon, 2014). This could explain the sense of responsibility women have towards their family and their husbands, as well as the consequent welfare attitude on part of the husbands. Another aspect is that the presence of wives in prison led to the use of husband and wife 'roles', which possibly had the consequence of limiting traditional prison experiences. This should be noted with caution, however, as the wives' entry into prison is still based more on veiled constraints or emotional needs.

With regard to children, some detainees argued that '... it is better for children to be here in prison than live outside on the streets,' while others said '... living outside could be very dangerous', '...they do not have relatives and would suffer hardship' and "... could not face life outside the prison'. However, the belief that prison

is not the best environment for children is certainly widespread and was shared by many respondents.

Some of the inmates recognised that '...in prison, however, the children see very hard scenes' or '...if there weren't some good people (Researcher's note: NGO volunteers who organise entertainment activities and games), children would become adults in a hurry'. In this context, some said that it is difficult to '... protect children from risky situations' as the living space is so confined that any exchange between the parents such as disputes, sexual activity or drunkenness is immediately evident to the child.

Overall, taking children to prison seems to be the best possible scenario because it falls between two extreme choices: exposing children to the prison environment and the risk and danger they may be exposed to outside the prison. So, prisoners accept a solution that works as a compromise, implying that they can not find a better solution for the children outside the prison. Respondents also seemed to be choosing for the sake of their children and this seems more like a delegated choice, rather than a responsible one. These aspects definitely intersect with certain social conditions; in fact, as far as infrastructure is concerned, the orphanages in Bolivia do not make for viable alternatives [47].

In Bolivia, children do not receive assistance from their extended families or the state [14]. Consequently, when one parent is arrested, the other parent is forced to seek employment, which prevents them from being able to look after their children [48, 48]. Therefore, the best option often is for the wife to move into jail to support her husband so as not to put their children at risk and also keep their family together [49]. When a mother is arrested, children may not receive any care as traditionally it is left entirely to the woman to look after children, data already found by Cebini [50]. In many cases, the family is comprised of children and a single- mother as the father has long before abandoned them.

In general, I remained cautious in assessing how the relationship between a husband and his wife and children in prison may have a welfare function or could be a situation of disadvantage and prejudice involving innocent people; therefore, the author wishes to stress the importance of exploring this issue further. In line with other studies, I noted that prisoners who were regularly visited by their family and friends showed more theoretical possibilities of practicing roles other than that of a prisoner and interpret what happens in prison in a non-self-referential way, suggesting less chances of violating probation, compared to other prisoners whose family ties were remarkably resistant to the negative influences of prison time. This further leads to the hypothesis that a relational exchange inside or outside prison can also promote successful prison and prison placements, which needs further investigation. This would confirm the same assumptions made by [51].

Sense of institutional abandonment and adaptive responses

The prison system was mainly described in terms of absence of services. Almost all respondents argued that the detainees are 'left to their own devices'. The structural conditions of the prison were inadequate and 'things do not work' was used to describe the same. Some mentioned old walls, inoperative electrical systems,

sanitation and hygiene as 'fit for animals'. Among the topics most often raised by respondents was the financial contribution by the prison administration. Most respondents reported the 'total absence' of prison administration. Some said, 'if we had to rely on the help of the prison administration, we would be unable to survive ...' and 'we are forced to find ways to earn a few coins, one way or another'. Some argued that the cost of living in Bolivia had increased, while the contribution for each prisoner had remained unchanged for decades and that '... things cost more than they receive'. A number of respondents reported that some detainees, in order to feed themselves, '... are forced to clean the cells of richer prisoners or undertake the maintenance of communal areas, work commissioned by the group of delegates at the head of the administration'. This possibility was considered favorable by some delegates and identified as an activity showing solidarity with those who do not work. Moreover, some respondents said that they were in the same situation but it was not possible to satisfy everyone. In some cases, the hardest jobs were entrusted to prisoners who had behaved badly towards the community, without payment.

Another recurring theme in the responses of those who were interviewed was food. Most of the respondents stated that '... the food is inedible' and that '... eating it can make you sick'. Some argued that '... besides the food being poor, it is not always possible to recognise the ingredients, and some of these are not edible'. Some said that the food was not always cooked properly. For this reason, most of the inmates preferred to buy food from the prisoners who sold it, if resources allowed them.

In general, the institution was experienced as absent, which became the reason for self-management, i.e. carry out activities within the prison such as selling, cooking, working, crafts to be sold through loved ones and keeping the exchange with the outside world alive. However, I found that these responses seem to influence interpersonal relationships and the way in which each person experiences the role of prisoner.

How the exchange between the inside and the outside takes place and what is specifically brought in is not clear. However, the suspicion is that there may be illegal activity involved but the same can not be derived from the participants' accounts.

Moreover, it seems to us that some conditions inside the prison such as continuing relationships with the outside world, the self-organised activities and management as well as the family's presence enable prisoners to go beyond the role of a detainee in the traditional sense. It was noticed that the free market and the possibility of having constant relationships with the outside world urged detainees to consider taking up jobs, ranging from barbers, soup manufacturers and head of public telephones to soft-drink sellers, cleaners and football tournament organiser. For example, when an order for the purchase of a product is made by one prisoner, it is directed to another detainee-as-employee for a product the latter created, who, in order to acquire the necessary raw materials, can also ask other inmates or their family members to supply these. One of the inmates said, 'Here, no one could produce anything without the help of others'. Additionally, the opportunity to receive visits creates a permanent interaction with the world outside the prison. The exchanges with their loved ones lead to a steady flow of information both inside and outside the prison, as also said by [52]. On the one hand, this flow of information facilitates economic exchanges between prisoners and the people outside. On the other, it can also expose children and women to situations and activities wherein they might be emotionally coerced.

Women are able to transport various materials into prison, and the importance of goods being exchanged between people both inside and outside the prison must not be underestimated as it increases the opportunity to engage in productive activities, which confirms what has already been found by Skarbek [49]. A small example that provides concrete evidence of the advantage of interacting with the outside world is that of the family bringing in food for their loved ones, given that the food supplied by the prison is considered inedible by most of the detainees [53]. This is also reflected in the report produced by the delegation of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which agreed that the food is not properly prepared and that the gastrointestinal infections reported by inmates may well be caused due to the same. The way in which prisoners are in favour of such exchanges with the outside world leads to the possibility that they may be experiencing prison life in an extremely negative way, conversely, it also creates the possibility that this may be functional for several other purposes. Thus, this aspect must be further researched.

A critical aspect that emerged is that such exchanges are not regulated in any way and, therefore, there is no data on how such exchanges are managed, according to a project of socialisation to community values.

Management for all, rather than repressive management

The detainees interviewed consistently referred to the past management of prisoners, talking about the group of delegates who were in charge of previous prisoners. Stories about the previous administration can be summed up in a few examples: 'In the past, the delegates acted violently towards detainees', '... in many cases, they extorted money from rich detainees', '... they threatened families of detainees' and '... they transformed the room used by the doctor into a place of physical torture'. Some respondents claimed that previous elections were based on threats and violence on the part of a dominant group. Some detainees argued that it was important to work for the good of all prisoners, not just for that of a few. Some said that it was difficult to deal with so many prisoners and that '... harsh methods should not be used'. Many detainees argued that it was impossible to maintain control over everyone because the numbers were much higher than the prison capacity. The groups of election winners were divided according to specific areas (work, cells, relationships with the prison administration, sports, etc.). Relationships with detainees were sustained through meetings between the prisoners and the representatives of delegations in specific areas. These meetings took place daily and ended in shared decision-making. Some respondents argued that this was not an easy situation, which often meant that 'those who disagree' did not always accept the decisions. Some detainees revealed that '... not everyone participates in these activities' and that '... in the past, the decisions were taken on the basis of pressure from the stronger ones'.

It was understood that the quality of relationships with other prisoners depended heavily on the group with 'power', i.e. the elected group of delegates and their policies. Although democratically elected, in the past – according to the prisoners – these representatives created an environment of violence and maltreatment. One of the various aspects described by detainees that may help them be active is participation in meetings organised by delegates to address everyday management.

These meetings could put prisoners in a position to face collective activities and 'domestic' issues related to their general coexistence and discovering of new ideas. This practice makes it possible for inmates to interact constantly with others, offering them an opportunity to be active members and have a voice in the prison community as well as be a part of the group. Even in the context of institutional anarchy characterised by occasional aspects of neglect and danger, these attempts at self-regulation of activities make one think, at least in intention, of participation schemes studied across the world such as the principle of participatory democracy [54], the mechanisms of self-enforcement [55], community development [56, 57], participatory empowerment [58], resilience [59], peer education and mediation [60]. Hence, the situation in the prison under the present study was found paradoxical, in which extreme experiences may contain germs of innovation. This finding is in line with what other studies have shown: some prison settings are more treatment-oriented, humane and rehabilitative than is commonly believed [61, 62, 63, 64, 65].

The author wishes to point out that the approach used by the two prisons studied is not defined on the basis of specific research studies. In fact, the approach used is totally improvised and doesn't follow a clear project intervention.

The idea of work as a tool for regulating interpersonal relationships in prison

Some detainees said that 'relations between prisoners depend very much on the organisation of work' in prison and that both 'commercial interests in the prison help to reduce conflict' and that relationships between detainees are also reinforced by work. According to some, 'the large amount and diversity of work are factors limiting the need to resort to violence'. The theory behind this is that decisions about prison work can affect relationships in prison and increase or decrease violence. On the one hand, choices at work seem to depend mainly on the management team, with the risk that they become an instrument of power.

On the other hand, the work could certainly allow some important social rehabilitation activities. The opportunity can offer the worker continuity or even create a new job, as in the case of those starting out in the workplace or those resuming their studies in prison. This is particularly important as there are few prisons where work is highly encouraged and supported. In addition to being a social microcosm, such a system is also a micro-economy that operates according to the basic principles of capitalism [12, 66]. Some detainees argued that this micro-economy may even be better than the national economy. In fact, this organisation is another example of a spontaneous self-organised prison community, as already found by Skarbek [67, 49, 50]. The work, when available, occupies the entire day. This is starkly different from most Western prisons, where prisoners often have feelings of worthlessness and wasted time. The suicide rate is significantly low, with suicides mostly being motivated by jealousy or sentimentality. The rate is similar to that outside the prison, whereas in Europe nowadays, suicides in prisons are far more common. The representation of various roles and social activities, such as priests, teachers, doctors and barbers, creates a situation similar to that outside prison.

The term 'city-oriented jails' intends to evoke how this organisation builds a community, similar to the one that exists in the outside world. This situation shows an implicit attention towards the resocialization activities which are common, for example, to the models of rehabilitative and restorative justice active today in many parts of the world [68].

According to this system, the offender must rectify the offence committed against the victim or the community as a whole. In order to do this, he must participate in probation paths, carrying out social activities that can rehabilitate him. The constant interactions between inmates, occurring within the context of different social roles (such as work roles), can certainly lessen feelings of being in prison, almost to the point of not considering oneself a prisoner [69]. In this arrangement, despite the harsh conditions, the prison can be regarded as an extension of the city or as 'a city within a city' and thus is better able to 'promote rehabilitation' [53].

The idea that justice is a remote and arbitrary institution

Many detainees describe their relationship with the justice system as 'paradoxical', 'distressing' and 'shocking'. The respondents seemed to not understand the logic of justice, which is reflected in the opinions they expressed. They believe that 'if you have money you can defend yourself better' and 'if you have no money, you are likely to rot in here for a long time'. For some, it means being able to pay a good lawyer. Many detainees claimed to be at the mercy of the system; they didn't believe there had been any progress in the legal process, particularly for inmates 'awaiting trial'. Furthermore, '... no one calls you, even after your release deadline'. One respondent stated that '... although the prison terms have expired, some inmates may not express their right to get out of jail'. Further, many stated that the courts were not able to address all the outstanding cases and that this explained the long durations for which detainees remained in custody. In many cases, the hearings were postponed by several months. The widespread belief was that the legal system was 'deeply unfair'.

With regards to the judiciary system, interviewees informed us that they were left 'on their own' and placed in a situation of anarchy and decay. The detainees saw the system as 'Kafkaesque', meaning completely arbitrary. The examples referred to some judges' decisions that seemed to depend on the 'income' of the indicted and on the considerable amount of work the judges have, which results in significant trial delays. There was no identification with the legal system as a whole, which was considered to be inefficient, unpredictable and even questionable [70].

Conclusion

The present work has described the situation of one of the world's most unusual prisons. In the literature, no other prisons like those in Bolivia were identified. With reference to the objective of describing prison organisation, some differences between Bolivian prisons and those elsewhere in the world have been highlighted: particularly regarding the presence of wives and children in prisons, the possibility of communication with the outside world and self-management.

As is known in Latin America, particularly in Bolivia, the issue of children living with parents in prison is a controversial one, raising several ethical, social and cultural questions. This self-management is conducted through the election of a ruling group (delegates) by the other prisoners – much like the election of any democratic country. Delegates are prisoners' representatives but are also responsible for various activities and organisation within the district. From our analysis, some theorisations emerged about the way of living in self-organisation prisons and some implications on this prison model and on its population.

Five aspects are highlighted: the idea that reuniting with the wife and children is crucial for an inmate's improvement in prison life; the sense of institutional abandonment and adaptive responses from repressive to participative management; the role of work as a tool for regulating interpersonal relationships in prison; and the judiciary system as a distant and arbitrary institution. These data integrate the little information present on the Bolivian prison and lend themselves for further investigation.

These narratives sometimes act as justification for keeping the prison's organisational system unaltered and, contrarily, as an expression of an ungoverned reality, in which there could be situations where injustice is perpetrated inside the prison. It is, therefore, imperative to consider this work as an introductory work on the comparison of an organisation completely different from other international prisons. It is hoped that other researchers can continue studying this topic and conduct research into such prison organisation.

Some limitations of this study include the number of interviews, the paucity of time and the precarious conditions under which the interviews took place. Another limitation was that the text obtained was translated into English, which may have resulted in loss of exact meaning of some idiomatic expressions. Another limitation concerned the lack of specific knowledge of the interviewees, which depends on their literacy level, educational qualifications and ethnicity.

Consequently, the generalization of the results should be cautiously avoided Ferreccio & Vianello, [71]. In addition, in some cases, the author wished to re-contact detainees to ask them other related questions, but this was not possible. Another limitation was the location of the interviews, which was in the prison, which is not a comfortable or relaxed place for both the researchers and respondents. Since this type of prison is unique in the world, a limitation was that of not being able to make specific comparisons. In fact, in the literature on this topic, there are very few studies and none on an organisational level.

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