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EXPERIENTIAL ORIENTATIONS TO
THE PRISON EXPERIENCE:
THE CASE OF FIRST-TIME, SHORT-TERM INMATES

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a new perspective on the "prisonization" experience by focusing on the processes through which first-time, short-term inmates come to know, and act in, their prison worlds. The study is based on participant observation and interviewing in a men's maximum security prison. We discuss inmates' evolving perceptions and definitions of prison life as they enter, endure, then exit the prison, noting the changing imagery of the prison over the course of their sentences. We analyze inmates' adaptations to incarceration at various stages of their sentence in terms of experiential orientations to prison life and the practical problems and concerns that dominate inmates' everyday lives.

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Preliminary to any self determined act of behavior there is always a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call the definition of the situation. . . . Facts do not have a uniform existence apart from the persons who observe and interpret them. Rather, the "real" facts are the ways in which people come into and define situations. . . . If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.

—Thomas (1931, pp. 41–50)

W. I. Thomas introduced the concept of "the definition of the situation" to express the idea that social action is not simply a response to the environment but rather an active effort to define and interpret the context in which we find ourselves, assess our interests, and then select appropriate attitudes and behaviors. Individuals make sense of their experiences by defining the situation through interaction with others (Blumer 1969). Situations are not inherently meaningful; rather, meaning is problematic and people create it. Therefore, defining any situation is a process of "reality construction" whereby human actors make their experiences of the world around them orderly and understandable (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

When a first-time inmate is sentenced to prison, he begins to prepare himself for the ordeal that awaits him. Inmates construct a definition of the situation that enables them to make sense of what they are experiencing. As new inmates move through their prison experience, their orientations to prison change accordingly. These orientations entail something more than the beginning and ending of their prison sentences or their gradual socialization into the prison world; they are better viewed in terms of the inmates' efforts to address their practical concerns of imprisonment, *as those problems are defined during a particular phase of the inmates' prison careers.*

The purpose of this paper is to recast sociological thinking about the prison experience. Prison research, in general, has focused on the uniformity of inmate behavior. We argue, however, that prisonization—the process of learning to be a prisoner—should not be seen as a singular mode of adaptation. Rather, an inmate's prison experience can be seen as a gradual progression from a "pre-prison" to a "prison" and finally a "postprison" orientation toward the prison world, with each orientation including both a characteristic image of the prison world and a perceived problem of imprisonment.

Data for the study are derived principally from ten months of participant observation at a maximum security prison for men in the upper midwest of the United States. One of the authors was an inmate serving a felony sentence of one year and one day, while the other participated in the study as an outsider. Relying on traditional ethnographic data collection and analysis techniques, this approach offered us general observations of hundreds of prisoners, and extensive fieldnotes that were based on repeated, often daily, contacts with about fifty

inmates, as well as on personal relationships established with a smaller number of inmates. We subsequently returned to the prison to conduct focused interviews with other prisoners; using information provided by prison officials, we were able to identify and interview twenty additional first-time inmates who were serving sentences of two years or less. See Schmid and Jones (1983, 1987) for further description of this study.

This paper is about the experiential orientations of first-time, short-term male inmates. It is organized in three sections. First, we briefly discuss the prison socialization literature. Second, we discuss prison orientations and the accompanying images and problems. We conclude by analyzing the institutional experience as shifting modes of commonsense analysis.

EXPERIENCING PRISON

Clemmer (1958, p. 279) defines prisonization "as the taking on in greater or less degree of the folkways, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary." The process operates over time, first initiating the inmate into, and then making him a part of, the inmate social and cultural system. Clemmer noted that no inmate could remain completely unprisonized; merely being an incarcerated offender exposed one to certain "universal features" of imprisonment which include assuming a subordinate status, learning prison argot, taking on a prison style of eating habits, engaging in various forms of deviant behavior, and developing negative attitudes toward guards. According to Clemmer, prisoners are assimilated into an inmate society which places considerable importance on antisocial attitudes and behavior, and the longer the prisoner's stay, the greater the emersion into the inmate subculture. By adhering to the inmate code, prisoners show solidarity and gain status.

Following Clemmer, two general theoretical models have been developed to account for adaptations to imprisonment: the "deprivation model" and the "importation model." The deprivation model (Sykes 1958; Sykes and Messinger 1960; Goffman 1961) suggests that the inmate encounters a variety of problems and frustrations associated with being processed through the criminal justice system which place the inmate apart from society and at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy. Once imprisoned, the inmate encounters numerous deprivations or pains associated with imprisonment which reaffirm his new status and identity as an inmate. These deprivations are somewhat alleviated or neutralized through a collective response, which is in clear-cut opposition to the desires of prison officials.

The major theme of the importation model is that the problems associated with confinement do not solely determine the extent to which inmates respond to the attitudes of the inmate subculture (C. Thomas 1977). Rather, a pre-incarceration socialization process begins to influence inmates' receptiveness to the inmate

system. In more general terms, the importation model focuses on how factors external to the prison situation affect patterns of adjustment within the prison.¹ Proponents of this perspective hypothesize direct linkages between various dimensions of contact with the outside world and the form of intraprisson adaptation.

In summary, the deprivation model asserts that prisoners construct a set of roles and supporting inmate code in response to the conditions of confinement. In contrast, the importation model asserts that inmate adaptations are based on factors external to the prison. Research employing both models has relied heavily on data collected from inmates who actively participate in the prison subculture, particularly long-term or multiple-term inmates.

We want to offer a new way of viewing the prison experience by asking the question of what happens to the concept "prisonization" if we think about it experientially, rather than as organizationally given steps or stages. We do this by focusing on the process through which inmates who have no prior direct knowledge of prison come to know the prison world. A dominant characteristic of these inmates' prison experiences is the social marginality that results from their transitional status between the outside and the prison social worlds. That is, when a first-time inmate is sentenced to prison he has already lost his status as a free adult but he has not yet achieved any significant status within the prison world; he is, to older inmates, a "fish."² He can shed this label through his increasing participation in prison life but if he is a short-term inmate, as well as a first-timer, his involvement in the prison world will continue to be limited by his ties to the outside world, however tenuous those ties may be. These inmates thus remain "between" these worlds for their entire prison careers, although they variously give greater emphasis to an outsider's or an insider's perspective. Their changing orientations are associated with shifting images of the prison world. Both the problems presented by their prison sentences, and strategies for addressing these problems are continually transformed. Our primary focus here will be on the inmates' prison imagery and associated problems, although we will briefly consider their adaptation strategies as well.

PRISON ORIENTATIONS: IMAGES AND PROBLEMS

The principal change in inmates' prison imagery is easily stated: inmates progress from a view of the prison world that is dominated by the themes of violence and uncertainty to a view that is dominated by the themes of boredom and predictability to a view in which the prison is seen primarily as an obstacle to continued participation in the outside world. Throughout their entire prison careers, the essential problem faced by all first-time, short-term inmates is surviving the ordeal of a prison sentence. As outlined in Table 1, however, the specific meanings of this problem depend on the inmates' changing orientations

Table 1. Orientation and Prison Imagery

	<i>Preprison</i>	<i>Prison</i>	<i>Post Prison</i>
Inmate Perspective	Outside Looking In	Inside Looking In	Inside Looking Out
Central Concerns	Violence/ Uncertainty	Boredom	Uncertainty
Specific Problems	Survival	Endurance	Re-integration
Orientation to Space	Separate World	Familiar Territory	Separate World
Orientation to Time	Lost Time	Killing time/ Time as Measure of Success	Lost Time/ Using Time
Supportive Others	Family and Friends	Partners	"Real" Family and Friends
Perception of Sentence	Justified and Unfortunate	Arbitrary and Unjust	Arbitrary and Unjust (intensified)
Predominant Emotion	Fear	Detachment	Apprehension (about outside)

to the prison world. Thus, at the time of his entry to the prison world, an inmate addresses the problem of survival quite literally: he is concerned with avoiding, or protecting himself from, injury, rape, or death. At a later point in his sentence, survival becomes a matter of enduring the unchanging, regimented routine of the prison world. As he prepares for his exit from the prison world, his concern gradually shifts to the question of how he will survive in the outside world, after having served a prison sentence.

Preprison Orientation

The "preprison orientation" is one of an outsider looking in. A first-time inmate, by definition, arrives at prison without an experiential understanding of the prison world. He has to *construct* an image of this world based on whatever resources are available to him. He begins to do so well before the beginning of his sentence. In this sense, a newly-sentenced felon's cognitive entry into the prison world begins not with his arrival at the institution but rather at the moment he attempts to *envision* himself in the prison environment. His preprison imagery will guide both his preparation for his sentence and his initial behavior in prison, until he is able to revise his imagery on the basis of actual prison experience. The inmate's preprison imagery reflects the perspective of someone who lives

in the outside world. Its principal source is the *shared public meanings*, or cultural stereotypes, that exist in our society about prisons. These shared meanings, in turn, are heavily influenced by fictional or journalistic accounts that emphasize the violence of prison life. The importance of journalistic accounts is expressed by two of the inmates with whom we talked:

Oh, you can watch it on T.V. . . . the news. They'll come out on the news and say there's a stabbing or a drug-related mishap in Stillwater prison. . . . That's the only thing a person's got to go by, is what they watch on T.V. or what they hear.

Well, I was scared to come here because . . . I figured that people would be bothering you, you know—probably playing games, doing stuff to you. Probably something like you see on T.V., on the documentaries, like Stateville. After seeing that documentary, it really changed my idea of the inmates.

It is not that these inmates accept journalistic and fictional accounts unequivocally; it is simply that they have no direct experience with the prison world, so they have no way of knowing how accurate or inaccurate these accounts are.

Shared public meanings are supplemented by at least three other sources of "information" about prison. First, any *personal experience* felons have with the criminal justice system, especially with jails or juvenile correctional institutions, shapes their anticipatory image. Second, felons attempt to concretize their prison images with *information provided by others* who are presumed to be more knowledgeable, especially jail cellmates, jailors, and, in a few instances, former prison inmates. Finally, each felon, while attempting to project himself into the prison world, draws upon his own *imagination* about what prison will be like. Violence and uncertainty are shared public meanings about the prison that lead to the felon's specific fears; the felon's fears, in turn, personalize and intensify these meanings.

Preprison imagery is necessarily *abstract*. Lacking direct prison experience, a felon, anticipating his prison sentence, is able to construct only a vague picture of what to expect. The abstract form of the image does not in any way diminish its potency; if anything, the emotional and behavioral implications of the image are intensified. For many felons the anticipatory image also seems to be, in some respects, *illusory*—a quality that is undoubtedly related both to the intangibility of the image and to the emotional impact of arrest, court appearances, and sentencing. The preprison prison image conflicts so sharply with the individual's assumptions about reality and about his own identity that it appears to be dream-like. This sense of unreality is experienced not only during a felon's anticipation of his prison sentence but often, intermittently, for weeks or even months after his sentence begins.

The dominant theme of the preprison image, again, is *violence*. Every first-time inmate we talked with, in both the fieldwork and interview phases of our

research, arrived at the institution with an intense fear of prison violence. One new inmate, when asked what he had expected prison to be like, replied:

Sleeping in a cell; getting up; guys walking around with knives, killing you for no reason at all; guards standing over you with a club. If you get out of there alive, you're lucky.

Another expressed the single greatest fear of virtually every first-time inmate:

I was worried about being raped for the most part, that's about it. You know, I had a good friend at PORT [a community treatment facility] who was raped in St. Cloud [correctional facility] and he's having a lot of problems because of it.

Closely related to the theme of violence is that of *uncertainty*, not only in the sense that first-time inmates know very little about prison, but in the sense that the prison is defined as an inherently unpredictable place. When one is sent to prison, these inmates believe, one no longer controls any part of his life. Worst of all, violence is believed to occur on a random, and, therefore, unpredictable, basis.

Well, my view of the prison was—actually I'd never been here, personally, never been to visit anybody, so I didn't really know. All I knew was what I'd seen on T.V. or in the movies, you know with George Raft and those kind of guys. And . . . I knew it was probably changed since then, but there's been T.V. programs on how violent it was. You hear about Attica and down in the Southwest, so I was scared. I was extremely scared. I don't ever think I'd been that scared before.

New inmates believe that at any time, without reason, it is possible that they might be beaten, raped or murdered.

The themes of violence and uncertainty affect the anticipatory image that felons hold of both guards and prison inmates. Not all newly-sentenced felons formulate an anticipatory image of prison guards, but those who do typically see them as hostile, possibly brutal, and, in any case, powerless to prevent the random acts of inmate violence. All newly-sentenced felons construct an image of prisoners. Like guards, prisoners are viewed as being antagonistic, but they are also viewed as being *alien*—as somehow different from the inmate himself. Part of that difference—the most important part—is that they are violent, as the following inmates suggest:

I thought the inmates would be—like you wouldn't be able to talk to them. It was hard time they were doing here . . . and I thought you wouldn't be able to talk to them. If you said something to them I thought they would try to hurt you.

I thought they'd be more or less like, you know, the animals that you run into on the

street, like Hennepin Avenue, and ghetto types and that type of thing—rather rough, trying to beat you out of something continually.

These depictions of prisoners as people who compulsively prey on others is a universal feature of the anticipatory images of the first-time inmates we studied.

When speaking of inmates' "preprison image" we do not mean to suggest that all new inmates arrive at prison with identical images. There are, however, certain features beyond the dominant theme of violence that are common to the preprison images of virtually all first-time, short-term inmates. Our analysis of how these inmates define the prison world must therefore begin with an examination of these common features.³

A felon awaiting the beginning of his sentence clearly defines prison in both spatial and temporal terms. Prison is a place, physically separate and hidden from his own world, to which he will be exiled for a certain (although not precisely specified) length of time.⁴ Furthermore, prison is viewed as punishment in large part because it *removes* the individual from his own world and because it *disrupts* the normal flow-of-time that exists in his world. A prison sentence is perceived as *time that is taken away* from the individual's life.

But the significance of a prison sentence extends beyond its disruption of an individual's normal world of space and time. Prison also disrupts an individual's participation in a social network of friends, relatives and associates. A particular concern for many inmates, illustrated here through an interview excerpt, is the effect of prison on intimate relationships.

Well, I was mainly worried about my girl. I was worried about losing her. And I think that is one of the hardest things to take, is losing someone you love while you're in there. . . . You know that at even a year, that's a long way off for someone on the street waiting for you.

This meaning of a prison sentence—as a disruption of personal and social relationships—accounts for the felon's concern, in a self-dialogue he conducts before and immediately after his arrival at prison, with the effects of his sentence on his family and friends. Because of this meaning, some felons terminate intimate relationships, sometimes even before the beginning of their sentences. While prison necessarily disrupts an inmate's relationships, what a felon does not know, and what causes his concern, is how much damage his relationship will incur, and how irreversible this damage will be.

A central theme of the preprison image, then, is the idea of *loss*—of place, time, social network, and self-determination:

. . . I had to own the responsibility on it for being involved. I didn't agree with their [the officials'] opinions, but you start taking a review—it's almost like your life is passing before your eyes. You wonder how in the heck you got to this point and, you

know, what are—what's your family gonna think about it—your friends, all the talk, and how are you going to deal with that—and the kids, you know, how are they gonna react to it? . . . All those things run through your head. . . . The total loss of control—the first time in my life that some other people were controlling my life at that point.

Most first-time inmates admit responsibility for their crimes, and most view prison as a logical consequence of law violation. They may not believe that their own sentences were appropriate for the crimes they committed, and they unequivocally do not see themselves as being anything like the "criminals" who are in prison. Nevertheless, when a first-time inmate enters prison, he typically sees his own difficulties with the criminal justice system as a *personal misfortune* rather than as an outcome of a corrupt system.

The emotional dimension of the preprison image follows directly from the themes of violence and uncertainty: it is extreme *fear*. Newly-sentenced felons are completely and overwhelmingly intimidated by the prison—or, more precisely, by the image that they hold of the prison world. They are able to articulate a number of specific fears, including loss of intimate relationships, loss of contact with family and friends, loss of identity, and so on. What they fear most, however, is the physical and sexual violence they believe will result from their contact with prison inmates. Table I summarizes the prison imagery held by inmates during their preprison (and subsequent) orientations. The immediate problem presented by this imagery is, as we have noted, physical survival. Thus, their "entry" tactics reflect the violence of their preprison image and their concerns with survival. Arriving at prison, these include a series of protective resolutions: to avoid unnecessary contacts with inmates; to avoid unnecessary contacts with guards; not to be changed in prison; to disregard questionable information; to avoid all hostilities; and to defend themselves in any way possible if hostilities do arise. Once at the prison, the tactics they develop during their earliest months in prison also address the problem of physical survival. These include: territorial caution (a reluctance to act in the yard, gym, or other prison areas until situational norms can be discerned); the use of impression management skills; highly selective interaction with other inmates; and reliance on a partnership (a friendship recognized by other inmates and guards) with one other inmate.

Prison Orientation

The "prison orientation" focuses on the present time experience of prison life as one's day-to-day reality. As an inmate acquires actual experience within the prison, his orientation to prison, including both his image of the prison and his behavior within prison, changes substantially. Although his transitional status may inhibit him from ever completely understanding all dimensions of the prison

social world, his imagery becomes more concrete, because it is based on first-hand experiences. And, it becomes more complex, as it is expanded by his knowledge of prison programs and services, his increasing differentiation of guards and inmates, and his familiarity (and perhaps limited involvement) with the illegal economy and other aspects of prisoner social organization. Because it is more concrete and complex, his imagery also becomes more definitive; it is the outside world that now begins to seem illusory.

The most profound definitional change that occurs is a change from the belief that prison is a violent world to the belief that prison is a fundamentally *boring* world. This change is not a simple recognition that prison is less violent than anticipated, for a good deal of violence does in fact take place. Nor is it a simple response to the unchanging daily routine faced by inmates after the first two months of their sentence. Rather, the change is the net result of many smaller definitional changes, including changes in the images of other inmates and guards, that reduce the inmate's preoccupation with prison violence. Prison can be boring only when violence is no longer an intense, ubiquitous fear.

The change in a new inmate's definition of other inmates is particularly striking. Before he enters the prison, as we have described, he sees all other prison inmates as hostile, violent and alien. As illustrated in the following fieldnote entry, a new inmate retains this image for some time after his arrival:

One other inmate told me that outside his cell that first night was a cardtable with four blacks sitting at it. [He said] "They were constantly staring at me. They would look at me, then look at each other, and start laughing. I knew what they had in mind."

As he forms tentative friendships and nodding acquaintanceships with others in his cellblock, he gradually modifies his definition of other inmates: he thinks *most* inmates are violent and alien but at least a few other inmates are more or less like himself. As he becomes able to interact with an increasing number of inmates, on the cellblock, at work and in recreational settings, his definition is further modified: there are *some* inmates, including a number of identifiable individuals and groups of inmates, who are hostile and potentially violent and who should therefore be avoided. Most inmates, however, are not nearly as abnormal as had been anticipated. Although he will continue to make some distinctions between himself and other inmates (for example, that others are less mature or less intelligent), his image of them undergoes considerable change within a few months time. Within a few months, he has progressed from viewing all inmates as abnormal to a more discerning and differentiated view of the inmate population, which allows that most inmates are "normal."

A new inmate's image of prison guards undergoes a similar, though less extensive, modification. His stereotypic view of guards becomes differentiated on the bases of friendliness, flexibility and consistency. He becomes able to

identify which guards will engage in casual conversation and which should be avoided at all times. Because of the institutionalized animosity between them, most new inmates continue to view all guards in primarily negative terms, but their image of guards has become multidimensional.

A differentiated image of guards and other inmates helps to reduce a new inmate's obsession with prison violence because it reduces the number of presumed sources of violence. If all guards are not antagonistic, then all guards need not be feared. If most inmates are basically normal, then most inmates are not a constant threat. These changes in imagery, however, have a limited effect on the inmate's fear of violence. In his preprison image, an inmate's apprehension stemmed primarily from the uncertainty of *random* violence. Even if an inmate believes there are relatively few "abnormal" individuals in prison, he can still believe that he is subject to random acts of violence by these individuals.

In order for new inmates to change their definitions of prison from a violent world to a boring world, their uncertainty about prison must be reduced. This reduction does, in fact, happen. A new inmate's entire prison career can be conceptualized as a process of decreasing apprehension and uncertainty about the prison world. This statement must be qualified, however, in two respects. First, a first-time, short-term inmate's uncertainty and apprehension about prison are substantially reduced during his prison career, but they are never eliminated. The prison world never becomes as certain or predictable as the outside world and the inmate never feels completely secure within his prison world. Second, the reduction in uncertainty and apprehension experienced by a new inmate does not occur in a linear fashion; rather the pattern is one of an *erratic reduction in uncertainty and apprehension*.

The process is erratic because of dramatic events—assaults, rapes, homicides and suicides. As a new inmate becomes familiar with the prison world, and as his uncertainty and apprehension begin to decline, a dramatic event may shock the inmate back to the "reality" of his preprison image. Following dramatic events during the first weeks of his sentence, his uncertainty and apprehension become as intense, or more intense, than when he first walked into prison. With lessening effect, this pattern repeats itself during the first several months of his sentence, each dramatic event providing a significant setback to the general definitional changes of declining uncertainty and apprehension.

As the inmate's sentence progresses, the shock value of these incidents declines because dramatic events are themselves subject to definitional change. The extent of this change can be illustrated by excerpts from our data. Incidents that occur early in an inmate's sentence are defined as random acts of violence:

The (second) day that I was here was when _____ was killed. That, that comforting feeling that I had left me. I was scared again. I thought, damn, somebody got killed—like that. . . . Yeah, I was going to be more careful, to watch what the heck was going on.

This interview excerpt also shows the powerful shock value of a dramatic event; it shatters an inmate's tentative feelings of security and revitalizes his initial sense of uncertainty and apprehension. This pattern—of declining uncertainty and apprehension followed by an incident that suddenly reasserts all of the inmate's deepest fears—occurs repeatedly during the early months of his sentence:

I would say after two weeks I felt really calm about being here. . . . After about the third week, there was another rape. This really shocked me. It upset this comfortable, safe world I had imagined I was living in. I realized that the first rape wasn't an isolated event. It also made me paranoid all over again. I had to reshape my whole outlook on this place.

I've seen a total of four blood pools that were obvious. . . . Everytime I see it I just keep thinking of what was the mechanics of the situation. How did it happen? . . . I've learned to treat situations extremely delicate. For the most part you can't trust anyone. You've got to be very extremely cautious with your relationships with other people.

As the second illustration suggests, new inmates actively seek to understand such incidents so that they can learn how to avoid them.

Within a month or two of their arrival at prison, there is a remarkable change in most first-time inmates' definitions of dramatic events:

Look at PCU [Protective Custody Unit]. Why do you think that place is packed? They aren't all pretty boys that can't take care of themselves. But they get into debt, and when collection time comes, the bill collector brings along his companions. The guy either pays up, puts out, or gets raped. Not much of a choice but he deserves what he gets.

I was in the hall waiting to go to the theatre when they dragged him to this hospital, but I didn't know what was going on. After the movie, as soon as I got back to the cell hall, I heard the story. Most inmates felt the guy deserved it. The stabbing was a matter-of-fact thing, no sadness or remorse; he deserved it. It was a lesson to us all. If you rip someone off, this is what happens.

Violent incidents that occur at the middle of an inmate's prison career clearly have less shock value than those that occur near the beginning of his sentence. Dramatic events are now defined as the consequences of violating prison norms. They become "explained" acts of violence rather than random acts and, accordingly, they have less effect on an inmate's uncertainty and apprehension.

Within two or three months of his arrival at prison, a new inmate is able to explain most dramatic events in this manner and to rationalize those that he cannot specifically explain.

You are ready for these things to happen after a while. You expect them, almost as if they are normal occurrences. I guess there is no reason to expect that murders, suicides or rapes wouldn't happen in here, since they happen on the outside. As long as (they) don't happen to you or your partner, there is little concern after you have been here a while.

The more that dramatic events can be explained away or rationalized, the less effect they have on the inmate's uncertainty and apprehension about prison life. By the middle of his prison career, a first-time inmate is not likely to be shocked by a dramatic event.

The evolving image of prison as a boring world is actually the product of two definitional processes. First, the dominant theme of the preprison image—prison as a world of random violence—is weakened, in the manner we have described. The second definitional process is much simpler: it is the increasing realization of the unchanging daily routine in prison. The early weeks of an inmate's sentence were filled with stimuli: in-processing, orientation classes, interviews, cell transfers, the exploration of new territory, meeting other inmates, a job assignment, the parole board hearing, and other events. After two or three months, however, his world becomes highly structured and repetitive:

It is strange how you can get used to a place, even if it's a place you can't stand. When I first got here, I would wake up in the morning, shake the sleep from my head, see the bars, and say "Damn, I'm really in prison." Now, when I wake up, I already am aware that I am here. I just seem to go through the motions everyday. It doesn't take much thought to wake up when the bell rings, go to chow when the bell rings, go to work when the bell rings, and go to your cell when it rings. There really isn't much choice or alternatives; you either do or you don't.

An inmate's prison life, by the middle of his career, is controlled by a regimented schedule of work, meals, and evening diversionary activities.

Just as his preprison image was dominated by the theme of violence, the prison image an inmate holds during his prison orientation is dominated by the theme of boredom, but it encompasses other definitional changes as well. Some of these are subtle, especially those involving the dimensions of space and time. The prison walls that were formerly perceived as enclosing a distant, spatially separate world to which criminals are exiled have now become the outer boundaries of the inmate's day-to-day world. Prison is no longer quite as strange or as frightening. Although a first-time, short-term inmate never considers prison to be his "home," it does become his primary world of reference at the middle of his prison career.

An inmate continues to view his sentence as a disruption of his personal life and, hence, as time that has been taken away from him. By the middle of his prison career, however, time begins to have special meanings *within* the prison

world as well as in relation to the outside world. Time becomes a measure of his *success* at survival. At the beginning of his sentence his intense levels of uncertainty and apprehension were related to his recognition that most prison experiences, possibly including his worst fears, still lay ahead of him. By mid-career prison life has become routine and dramatic events have lost much of their shock value. The more time that he has served and, especially, the greater *proportion* of his sentence that he has served, the more confident he becomes in his abilities to complete his entire sentence. Moreover, time becomes a measure of an inmate's *status* in prison. In a general sense, he gains status simply by serving time, because he becomes a more "experienced" prisoner. But it is not only the actual time served that affects his status; the length of his sentence is also significant. It is for this reason that inmates typically describe their sentences in terms of the maximum amount of time they could serve rather than the actual amount of time they expect to serve.

An inmate's initial view of his sentence as a disruption of his social network of family and friends is altered by a prison perspective on relationships. After serving several months, the inmate has been able to interact with a variety of other prisoners. He has made a number of casual acquaintances and has probably established at least one solid friendship, or partnership. This new network does not replace his old one, but it reduces the amount of time he spends thinking about his outside associates, and perhaps reduces his involvement with them as well. For the inmate, maintaining outside relationships is very stressful, primarily because of a lack of control over those contacts and over events that take place outside the prison walls. Because of this, many first-time inmates maintain that doing time would be much easier without outside contacts.

The idea of terminating outside contacts because they are too stressful may be a protective rationalization. In order to maintain a sense of control over the situation, the inmate considers terminating outside contacts before outsiders do. The inmate therefore experiences feelings of ambivalence because outside contacts are still very important to him, but he has no control over these events. Also, the contacts are still very powerful events, and at this stage of the prison career, the extreme "high" of having a visit along with the extreme "low" of the visit ending produce a stressful situation that most inmates prefer to avoid.

. . . when they left, I felt depressed. I felt bent out and that kind of stuff. It's a high when they come and you get depressed when they leave. I was wondering if that's good, maybe I should just forget that there is an outside world, at times I maybe thought that.

Sometimes I wish I didn't have any visits. It is nice to have people caring about you, and it feels real nice to be with them for that short time. But I tell you, afterwards it is really a let-down.

Although many inmates do contemplate terminating their outside contacts, few inmates actually do.

By the middle of their sentences, most first-time inmates have changed their assessment of the criminal justice system and their relationship to it. They have heard about, witnessed, or experienced a host of inequities in prison. Some of these are minor: approved transfers not being implemented on time, visitors being stranded because of prison lockups, or staff members failing to follow through on a promised course of action. Others are more serious, such as disciplinary actions taken against inmates because of staff errors. Of more consequence still are the inequities stemming from actions of the judiciary or the parole board. New inmates learn that other inmates, convicted of more serious crimes, are serving sentences that are not appreciably longer, and in some cases even shorter, than their own. As the prison and the entire criminal justice system come to be perceived as unfair, an inmate redefines his own sentence as a *personal injustice* rather than a personal misfortune. This is not a matter of the inmate denying responsibility for his own criminal behavior. It is a matter of relative deprivation: when a new inmate sees the sentences that other prisoners are "getting away with," he begins to define the system itself as unjust.

These various definitional changes are accompanied by a change in the inmate's emotional response to his imprisonment. His apprehension about the prison diminishes. As the outside world becomes less salient and the prison world becomes defined as boring rather than violent, he begins to take on what Clemmer (1958) has called the "universal factors of prisonization," becoming physically lethargic and emotionally apathetic:

I spent a very lazy, unproductive day. Eating, getting high and watching T.V. What a life. In some ways, not all that different from my life on the outside. . . . I never envisioned myself doing that before I came here.

Intermittently, he also experiences varying levels of tension resulting from the monotony of his everyday life within an environment that remains basically uncertain and potentially dangerous.

The changes that take place in an inmate's imagery occur because of the knowledge he gains through their direct *participation* in the prison social world. While the anticipatory image was principally based on shared public meanings about prison, much of his subsequent imagery is based on first-hand experience and shared subcultural meanings within the prison world, which emphasize the interminable boredom of prison life. First-time inmates may still possess only incomplete knowledge of the prison social organization and they may only be minor participants in that organization, but their participation is sufficient to enable them to view prison from the perspective of organizational insiders.

As the prison imagery held by first-time, short-term inmates during their mid-sentence prison orientation (summarized in Table 1) comes to approximate that held by the long-term inmates, the problem posed by their imprisonment shifts from an outsider's fixation on physical survival to an insider's focus on enduring prison boredom. Adaptation tactics developed earlier, such as impression management and partnership, are now taken for granted and new tactics are added to deal with the boredom of the day-to-day prison routine. These include participating in both legal and illegal diversions (sports, cards, drugs and alcohol), minimizing the importance of outside contacts, and actively repressing thoughts about the outside world.

Postprison Orientation

The "postprison orientation" offers an inside-out perspective on prison life. As they prepare for their exit from the prison world, and anticipate their return to the outside world, inmates gradually move away from their prison orientation toward a "postprison" orientation, again bringing an outsider's perspective into their view of the prison world. At the prison we studied, this change is facilitated by a minimum security unit, located on the prison grounds but outside of the maximum security walls, and available to many inmates for the final months of their sentences. Not all prisoners participate in this unit; inmates must apply for transfer to the unit, and acceptance depends both on the crimes for which they were sentenced and staff evaluation of their potential for success in the unit. There are three features of the minimum security unit that facilitate change in inmates' imagery: a more open physical and social environment; the fact that the unit lies just outside the prison wall (so that an inmate who is transferred is also physically removed from the maximum security prison); and greater opportunity for direct contact with the outside world.

The prison image associated with this postprison orientation directly reflects the continuing marginal status of first-time, short-term inmates. It is essentially a synthesis of their earlier images, combining the insiders' view of the prison as a world of boredom with the outsider's view of prison as a fundamentally alien world. Inmate's boredom, for example, is temporarily interrupted by the transfer to minimum security. Yet, despite the considerable physical and social differences between maximum and minimum security, inmates' lives again become dominated by a standardized routine within a relatively short time following their transfer. Minimum security residents do have greater freedom of mobility, fewer restrictions regarding visits, a somewhat less regimented life style, and eventual eligibility for home furloughs, but these privileges are tempered by the hardships of living under "half freedom" and program regulations that are viewed as petty.

The imagery of the postprison orientation also retains other features of the insider's prison image. Most residents, for example, continue to view their

sentences as a personal injustice. This view may even be intensified at minimum security, as first-time inmates become perplexed and angered by the early release of repeat offenders because of prison overcrowding. Although minimum security residents no longer experience uncertainty about the possibility of violence, they continue to view their prison world with some degree of uncertainty, just as they did at mid-career, because of the lack of control they have over their own lives.

Elements of the preprison, public image are also present in the release image, albeit in modified form. This is particularly evident when minimum security residents look back at the maximum security prison. This institution again comes to be viewed as a spatially separate world that is quite distant from the residents' own world. In contrast to the beginning of their sentences, residents now know what life is like within the prison walls, but even with this knowledge prison again starts to appear as an alien world as the inmate turns his attention toward the outside world.

As they look forward to their return to the outside world, inmates tend to think about their sentences in much the same manner as they did in the earliest stages of the careers. Prison is viewed as time that has been taken away from them—a disruption of the normal flow-of-time that exists in the real world. In *Asylums*, Goffman (1963, p. 168) observed that one of the dominant themes of inmate culture is "a strong feeling that time spent in the establishment is time wasted or destroyed or taken from one's life." In contrast, we found this feeling to be strongest at the beginning and end of the inmates' prison careers, when they are least influenced by the shared meanings of the inmate culture. The other meanings of time that were accepted at mid-career, for example time as an indicator of status, become unimportant. In the postprison orientation, inmates become increasingly concerned with marking time, or using time, until their release dates arrive.

Similarly, prison is again defined as a disruption of an inmate's prior network of social relationships. The prison social network that had been established during the middle months of his sentence withers, because a minimum security resident is isolated from his prison social network and because the network itself now appears artificial. In the final weeks of his sentence, a new inmate is more interested in reestablishing ties with relatives and friends on the outside. The more successful he is at reestablishing these ties, of course, the less important his prison friendships become.

Perhaps the most important similarity between the preprison image and the release image is in the resident's definition of other inmates, especially maximum security inmates. In his preprison image, he saw prison inmates as violent, hostile and entirely unlike himself. Within a few months time he had developed a differentiated image of other inmates and he saw most inmates as normal. In his release image he again sees maximum security inmates as essentially abnormal and alien beings, who are quite different from himself:

The animals were at work tonight, they set fire to the gym . . . and completely destroyed it. They are fools, they ruined the only decent thing that they had. More inmates used the gym than anything else in there. And the funny thing about it is that the inmates really think that the state is really going to suffer because the gym was burned down. Hell, they don't give a shit whether or not there is a gym. Sure, they will eventually have to build another one and that will cost some money, but believe me, the state won't suffer. The only ones that will suffer are those guys that use the gym and use the recreational equipment. They really are fools.

His release image of other inmates remains much more differentiated than his anticipatory image and he no longer fears maximum security inmates as he did at the beginning of his sentence. Nonetheless, there is a clear reversal in his differentiation of other inmates and his identification with them.

An inmate's emotional response to prison involved appreciably less apprehension at the middle of his sentence than it did at the beginning. This trend continues: he experiences virtually no apprehension about his life in prison following his transfer to minimum security, although he gradually becomes more apprehensive about his return to the outside world. The lethargy and apathy that characterized the middle of his sentence also diminish at the end of his sentence because of his growing orientation toward the outside world.

Just as increasing participation in the prison social world enables an inmate to modify his prison imagery, his simultaneous decreasing participation in the prison world and increasing participation in the outside world provide the basis for his release image. Transfer to minimum security removes the inmate from most of the dangers of maximum security, provides him an opportunity to look back on the maximum security institution from a vantage point of physical and social distance, and affords him more contact with the outside world, through greater visiting privileges, outside activities, and furloughs. As his orientation returns to the outside world, his image of the prison becomes closer to that held in the outside world. At the beginning of his career, a new inmate looks at prison entirely from an outsider's perspective. During the middle of his career this perspective has not disappeared completely but it has receded, and the inmate looks at prison largely in terms of the meanings that he shares with his fellow prisoners. As he anticipates his return to the free social world, he begins to adopt an outsider's perspective once again. He cannot return completely to the public stereotype with which he entered prison, because he has become a part of the prison world and he knows the stereotype to be inaccurate. As his own involvement in the maximum security prison seems more and more distant, however, his concluding image (summarized in Table 1) again approximates the public stereotype.

As inmates develop a postprison orientation, the problem presented by their imprisonment changes from simple endurance of the prison world to a concern with how this world has and will affect their lives in the outside world. Their

adaptation tactics change accordingly. Because the boredom of daily routine continues, minimum security residents continue to engage in diversionary activities. Aided by the less institutional and less dangerous minimum security environment, however, many of their maximum security strategies—including impression management, control of outside thoughts and their reliance on a prison partnership—gradually disappear. Most inmates also begin to plot a rudimentary survival strategy for their return to the outside world. Although this strategy includes some consideration of the practical problems of employment and residence, its central feature is a recurrent self-dialogue about how they have changed in prison and how they will get along when they return to the outside world.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, prison images held by first-time inmates cannot be understood solely in terms of what goes on inside prison walls. Rather, this imagery derives from inmates' social marginality and their orientation to both inside and outside concerns. The images themselves draw upon subjective meanings associated with both the outside world and with inmates' direct experience in prison. Prison images, then, depend on inmates' shifting orientations between the prison and the outside worlds, and on the effort required to address the practical concerns of doing time.

First-time inmates, at the time of their entry to the prison world, recognize that they face a fundamental transformation of their social worlds. Based on the violence of their outsiders' imagery, their earliest survival tactics are protective and defensive in nature. But they also recognize that their outsiders' understanding of the prison world is both abstract and incomplete. Their driving motivation at the time of their entry to the prison world is to make sense of this world by acquiring more, and more precise, information. Virtually all of their early survival tactics—selective interaction, impression management, territorial caution and their prison partnership—thus serve as information-seeking tactics as well as protective measures. All of these tactics enable new inmates to interact more with other inmates, to gain direct experience in prison, to acquire an insiders' perspective on the prison world, to contrast this perspective with their outsiders' stereotypic view, and to adjust their own imagery accordingly. In this sense, inmates' survival tactics not only result from their prison imagery, but they also allow the revision of imagery.

As inmates reshape their image of the prison world to one that more closely approximates the perspective of long-term inmates—that is, as their imagery shifts from violence to boredom—there is also a shift in what inmates believe to be the immediate problems of their imprisonment, from physical *survival* to *endurance* of a boring prison world. As this happens, first-time, short-term

inmates are in the least marginal phase of their prison career. They share with the long-term inmates a common imagery of the prison world, a common set of problems presented by their prison sentences, and common tactics for addressing this problem: a decreasing emphasis on the importance of visits from outsiders, a conscious effort to control thoughts about the outside world and active participation in legal and illegal diversions, ranging from athletics to gambling to drug use. At this point they are using an insider's perspective to address insiders' problems.

This relative integration into the prison world is short-lived, however, and inmates' marginality within the prison world again becomes evident as they prepare for their departure from prison. As they begin to focus on their impending problems of "getting out"—where to live, how to earn a living, how to deal with the effects of their prison sentence on their relationships with others—it becomes increasingly apparent that their prison orientation is inadequate for dealing with the outside world. They find themselves contrasting their own (insiders') perspective with that of the world they are about to enter. Thus, the prison image held at the time of release is a product of inmates experience and contrastive work.

The traditional way of viewing the interplay of outside and prison meanings is exemplified in Wheeler's (1961) finding of a curvilinear relationship between institutional career phase and conformity to staff expectations, a finding that has been repeatedly tested and generally supported by subsequent research (cf. Akers, Gruninger, and Hayner 1977; Garabedian 1963; Tittle and Tittle 1964; Thomas 1973; Wellford 1967; see also Atchley and McCabe 1968). Wheeler argues that inmates in the early and late phases of their sentences show the highest conformity to staff expectations, while inmates in the middle phase show the lowest conformity. This suggests a cyclical pattern of prison socialization in which inmates—both first-timers and recidivists—enter prison with conventional values, become socialized to the criminal values of an inmate culture and then, at the end of their sentences, become resocialized to the values of the outside world.

This paper offers an alternate perspective on the prison experience. Our fieldwork corroborates much of what Wheeler and others have noted, but our analysis suggests a different way of understanding changes in inmates' outlooks and behavior. Wheeler suggests that inmates are subject to socialization processes that transmit an inmate code—a set of rules and values—that shapes inmate responses to the deprivations of incarceration. Then they relearn how to live on the outside at the end of their terms. At the risk of oversimplifying, Wheeler implies that inmates learn, then unlearn, how to live as prisoners over the course of their incarceration; this accounts for the observed changes in their attitudes and behavior from beginning to end of their sentences. Our analysis, however, focuses on inmate's experiential realities and their orientations to the practical problems of everyday prison life to explain these changes. Rather than attributing

inmates' behavior to rules and values in some deterministic sense, we see inmates as more actively engaged in social life and social action as interpretive processes (Blumer 1969). Thus, their evolving experiential realities and the changing problems and concerns of everyday prison life provide the basis for inmates' changing adaptations to the different phases of the prison experience. Our analysis suggests that, for inmates who are being exposed to prison for the first time, the cyclical pattern of socialization (as described by Wheeler 1961) entails something more than a passive alternation between conventional and criminal values; it involves continuous and active work to *interpret* the prison world within which they act and interact.

Although the usefulness of our theoretical model lies primarily in its capacity to explain the particular case under study, similar processes may occur in other social situations as well. A prisoner of war or a political hostage faces many of the same conditions and practical concerns as do first-time inmates. So does an individual who is involved in any kind of total institution, from a tuberculosis sanitarium or mental hospital to an army boot camp. But, he need not be an involuntary mental patient or draftee; the same conditions may well be present if his participation is voluntary. In all of these situations, the individual's experiential orientation to the situation derives from an active effort to define and interpret the context in which he finds himself, assesses his interests, and then selects appropriate attitudes and behaviors. Whatever the situation or institution, understanding the patterns through which the participants define their social worlds is essential to understanding both their adaptations to that particular social world and their continuing relationship to the world at large.

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NOTES

1. For a discussion of this model, as it contrasts to the deprivation model, see Thomas and Peterson (1977).

2. The inmates we studied can be classified, in Irwin's (1970) typology, as "square johns" or "lower class men." In addition to these inmates' prison imagery, we also studied the adaptation strategies they use and the identities they present to others in prison.

3. Boulding (1961) has suggested five basic dimensions of an individual's subjective knowledge: space, time, personal relations, the world of nature (relational imagery), and emotion. Our analysis borrows from Boulding's discussion.

4. The initial phase of our fieldwork was conducted before Midwest state instituted a sentencing guidelines policy. Since implementation of that policy an incoming inmate is given more precise

information about how much time he will serve, though "good time" and other contingencies still apply.

5. There is some evidence to suggest, moreover, that there are also corresponding changes in how these inmates define the outside world and their relationship to it (see Jones and Schmid 1983).

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ACCOUNTS OF PRISON WORK: CORRECTIONS OFFICERS' PORTRAYALS OF THEIR WORK WORLDS

Stan Stojkovic

ABSTRACT

Correctional officers' portrayals of problematic aspects of their work worlds are analyzed as accounts which explain perceived gaps between officers' actions and official organizational expectations and procedures. The study is based on observations of the everyday work activities and relationships of correctional officers in a maximum security prison, and formal interviews with twenty officers. The analysis considers how the officers portrayed their work worlds as filled with problems stemming from the prison system, prison administrators, and inmates. The officers' accounts of their relationships with inmates are also analyzed, particularly the ways in which they explained their accommodative orientation to inmates' "normal" rule violations. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the officers' accounts may be analyzed as rhetoric.

The literature on correctional officers and their work worlds includes major analyses of how correctional officers are socialized (Sykes 1958; Sykes and Messinger 1960; Lombardo 198.), officers' attitudes toward their work (Jurik

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