

## Food Matters: Sharing “Spread” in Prison—Reciprocity and Social Capital

A couple of hours before lights out in county jails and prisons, inmates start to feel familiar pangs of hunger, unsatisfied by the tray meal served as dinner. At this time of the evening, many inmates begin making a “spread” to share. On the surface, it’s a simple food dish made up of whatever ingredients the inmates put together. Individually, it’s a way to connect with one’s identity and foods of comfort. In an economic sense, however, sharing spread is an important way to build one’s social status and share membership in small networks of incarcerated people.

Spread is a makeshift prison meal with an instant ramen noodle base. Anything can be added—beef sticks, Hot Cheetos, corn chips, pickles, sweet jam packets—to simulate the flavors of foods enjoyed on the outside. All the ingredients are pounded together and “cooked” with hot water so the starchy noodles absorb the flavors. The cook’s imagination is limited only by the ingredients that can be found on the regular meal trays or purchased in the commissary. In their research, anthropologist Sandra Cate and photographer Robert Gumpert (2008) found that inmates craving Mexican flavors may add tortilla chips, jalapeño-flavored cheese product, hot sauce, and chili beans to their noodles. Others may prefer an “Asian Stir Fry” with ramen soaked in peanut oil saved from a lunchtime peanut butter sandwich, mixed with leftover vegetables and meat.

Sharing spread is essentially an act of balanced reciprocity, since those inmates who add ingredients or materials (such as a garbage bag to make larger quantities) most often are the ones to partake in the meal. This provides a sense of



Figure 6.3

### INMATES SHARING “SPREAD”

Inmates at San Francisco County Jail Five give thanks before sharing a meal of spread.

Credit: © Robert Gumpert.

fairness over who gets a seat at the table and who doesn’t. However, generalized reciprocity allows some charity to inmates who might not have anything to share that night, or who don’t get commissary money sent to them from the outside. But like any exchange in a tight-knit community, the exchange must be reciprocated at some point or the relationship will end.

French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) discusses these kinds of real and symbolic exchanges in the context of **social capital**. Like economic capital (money), social capital is the set of resources accessible to a person by virtue of their membership in a social group. High-status groups provide insiders with social capital, while low-status groups have less to offer. In the case of makeshift prison meals, those with the knowledge, ingredients, or skill to make good-tasting spread gain status and reputation and, therefore, social capital.