

Ethnicity and Culture

A Diversified Correctional Approach

BY **Djamila Amellal**, Communications Officer, Communications and Citizen Engagement

The National Ethnocultural Advisory Committee (NEAC) came into being in 2001, and Dr. Emerson Douyon, an internationally renowned psychologist, was elected chairperson in fulfillment of Commissioner's Directive 767, Ethnocultural Offender Programs. The CD complements and enhances the existing programs of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and encourages the recognition of ethnicity and culture while managing inmates.

I recently met with Dr. Douyon — an authority in his field and an unassuming man. He spoke openly and candidly about the importance of the ethnocultural factor when dealing with offenders from ethnocultural minority groups.

“The Correctional Service of Canada administers programs in prisons to promote a change in the criminal behaviour of offenders under its responsibility,” Dr. Douyon said. “In order to ensure that this educational process operates effectively, CSC must take the ethnocultural parameter into account and consider the needs of offenders from ethnic groups. Offenders do not have the same history or the same path, and this heterogeneity requires a more diversified and more personalized approach, depending on the offender's home base, culture and ethnicity.”

So far, Dr. Douyon, who has conducted research in the area at the Université de Montréal and outside Canada, has visited 14 federal penitentiaries in various CSC regions. He has talked to offenders from many ethnic backgrounds and cultures, including Asians, Blacks, Arabs and Latinos. In his opinion, CSC should focus its efforts on three key elements in relation to ethnocultural offenders: programs, requirements and services, and staff awareness.

Adapting Programs to Cultural Realities

Correctional programs are very important since their objective is to help offenders evolve and prepare for parole in the community. However, according to Douyon, offenders belonging to ethnocultural groups agree that they do not see themselves reflected in these programs and that the content is not adapted to their reality: their ethnic identity, the traditions and values of their culture of origin which constitute a reference for them. “CSC programs are void of culture — a hidden aspect of the personality,” says Dr. Douyon. “Behind the criminal acts, there are attitudes, beliefs and values that are shaped by culture. Individuals do not express distress, emotions and needs the same way in every culture. Each program should, therefore, have a specific cultural component, depending on the ethnic groups. This pluralist ethnocultural approach would help with the effective management of diversity in prisons.”

Douyon raises another key issue regarding programs: dealing with non-Canadian offenders who are serving their sentence under the responsibility of CSC and who are threatened with deportation at the end of their incarceration. “How do we motivate these offenders in the programs? What living environment do we prepare them for, here or elsewhere?”

Requirements and Services Meet Expectations

One of the requirements that offenders consider important is *diet*. This is not a minor issue for those who want a diet that is consistent with their traditions and religious standards. “Behind these community culinary preferences,” says Dr. Douyon, “are profound emotional and spiritual links between diet and culture.”

Offenders also need to keep in direct contact with their families or members of the NEAC through visits to the penitentiaries. According to Douyon, contact must be maintained at all times.

The offender intake assessment also could be more tailored to identify ethnicity and cultural factors. It would be useful for CSC to evaluate procedures and assessment tools with a view to allowing for ethnocultural variations. If CSC disregards cultural parameters, a distorted image of the offender’s personality may result. “That is what offenders are talking about when they say that their criminal profile, compiled from psychological tests, dangerousness classifications and actuarial scales designed for North Americans, does not reflect their reality,” Douyon pointed out. “Some offenders may be incorrectly classified as dangerous or high risk, which could have an undesirable effect on their incarceration.”

Staff Training — An Effective Tool for Improved Communication

Dr. Douyon points out that program methods could be improved by educating correctional staff about offenders’ cultures of origin. In his opinion, this could easily be achieved by holding discussion workshops with staff members and ethnocultural offenders. It would be an opportunity to become familiar with one another in an atmosphere of mutual respect. “Knowledge makes it possible to correct certain stereotypes and prejudices, labelling practices, and some negative attitudes that are detrimental to intercultural harmony,” Douyon commented.

He added, “Recruiting more diverse staff and making them more visible to staff and offenders will help CSC accomplish its mission. It would be ideal if diversity were visible in administrations and in the institutions. For example, Leclerc Institution has an intercultural relations officer who conducts outreach work from the institution. That’s fantastic. It would also be good to have parole officers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to supervise in the community and make connections with offenders’ families.”

Building Bridges with the Ethnocultural Community

According to Dr. Douyon, awareness is not just limited to CSC staff. A great deal of education needs to happen with the families of offenders belonging to minority ethnic groups and with community organizations that do not always have a positive perception of CSC. “In a number of ethnocultural communities, there is an anti police and anti prison tradition and culture,” says Dr. Douyon. “Because of their past experience in socio-political systems where arbitrariness and non-entitlement are too often the rule, many offenders and their families are prejudiced against CSC. So CSC needs the support of the families and ethnic communities in order to facilitate offenders’ gradual reintegration into the community. To build real bridges with the ethnocultural community, we must better understand it.”

To dispel these prejudices, Dr. Douyon strongly recommends that CSC holds forums, recruits volunteers from ethnic groups, educates people about the role of the NEAC, develops research projects on ethnic groups and conducts special surveys concerning the perceptions, attitudes and expectations of ethnocultural communities. "I address the Haitian community on the radio to explain and educate," he says. "People were very happy to find out that there is an ethnocultural committee. They didn't know. We need to clarify the image of CSC and foster reconciliation."

He also points out that raising awareness among offenders' families will help offenders feel less cut off from their communities. "There is a tendency in ethnic communities to abandon, too quickly, those members who commit a crime. They become the shame of the family. Family members and communities who abandon the offender only fuel the offender's anger and discontent. Some of these individuals do not even speak the local languages and become very isolated. Raising awareness brings us closer to a solution."

In conclusion, Dr. Douyon says, "Ethnicity and culture are the frameworks within which we can examine offenders' problems. In other words, ethnicity and culture are categories or interpretation methods that can assist us with assessment, orientation, treatment and offender reintegration. Any initiative to restructure programs, services and research in an increasingly diverse prison setting should consider these new parameters."♦