

Disclaimer: This paper is a brief analysis of “The Role of Music Among Prisoners and Prison Staff: A Qualitative Research Study” by Ortal Edri and Moshe Bensimon. Any differences in interpretations are the responsibility of the author. If any errors are noted please inform the author. For a more comprehensive understanding of this subject, we recommend reading the original paper available in the *European Journal of Criminology*.

**Analysis of**

**The Role of Music Among Prisoners and Prison Staff: A Qualitative Research Study**

**By Ortal Edri and Moshe Bensimon**

Analysis by

Deborah McQueen

## Introduction

Ortal Edri and Moshe Bensimon have conducted and written a qualitative research article on the effects of music on prisoners and prison staff within Israeli prisons. It is considered a "first-of-its-kind" study and was led by Bensimon's ongoing work on defining the sociological effects of music within various subgroups in diverse populations. Their work addresses a gap in the literature on the relationship between music and prisoners and prison staff members (PSM).

Bensimon et al. examined the effects of music in the insular environment of prisoners in Israel and its impact on prison staff members (PSM). The key concepts for the study were revealed through direct interviews with ten convicted inmates and nine prison staff members. Those critical concepts included "different ways prisoners consume and are exposed to music; the role of music in provoking positive and negative feelings; the role of music in the relationships among inmates – closeness and conflicts; and the role of music in the relationships between prisoners and prison staff, particularly in terms of prison regulation of music consumption" (Edri & Bensimon, 2018, p. 633).

Prior research into prison music programs has primarily included prison education and therapeutic programs. The author intended to examine the effects of prisoners' personal choices on their listening to music. Prisoners listen to music independently during their free time for personal pleasure or to relieve boredom, such as background music while doing other tasks such as working, reading, or writing. The authors addressed a gap in the literature within this area of study and sought new insights to the current body of existing research."

The purpose of the present research was to examine the role of music in prisons on individual and interpersonal communication levels. This qualitative study examined how the prisoners experienced music, what contributed to their different interactions during incarceration

(with both prisoners and prison staff), and how the prison staff experienced the music that prisoners listened to.

Since prison staff members (PSM) are not allowed to listen to their music when on shift, the only music they hear is that which the inmates choose. This study looks at the impact of that music on PSM and its effect on them. Incidentally, both groups inhabit the same space but have wholly different objectives: prisoners are generally focused on regaining their freedom and often harbor deep resentments toward staff. In contrast, the staff is focused on maintaining security. It seems only appropriate to look at the intergroup relationships in response to music.

The authors state that no prior research has looked at these complex relationships through the influence of music, thus the impetus to focus on this area.

### **Methodology**

The authors conducted a content analysis with two population groups selected through purposeful sampling (Fetterman 1989, Mason 1986). Permission to conduct the study was granted through the Research Committee of the Israel Prison Service (IPS) and the Institutional Ethics Review Board of Bar-Ilan University.

The first group included ten inmates between the age of 20 to 60 serving long sentences in medium to high-security prisons. The second population group consisted of 9 members of staff from two different prisons with a minimum of three years of experience and aged 29-40. While small, the sample size of both groups fell within the required range for phenomenological research (five or six). (Creswell, 1998, Morse, 1994).

Content analysis of interviews with each group member revealed four central themes:

- The different ways prisoners consume and are exposed to music.
- The role of music in provoking positive and negative feelings.

- The role of music in the relationships among inmates – closeness and conflicts.
- The role of music in the relationships between prisoners and prison staff, particularly in terms of prison regulation of music consumption.

The researchers sought to answer the following research questions: "What is the role of music in the lives of prisoners? What music do prisoners listen to in prison? How are they exposed to music during their incarceration? What role does music play in the dynamic among prisoners and between prisoners and PSM? How do the staff members view the music they hear from the prisoners" (Edri & Bensimon, 2018, p. 635).

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research approach (Moustakas, 1991). Studies such as these generally focus on the "exploration of the meaning and interpretations that the research participants ascribe to a given phenomenon" (Van Manne, 2014) (Simon). The authors believed this method was highly suitable for determining meanings in situ.

Thematic analysis was carefully examined to identify all categories. The researchers applied the four stages of content analysis proposed by Strauss (1987): open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and core category. The data was collected through open-ended interviews. Questions for prisoners included: "How is music expressed in your daily life in prison? What do you feel when you hear music? In what situations do you listen to music? What type of music do you like, and why do you listen to that genre rather than others?" (Edri & Bensimon, 2018, p. 636).

Questions for PMS included: "What are the procedures/rules governing the prisoners' listening to music in the ward? What do you think the music the prisoners listen to does to them? How do the prisoners react to the music they listen to? What does the prisoners' music do to you? How do you react to it?" (Edri & Bensimon, 2018, p. 637).

## Study Findings and Results

The study revealed three emergent themes. The first theme was "supportive vs. dangerous use of music," the second theme was "closeness and conflicts among inmates via music," and the third theme was "closeness and conflicts among prisoners and prison staff via music."

Results include:

- 1) Supportive vs. dangerous use of music – that while listening to music could help inmates cope with the pain of their past life and present state of incarceration, it could also induce a desire to use drugs or alcohol. Some inmates found ways to gain access to both drugs and alcohol within the prison while listening to music.
- 2) Closeness and conflicts among inmates via music – showed that music could be used to create and improve communication between prisoners, thereby giving it a social role in relationship and solidarity building. However, it could also cause conflict over volume and type of music, leading to fights and violence.
- 3) Closeness and conflicts among prisoners and prison staff via music – Prison staff reported that the relationships between prisoners and staff regarding music were complicated by the prisoner's perspective of them as dominant or misusing authority, and noted that music often was the source of conflict over volume. Loud music can be used as a diversion or a camouflage for illicit activities. Prisoners who fail to regulate the music volume (or their actions) may receive sanctions. On a positive note, music also enabled prisoners to build rapport with staff over mutual tastes in music.

Based on the qualitative methodology used, it was impossible to draw conclusions for the entire prison population and staff. Also, most of the prisoners were primarily of one ethnic background (Jewish) and gender (male); therefore, the study lacked diversity. The authors

recommend future studies with a more diverse population and perhaps using quantitative analysis as a methodology with a larger population pool.

### **Conclusions**

This study was a first, and to the researcher's knowledge, no other studies on the effects of music within prisons on a personal level have been completed. The study was well written, and research methods were clearly defined for future researchers to test. This qualitative study demonstrates a direct and consequential effect on the use of music within prisons which has both positive and negative outcomes. Thus it warrants further investigation on how to produce more positive effects within prison while reducing or eliminating adverse effects. The researchers believe future studies should be encouraged using quantitative analysis methods with a more extensive and diverse population pool. Finally, this study demonstrates that music plays a significant role in the culture of prisons.

## References

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