

SFU Press Releases Collection

These archival copies have been generated from web press releases maintained and originally written by SFU Communications and Marketing. Where possible, an effort has been made to preserve the public comments left on the website as well as any included photos or other images. All textual content should be faithful to the original press releases; contact numbers have been removed but they have not otherwise been altered in any way. However, this collection of documents spans multiple generations of web authoring software and not all formatting will be exact.

Vying for a serving of power in prison

Oct 04, 2002

When Rebecca Godderis sinks her teeth into a vegetarian pizza she doesn't just savour the delectable topping. The Simon Fraser University graduate ponders the enormous social, cultural and punitive power of food in the prison system, the subject of her master's thesis in criminology. Godderis first became fascinated with how prisoners perceive food, how it's used to control them and how they use food to resist that control when a notorious incident sparked public outcry.

Prisoners at a Fraser Valley institution had been treated to a pizza party on New Year's eve at the turn of the millennium. "I was fascinated by how outraged the public got over prisoners getting this fast food at a time when there were celebrations worldwide," says Godderis, now a criminology instructor at Kwantlen University College. "I wanted to use my understanding of the symbolic power and nurturing value of food to get a realistic picture of how prisoners perceive the effects of incarceration." Godderis defends the importance of studying how food serving rituals impact prisoners, even though prison is not meant to be a party. "How inmates experience prison life ultimately impacts their rehabilitation. Given most prisoners get out of jail, their successful rehabilitation is a key issue," notes Godderis, a graduate of Calgary's William Aberhart high school. She completed her undergraduate studies in criminology and psychology at SFU.

Godderis' master's thesis is the first of its kind in North America. Her study found that prisoners perceive food as playing a key role in relations between prisoners and the guards. For example, prisoners described what they view as 'overt' and 'covert' food control, such as guards arbitrarily withholding food items like sugar. In turn, says Godderis, prisoners take measures to resist what they see as unjustified stripping of their individuality and rights. "Some prisoners use cognitive tricks, such as avoiding newspaper or television ads that cause them to lament the loss of food rituals they used to engage in, such as grocery shopping. Others engage in legitimate acts of group defiance, such as winning the right to be served or to cook ethnic meals. And finally, others engage in illegal activities such as rioting and underground food markets," explains Godderis.

The east Vancouver graduate based her conclusions on 16 interviews with inmates in several B.C. minimum and medium security prisons.