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SELF IDENTITY OF FEMALE PRISONERS:
THE MORAL CAREER OF THE INMATE

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Reflexive Statement: Behind the Barbed Wire

Early in the summer of 1981, I was offered the opportunity to teach an Introduction to Psychology course to a class at the Midwest Reformatory for Women. My students, I imagined, would be bitter and cold prostitutes, junkies, and murderers; hardly the model of pedagogical receptivity that one could hope for. Not without some reservations and mixed feelings, I accepted the position. I did not know when I began teaching at the Farm (as I found out later MRW was nicknamed) that the summer position would stretch into 15 months of contact teaching some 50 different students classes in Human Behavior, Introduction to Psychology, and Community Sociology.

Teaching in a correctional institution is an extremely intense experience for many reasons, especially with the kinds of courses that I taught. The Introduction to Psychology course fascinated most of the women. Here finally they would have a source of information about a part of the criminal justice system to which they all had had exposure, namely the psychological testing done in the early stages of incarceration. They thirsted for answers to a multitude of questions for which at times I could only supply the barest answer.

A second course that I was asked to teach after that first summer quarter was Human Behavior. This course is essentially a humanistic psychology course geared specifically to encourage the student to reflect upon and critically examine his/her values, perspectives, feelings, and sense of self. An ongoing assignment for the students in this course was to write a weekly "Awareness Sheet". This essay was to be a personal reaction to and/or assessment of what had been discussed in class that week, or, if the student had current life experiences more pressing, the Awareness Sheet could be devoted to a discussion of whatever happened to be going on with the student at that time. A crucial element of this assignment - especially in the prison environment- was the fact that these essays were "for my eyes only" i.e., I stressed to the students that I would be the only person to see and read these papers and so they should feel free to say anything that they wanted. I started teaching the Human Behavior course in my second quarter at the Farm and hence was an already "known quantity" to most of my students; I had slowly earned their trust.

A third course that I was able to offer in three different quarters was Community Sociology. As the course evolved at MRW, the main text turned out to be Erving Goffman's Asylums. There were other books assigned for the course, but we never seemed to spend nearly as much time on them as we did discussing and arguing about Goffman's descriptions of life in a total institution.

Both the design and content of all three courses that I taught in the institution allowed an exceptional opportunity for endless class discussions -as well as individual student conferences- about life as an inmate. The Human Behavior course especially allowed me to aid students in becoming aware of the personal and psychological changes that they had undergone since becoming enmeshed in the criminal justice system. The Awareness Sheets were a constant source of dialogue between individual students and me for I frequently wrote long answers and responses that allowed them to elaborate upon topics and problems they did not feel comfortable discussing in front of their classmates. Finally, the Community Sociology course with its focus on Asylums, allowed us as a class to explicitly discuss the effect of living in a total institution on the self identities of inmates.

As a methodological note I should add that the data I gathered during the course of my experience goes beyond any that could have been gathered by a survey questionnaire or even from the prison psychologists. As an instructor, I held the unique position of being neither an inmate nor a member of the institutional staff. As such, I was viewed as essentially nonthreatening by the inmates. In one-to-one conversations and in their Awareness Sheets they were able to vent thoughts and feelings that would have perhaps gotten them into trouble with the other inmates and/or the prison officials. During the 45 minute drive home after class sessions¹, I invariably felt the burden of known intimate details² about many of the inmates' lives, which I ethically was unable to reveal to anyone. I was used as a dumping ground by many of my students, a function, however burdensome, I did not mind serving.³

Using notes collected during my tenure as an instructor at the Farm in the above mentioned courses, I present below an analysis of the "moral career of an inmate".

The Moral Career of the Inmate: Prelude

As mentioned above, I used Goffman's Asylums as a central text for the Community Sociology course. In class we read, re-read, probed and tore apart Goffman's discussion of the moral career of the mental patient, relating always the insights that he offers to the ebb and flow of life inside the Farm. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to outlining the moral career of the inmate as seen by the women in my classes. First, however, I will briefly clarify what is meant by the terms "total institution" and "moral career".

A "total institution" is a unique social arrangement whereby all spheres of daily life take place with a large number of like others and occur in the same place under a common authority in a rigidly scheduled routine of daily activities. The public rationale for this treatment is to fulfill the aims of the institution (namely, in this case, to punish and rehabilitate criminal offenders). All total institutions have in common a basic division between a large controlled group (called inmates) and a much smaller group whose function is to maintain control over the inmates (called staff) (see Goffman pps. 6-7). Examples of total institutions include monasteries,

military boot camps, and mental hospitals. The prison as a total institution has been described by a large number of writers both in scholarly form (e.g. Clemmer's The Prison Community, and Syke's The Society of Captives), and in more journalistic or novelistic form (e.g., Abbot's In the Belly of the Beast, or Mitford's Kind and Usual Punishment). Literature which specifically examines the experiences of women prisoners includes Smith's Women In Prison, Alder's Sisters in Crime, Heffernan's Making It In Prison, and Ward and Kassebaum's Women's Prisons. These works will be discussed in more detail in the Epilogue.

I will let Goffman speak for himself in defining the concept of the moral career:

"Traditionally the term career has been reserved for those who expect to enjoy the rises laid out within a respectable profession. The term is coming to be used, however, in a broadened sense to refer to any social strand of any person's course through life. . . . One value of the concept of career is its two-sidedness. One side is linked to internal matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt identity; the other side concerns official position, social relations, and style of life, and is part of a publicly accessible institutional complex. The main concern will be with the moral aspects of career—that is, the person's self and in his framework of imagery for judging himself and others." (pp. 127-128)

Restated, the concept of moral career has to do with the individual's movement through his/her social life and those changes that take place with respect to the individual's sense of self identity and how they view the people and situations around them.⁴

Having clarified how these central terms are to be used in this essay, I will proceed in presenting my findings.

The Moral Career of the Inmate: The View from the Farm

In discussing the concept of the moral career we collectively agreed upon seven more or less distinct --yet distinctly overlapping-- stages in the moral career of inmates at the Farm. In this section I will outline and describe these stages including both the "internal matters" of self identity and the more "publicly accessible" aspect of the moral career (e.g. official positions, and style of life).

STAGE 1: Stripping of the Self

WCAC (Women's Correctional Admittance Center) is the inmate's initial exposure to the penal system outside of various local and county lock-ups where they might have spent a brief time. Each new inmate spends at least

two weeks at this processing institution. Inmates stay at WCAC until room is made for them at the Midwest Reformatory for Women; some will be there as long as two to three months.

The manifest function of the stay at WCAC is to run a series of medical and psychological tests on the inmates in order to make sure both that no communicable diseases are brought into the prison population and to establish a file of psychological information on each.

A more subtle yet no less important function of the time spent at WCAC is to begin enculturating the women into the subcultural norms (both official and unofficial) inside a correctional facility. To wit, the point of any process of resocialization is to have the effect of producing the kind of individuals (with the proper values, sense of purpose, and goals) that will allow the subculture to continue. In the case of a prison, individuals who accept and respond to those in authority are desirable.⁵ This process of resocialization can be thought of in terms of examining the roles which the women are allowed to play. On the street or at home these women were, for example, mothers, lovers, employees, club members, and so on. Each of these roles has certain accompanying responsibilities and rights. The "free" person, then, typically plays a variety of different social roles.⁶ In this first stage of the inmate's experience she is taught that she will play essentially only one role, i.e., inmate. And although this role carries with it certain responsibilities and rights, both of these are substantially limited compared to what they had been before coming into the criminal justice system. By disallowing any phone calls and limiting the amount of mail which can be sent, the institution is effectively forcing the inmate to begin to sever connections with previous important relationships. The "stripping of the self" process includes, taking away the individual's ties with the outside world. By using the threat of restricted privileges and/or additional prison time the institution encourages an understanding of the extent to which individual rights have been revoked while in the inmate status.

This stripping is also accomplished by many other procedures at WCAC. After being strip searched and deloused when they first arrive at the institution the women are issued state clothing and a minimal amount of toiletry items (e.g., shampoo, deodorant). Personal items the women are allowed to bring with them into WCAC are few. The function of this initial treatment is to make the inmate feel less in control of the image that she is capable of projecting. In Presentation of Self in Everyday Life Goffman explains in detail how we spend a great deal of time managing our self identity. This social management depends a great deal upon having the ability to manipulate people and props (in the theatrical sense). At WCAC the women neither have the free time nor the necessary paraphernalia to use in creating a personal image which to varying degrees they were used to doing as free persons.

The inmate's stay at WCAC has the effect of altering her self identity. By wearing state issue clothes and using state issue toiletries the women have their individuality threatened. Many reported feeling dirty, sloppy, and unattractive. After they have endured the various rules and regulations governing their behavior at the institution, there is a deep sense of loss of control of one's life. The inmate is made to feel like a child, even

down to having to ask permission to go to the restroom and having to sign an In-Out sheet before and after going. Daily life activities are all done in the immediate presence of others (showering, eating, sleeping, etc.) and hence there is no time during the day when one is even afforded the luxury of sustaining the fantasy of being free, of being "one's self" again. More than anything else the inmate learns that she is not in control and that she must be obedient to those who possess authority. Acts of individuality are restricted both by the nature of the living situation (e.g., collective living and wearing the same clothes as all other women), and by the severity of the rules and regulations. The institutional authority system is structured so that any inmate who continues to cause trouble is called from the group and dealt with more severely until she begins to conform. In actuality, acts of outright disobedience are rare because women realize that the costs involved are high.

In summary, this first "stripping of the self" stage gets the inmate ready for life at The Farm by socializing her into the role of prison inmate; she learns to accept being treated like a child and having little control over her individual actions.

Part of the stripping of the self process, yet not restricted to any one point during incarceration, is the confrontation many of the inmates have with the two major issues of race and sexuality. I can not treat these issues extensively in this essay, except to point out that for many women this is the first time in their lives that they have been in close quarters with someone of the opposite race. In order to survive an inmate must learn to deal with the language, perspective, and values of people who are quite possibly very different from anything previously experienced. Also, that homosexual behavior (very broadly defined to include showing affection to someone of the same sex) is much more frequent in a penal institution than in the general population is well documented (see e.g., Ward and Kassenbaum, 1965). In this environment, the women are forced to examine and possibly reassess their own sexuality, something very near the core of any human identity.

STAGE 2: Initial Distancing from the Role of Prisoner.

When the inmate is finally transferred from WCAC to Midwest, the reality of incarceration is probably felt for the first time. Life at WCAC is viewed as temporary and the inmate feels as if she is only passing time until her "real" sentence begins. As the inmate is being driven inside the gates at Midwest, the thought that the next time she will be outside the perimeter of that 13 foot fence may be long months or even years away can be very intense and frightening.

In the first few days or weeks of her incarceration the inmate will tend to distance herself from the other inmates.⁷ Much time is spent alone reading or writing letters to friends and relatives; as little time possible is spent in the company of other inmates. This can be explained by pointing out that once the new inmate begins to see herself as an insider -one who

belongs to the prison group- as opposed to an outsider, she has accepted the role of inmate. The process of denial is such that the individual attempts to maintain the fiction that she is not one of "them", i.e. a criminal who is locked up and treated as a child. As time passes, this fiction is harder and harder to maintain, and the relationship ties with people on the outside becomes weaker and more tenuous while the relationship ties with women on the inside get stronger and more engaging. Some time after entering the gates, the inmate finds that she has more in common with the new people she has met than the ones she left behind. Even relationships with husbands and children become less significant and thus somewhat less important over time.

A common pattern for the inmates to follow is to have a great deal of contact with family in the first months of incarceration (visits, phone calls, letters), but as time passes the frequency of these contacts drops and reaches a plateau at about one third the rate of these first few months.

The initial distancing from the role of prisoner is a self defense mechanism destined that is to fail the inmate because the isolation that one imposes on oneself contributes heavily to an already present depression. The inmate sees many of her cottage mates laughing, playing cards and talking to each other, and envies their mood. And soon instead of ignoring someone who invites her to play a game of cards she accepts, thus in her own mind becoming one of "them" and accepting as legitimate the status of prisoner. The inmates who have been on the Farm for a while realize that it takes time for the new inmates to adjust, and use various tactics to drop the defenses of these women. They realize that a sympathetic ear is exactly what most of the new arrivals could use.

STAGE 3: Learning the Ropes.

While covering Goffman's Asylums in my classes the students were interested in giving their own examples of the "underlife" of the institution (see pp. 173-320). The underlife of a total institution is the informal social structure created and sustained both by the inmates themselves as well as the staff, especially the lower level staff (e.g., guards). In addition to Goffman's treatment there are many other respectable descriptions of life in a prison from the inmate's perspective; I will discuss only a few illustrative examples of the underlife of the Farm, and encourage the reader to consult works that I have listed in the bibliography for additional information.

In both WCAC and to a lesser extent on the Farm, a game called "Dirty Hearts" is played by many of the women. This game is a ploy used by the established inmates to bring out and get to know some of the more shy and fearful new women. Very simply, the game is played by a small group of women using a deck of playing cards. The cards are dealt out to each woman until one person gets a card with a heart on it. The dealer is then allowed to ask the person who holds the heart any question she wants, and according to the rules of the game which are explained before the cards are dealt,

the woman is honor bound to answer the question as honestly and completely as possible. The deal rotates around the circle of women participating so that any one person is at some time likely to ask any other person a question during the course of the game. At first the questions asked are rather mundane and harmless, e.g., where are you from, are you married, and so on. As the game progresses the questions usually begin to center around sex. The older inmates are interested in any previous lesbian experiences, and any other kinds of out-of-the-ordinary sexual encounters. Not infrequently there will be questions about inmates' crimes and sentences. This topic is treated with much less candor than the questions on sexuality, and if the inmate does in fact answer completely and honestly on many of the questions asked, she may feel the consequences some time during her incarceration. For example, if a new inmate answers that she has experimented with lesbian relationships, the word about her will be spread around the inmate population very quickly that a "live one" had arrived. This inmate can expect to be approached by hopeful suitors. And if this was not the result desired by the inmate she may regret having been honest in the first place. In fact, the main function of this game for many of the women is to teach one of the cardinal rules of inmate life: keep your mouth shut. The perception is you can never be sure that what you say about yourself may not come back later to be used against you, and conversely you can never be sure that what you say about anyone else may not harm them.

The lesson learned playing "Dirty Hearts" is a serious and important one that remains with the inmate for the rest of her stay at the institution. In addition to the lesson that one is better off not freely discussing her inner life, there is the larger lesson that life inside the gate is substantially unlike that in the free population; there are many more important subtleties to recognize. There are rules made by the prison officials which, of course, have to be followed and these rules are much more restrictive than one encounters on the street.

Another example of "learning the ropes" involves the lesson that one must constantly monitor behavior both around other inmates and around staff. One inmate recalled the event of a new inmate taking a seat in the public area of the cottage after the evening meal. Soon an older inmate approaches her angrily and forcefully demands to know why she is sitting in "her" chair. The new inmate assumed that as a public area the seats were on a first come first serve basis, and this is a normally valid assumption, at least in the free world. Yet, the older inmate may have been sitting in that same chair for months or even years (after having inherited it from an inmate before her who had been released). The new inmate gives up the seat and is now more careful than ever in watching her step.

Learning the underlife of the prison is not unlike experiencing a new culture, and culture shock is a somewhat accurate description of many of the new inmate's reactions to the situation. The inmates learn very quickly that in this setting there are many subtleties that must be learned in order to stay out of trouble and do the required time in as comfortable a fashion possible. In this subculture the new inmate, having earlier been stripped of the cocoon of family, friend, and work relationships and material things that had before sustained a functioning of self identity, finds herself feeling unsure and even paranoid, utterly friendless.

For many inmates this feeling stays throughout the incarceration and even after release from the penal system.

Human beings are by nature social animals and have a basic need to be accepted. In the prison environment the inmate still feels this need. However, in the back of her mind she knows that some day she will be released and that this existence is a temporary one. The dilemma is this: the individual has a human need to interact and become accepted by the relevant social group, but befriending any one person or group of people carries with it the very real possibility that her faith and confidence may not be justified. In other words, many inmates feel that even the "very close friends" that they have in prison can never be completely trusted. They can be allowed to know certain surface, trivial matters and thoughts, but one rarely feels enough complete trust to be totally honest and open to anyone. The inmate solves this dilemma by adopting the use of interactional masks or false fronts.

I would see my students talking with each other during breaks in our class, and it would appear to me that they were extremely friendly and close. They were, after all, together for at least eight hours a day, five days per week. But in talking with the women in individual conferences I found that they really did not trust their classmates. In these conferences they related to me feelings and thoughts, sometimes about their life inside the Farm but also often about their court cases that they said they could never tell anyone in class or indeed anyone on the entire Farm. After I had gained their trust I was allowed to see them with their mask at their side and see long held back tears come to their eyes. I still wonder about all the women on the Farm who must wear their "masks" on virtually every waking moment. Many of the women said that they were told by friends and family that visited them that they had changed, become more cold and distant, less spontaneous and more inhibited. Learning the ropes involves, of course, learning the underlife of the institution, but it also involves learning to deal with a new self identity which arises in response to this underlife.

STAGE 4: Learning how to do the time.

Although learning the ropes at the Farm is a never ending process (i.e., the subtleties of the subculture are limitless), after the initial intensity and confusion wears off and most of the more important norms are internalized to a point where day-to-day activity begins to take on a routine quality, a sense of boredom sets in for most inmates. The challenge and excitement (however perverse or enjoyable) of blending into a new subculture eventually fades in the first few months of incarceration, and the inmate is faced with the fact that she will be seeing the same scenery and faces, eating the same meals at the same time of day; that she will be constantly monitored in her behavior by both staff and fellow inmates and walked through the same routines day after day for months and perhaps years on end. Shorttimers-- those women with sentences less than a years duration-- are able to deal with the boredom and routine better than those who have much longer stays to look forward to. Most of the women at the Farm eventually have to learn how to adjust to the system and routine, i.e., they have to learn how to do the time in such a way that they can cope with the situation in a somewhat

sane and positive way. Before I describe some of the coping strategies, I will relate one anecdote which describes the sense of routine that exists.

One very cold winter morning I drove into the gates and noticed that nearly the entire complex was a glaze of ice. There had been a sudden freeze the night before and the water from the rains of the last several days was frozen. I didn't think much about the situation until the ladies began to file into class in a markedly better mood than was typical for them. I knew something was up, but I assumed that some member of the class had received her freedom. When I asked the class how they could be so cheerful at 8:00 a.m. on a Monday morning, I was told that this morning the top ranking prison official had allowed them to walk on the grass. Until they explained why this was so "fun" I was frankly at a loss to understand their glee. On the pavement along every path from one area of the complex to any other area there are lines painted. The women are to walk within three feet of the line at all times when going from, for example, their cottage to the dining hall. On this morning the sidewalks were completely covered with very slick ice, and the superintendent had communicated to the staff in all of the cottages that the women were to travel on the grass in order to minimize the chance that anyone would slip and fall: this morning the ladies' routine varied. At first I could not understand why they were so thrilled by such a trivial matter, but eventually they convinced me that this change did make a difference. We continued that morning talking about the routine and the boredom, and I learned that although many fights (inmate-inmate and inmate-staff) start because of real anger and frustration, not infrequently someone will be encouraged to fight solely to break up the boredom and to give people something to talk about for a while.

Learning to do time means, then, learning to cope with and even overcome the routine and boredom of daily life. In the section below I will briefly outline a taxonomy of inmate behaviors, i.e., various coping strategies, which I developed with the help of one of my Human Behavior classes.

The women on the Farm can be divided into Game Players and Non-Game Players. The Game Players are those women who involve themselves in the local gossip, enmesh themselves in various relationships, and in general treat the incarceration experience much like they treated their life in freedom, i.e., they are involved intimately with life on the Farm. There are two types of Game Players and these two types can be further subdivided. Manipulators are able to use other women both for material gain and for emotional or psychological gratification. Some manipulators are "out front" and more or less obvious about the fact that they are using their personal power over others for their own gain. Another type of manipulator is that woman who is very subtle in her manipulation of others, and some of the more naive inmates find themselves doing favors for this type only later to realize that they were being used.

Obviously, these manipulators need other inmates who are susceptible to being manipulated. Some women (for psychological reasons that go beyond the scope of this paper) feel a need to be controlled and knowingly allow themselves to be used by the manipulators: Other women are objects

of the manipulator's attention for long periods of time before they are aware of what is happening.

Non-Game Players can also be divided into two main classifications. Some women do not participate in the game playing against or beyond their will. Two examples of this type are the inmates who legitimately belong in a mental institution and/or are on "special medication" (e.g., Thorazine) and those inmates who are too old or poor to have anything to offer. Those Non-Game Players who have that status by choice can also be subdivided into two groups. First there are those who are perceived as too violent and dangerous to interact with. These women are essentially left to themselves. The final and perhaps the largest grouping in this taxonomy is the Non-Game Player who realizes what is going on and simply chooses to remain outside of the action. Women in this category will spend as little time possible with the rest of the population. They will frequently request "early beds" (i.e., ask to be allowed to stay in their room instead of spending time in the evening in the recreation room of the cottage) and be locked up from early evening until the next morning breakfast. On days off (usually holidays and weekends; the women work a five day week) some of these women will choose to stay in their room until the evening meal (around 4:00 p.m.).

The taxonomy presented above, as do all taxonomies of this nature, merely points out various ideal types. When my class and I attempted to place specific individuals into this scheme there were many inmates who did not seem to fit clearly anywhere, and there were many inmates who seemed to change from one category to another from time to time.

By being a Game Player one was afforded an involvement in the here-and-now daily life of the institution, and as such felt somewhat less bored and oppressed by the fact of incarceration. As one of my students pointed out, she was playing just to be playing, because it beat being alone all of the time; it made her feel "alive" instead of just existing. She pointed out that she realized the games she was playing (e.g., having quasi-romantic and/or family relationships with other inmates) were only temporary but that at least she was something to somebody even though it was a transient and somewhat shallow involvement.

Learning to do one's time at the Farm is a matter of learning to deal with the boredom and routine. The social types that are sketched out above indicate various ways in which the time is done. Regardless of whether one is or is not a Game Player, and inmate acquires a deeply held assumption about other people--that they are capable of playing psychological games and that things are not always as they appear to be on the surface. Slowly one learns to be cautious and to deal with most other people in what could be called a cold or detached way.

STAGE 5: Dealing with denial: the ups and downs of board dates.

Usually once every month a parole board meets to consider eligible inmates for either parole or furlough to a half-way house. After a few months of teaching at the Farm I was able to sense when these days were simply by observing the members of my classes. Although the actual number of women coming up before the board in any one month may be somewhat small (less than 20) it seemed as if nearly everyone was close friends with or knew a lot about someone who was to be examined. The drama of going before the board was thus experienced either directly or vicariously by much of the Farm population. Before each date there would be a keen sense of tension in the air. A sense of anticipation existed and focused on whether the board would be a "good" one or a "bad" one, i.e., whether a high percentage of the women going before the board would be released and/or furloughed or whether the board would be "giving out a lot of time", that is, continuing sentences for additional years. The informal prison communication system is such that news on board day concerning how inmates were being treated seemed to spread instantly to the entire population. In the event that someone you knew had gotten her release, you would feel her excitement and rejoice in her good fortune. Conversely, if the friend had been given more time to do, you would share her despair and deep depression. I came into my afternoon class one day to find almost the entire class in tears because one of them had gone before the board and been continued for two years (i.e., she would not be eligible for release for at least two years). The point being made is that although any single prisoner only infrequently sees the board herself, the emotional ups and downs are nevertheless regularly experienced.

One additional aspect which surrounds the board dates is that the inmates come to feel a nearly overwhelming sense that the parole board system is capricious. Over months of time the women attempt to make sense out of the actions of the board. Do they look at types of crimes differently? Does one's prison record count a lot or at all? Does the personal appearance of the inmate affect her chance in front of the board? What are the most important factors looked at by the board members? What exactly is contained in the folder these stern faced individuals have before them? Is the fact that the facility is extremely overcrowded important? Are comments from my sociology instructor in that file? These questions and others were discussed before and after every board, and the most common conclusion arrived at was that there were no clear discernable patterns in the board's actions, at least in part because the specific individuals who composed the board changed with some frequency.

By watching scores of women undergo the parole board experience the inmates grow to feel a deep distrust in the fairness of the system and eventually come to accept a pervasive sense of uncertainty about their own fate. The emotional roller-coaster produced by the monthly board dates, either directly or vicariously produces in many inmates a stronger and stronger layer of emotional insulation to the point that they are unaffected by these events, with the constant sense of uncertainty surrounding the board's decisions adding to this reaction. It becomes difficult to be seriously affected by that which seems to be an event without any rational or direct control.

STAGE 6: Getting papers.

Eventually all but an extremely rare few inmates go before a parole board and are told that they are being granted their freedom, i.e., "getting their parole papers". The period of time between when the inmate has been told that she is being released (either paroled or furloughed to a half-way house) and when she finally rides out of the gate is the most intense period of her entire incarceration. This period, which can last from only a few days to approximately a whole month, is marked by the inmate being consumed by violently conflicting emotions. A profound and intense sense of joy and happiness is an immediate emotional reaction for the inmate: she is finally going to be free of this living hell. One of the most enjoyable aspects of teaching at Midwest is being able to see a student begin to disassociate herself from life in the prison and to be filled with a fresh sense of enthusiasm and joy. For a long time I was under the impression that the fact that an inmate had gotten her papers was unambiguously a time of celebration and carefree joy. As I had a chance to talk with many of the women that had gone through the process on a one-to-one basis, I discovered that there paradoxically are actually more negative emotions which accompany this stage of incarceration than positive ones.

First, there are many fears that crop up when the inmate reflects on what will be happening in the near future. Many serious and in most cases frightening questions arise. How will my family and friends react to me when I go back home? Will I be able to get a job and support myself? How will the label "ex-con" affect my life? What kind of changes have there been in my social world since my incarceration? How long will it take me to readjust to life outside? Will I get in trouble and/or get caught again? Will everyone expect me to be a lesbian? Will I be treated differently by family, friends, and people in general? All of these questions are pondered as the inmate spends the days and nights awaiting her final release. Of course, for those inmates being released to a furlough house or having a stable family to go back to, these questions are far less fear provoking. But for the majority of inmates, being released means having to deal with a situation that holds many frightful uncertainties.

A second reason why getting one's papers is not an unconditional cause for celebration is that these papers can be taken away at any time if the inmate violates any of the prison rules. All through her incarceration the inmate has learned to monitor virtually every aspect of her behavior so that it conforms to all of the rules and regulations of the institution as well as the informal normative system of the Farm. Now this monitoring is ever more crucial because one slip-up could mean a violation ticket and a delay in release. The inmate becomes superconscious of her every move and suddenly follows to the letter rules about which she had been lax in the past. For many inmates this is a period of mental strain and even paranoia but is nonetheless manageable. The real strain comes from the knowledge that there are many inmates that may be jealous or angry that you have received your freedom and may be "out to get you". Not frequently--but just often enough to make the possibility real--an inmate will get her freedom only to become involved in a fight with another inmate and be sent to maximum security for at least 15 days. Both parties are punished regardless of who started the fight. A particularly jealous inmate may begin harrasing a woman who has gotten her papers specifically because she knows that if they get caught fighting they both will be punished. For many

reasons it is not a valid assumption that all inmates are thinking and acting rationally, or that someone who has been rational in the past will necessarily continue to act rationally. Thus, the inmate who has gotten her papers lives in constant fear that she has or will offend one of the women she comes in contact with and will be forced into a no-win situation.

As I stated above, this relatively short period of time during which the inmate has her papers but has not yet boarded the van that will take her out of the gate is the most intense period of incarceration. The feeling of joy is painfully tempered by the fact that behavior must be constantly monitored and the accompanying fear of getting into trouble.

STAGE 7: Getting out and shedding the inmate role.⁸

For the purposes of this essay I will not differentiate between those inmates who are released to their family or friends and those who have been released to a furlough house. There are vast differences between these two experiences which are beyond the scope of this essay. There are, however, many similarities, and these are discussed below. The reason for extending the discussion of the moral career of the inmate beyond the confines of the Farm should be somewhat obvious: just as one does not feel "single" right after a divorce (i.e., after the role of spouse has been legally shed), the inmate does not immediately shed the role of prisoner as she leaves the gates behind her. As one ex-inmate commented to me, she would always remember her experience and in a sense would always be a prisoner. After having lived in a total institution for an extended period of time and getting used to having very little responsibility for such things as securing meals and having clean clothes, as well as having all daily decisions made for you by prison staff or social workers, getting out and having these freedoms and responsibilities becomes an immediate burden. The following anecdote will perhaps illustrate the nature of this stage.

The ex-inmate goes to a restaurant for a meal. Here for the first time in possibly many years she has a choice to make about what to eat. As she sits in the chair reading the menu she feels as if everyone around her is watching her every move because they know she is an ex-con. Her actions are strained and awkward feeling because she "knows" everyone is aware of where she has just come from. Slowly, the ex-inmate becomes more and more comfortable moving around in the free world, but for some it takes many weeks before she again feels natural. In general, the longer the inmate has been incarcerated the longer this sense of awkwardness will last. As she eats her meal and talks with her friends or family, they comment on how cold and distant she seems. This emotionless face that she presents is a vestige of the persona that was adopted as a defense mechanism during incarceration. For some ex-inmates it will be many months or even years before they unlearn the subtle use of facades which were so much a part of daily life inside the prison. The role of the inmate carries on into free life in many ways and thus the final stage in the moral career of the inmate is shedding the sense of self that was developed in this environment. Yet it is not merely a matter of going back to the person that one was before going to prison. Just as the young man who goes through boot camp and is never again the same naive person, the woman who spends time in MRW has been permanently changed and will likely forever seem somewhat different to those who knew her before she had that experience.

This final stage in the moral career is marked by the ex-inmate becoming aware that she has been permanently affected by her life at the Farm, and that she will continually have to deal with the social stigma of being an ex-con.

The Moral Career of the Inmate: Epilogue

When I began to review the scholarly literature which examines the lives of prison inmates and the effects of incarceration, I somehow expected there to be any number of researchers that had used the concept of the moral career laid out by Goffman in Asylums. There are many citations of this work to be sure, however no one seemed to be using his framework. What I did find was a modest but nonetheless impressive body of literature in which the problem has been examined.

Sykes' The Society of Captives and Clemmer's The Prison Community both afford the scholar new to this field a study a detailed impression of the effects of incarceration on male prisoners and, more generally, a sense of the nature of the prison as a total institution. Dimik's Ladies in Waiting is a particularly well written and humanistic account of the lives of female inmates at the Indiana state institution for female offenders. As the prison psychologist, Dimik held a position not entirely dissimilar to my own as an instructor. His key to gaining a somewhat clear insight into these women's lives--as was mine--was earning their trust over a long period of time. Ward and Kassebaum's work Women's Prison: Sex and Social Structure begins to answer the question I was asked with disturbing frequency by family and friends when they learned that I was teaching in a women's prison: are they all a bunch of lesbians? The answer one will find in Women's Prison as well as in my field notes is "no". Ward and Kassebaum examine the general "pains of imprisonment" but, as the title would indicate, they spend the majority of their effort describing the extent to which homosexuality does exist among female inmates.

In Making It In Prison Hefferman gives an exceptionally detailed description and analysis of the community of women inmates. Her objective in this book is no less than describing the inmates social structure, complete with typologies of prisoners. Toward this goal her writing frequently complements the work of Ward and Kassenbaum in touching on the subject of sexual behavior as well as many other areas of the normative system which exists in this subculture. An overall examination of the female criminal is presented in Alder's Sisters in Crime. In her chapter entitled "New Crimes and Old Correction" she looks specifically at the problem of women's prisons from a particularly useful historical and feminist perspective. An additional work which examines the history of women's prisons is Smith's Women in Prison.

The seven stages of the moral career of the inmate outlined in the previous sections of this essay give only the barest of impressions as to the richness and complexity of the lives of the students and other inmates I encountered. I found virtually all of the works cited above to be particularly helpful in further understanding the nature of the effects of incarceration on the inmate. My effort, in one sense, does

not go beyond but rather restates in lean outline form some of their insights and conclusions. Yet, in another sense, I feel that the preceding discussion of the "moral career of the inmate" makes a point which may be implicit but is not directly emphasized in any of the literature which I was able to find. Specifically, the literature cited above does present many useful typologies and descriptions of inmates and inmate life. It examines the structure of inmate life, yet it fails to emphasize something which I see as extremely important, that being an inmate is a dynamic process, a series of stages that one goes through. The great utility of the concept of the moral career is that it forces one to examine social phenomena as dynamic, as becoming as opposed to merely existing.

Conclusion

Not unlike the many women that I had a chance to meet and teach in my classes at the Farm, I too am permanently affected by having had that experience. By exploring and then writing about the moral career of the inmate I have been forced to consider in depth the nature of our penal system and the effects that it has on the people who experience it as inmates. By examining the moral career of the inmate one begins to see those behind the walls and fences as victims as well as criminals. When I told my classes that I was going to write a paper on this topic they were extremely excited about it and wanted to help in any way they could. They explained to me that they thought it was important to inform as many people as possible what being in prison did to them, and that in some way this would make people in general more sensitive to the ex-con and perhaps even more generous in funding penal institutions. A few of the students even voiced their hope that after hearing what life at the Farm did to an individual's sense of self, some people would reconsider completely the nature and purpose of the entire penal system. Perhaps we should.

FOOTNOTES

1. Class sessions in all cases were either morning or afternoon three hour blocks. There would be a 15 minute break halfway through each class.
2. Some of the things the inmates told me incriminated them or others in serious crimes.
3. Technically, this is a piece of participant observation research, and as such my students should be properly referred to as "informants". The thought to put down my notes and recollections in article form came in my fourth (next to last) quarter of teaching at the Farm, and although I did make clear to them what my intentions were they of course still viewed me as their teacher, not as a researcher. I view this essay as less of an ex post facto piece of research than a sharing of insights although it is of course both.
4. One can as easily talk about the moral career of a lawyer or a waitress, and so on. The "burn out" phase that, for example, social workers (as well as many other professionals) report going through can be seen as a stage in the moral career of the social worker.
5. The resocialization which is accomplished at WCAC is, of course, closely analogous to that which goes on in a military boot camp. The point of boot camp is the production of men and women who at least appear to embrace military values, sense of purpose, and goals.
6. "Free" individuals are also able, to an extent, to separate both physical and psychologically the various roles that they play through a process referred to as "role segregation". Although the inmates do play various roles (e.g., roommate, worker), their main role is that of inmate and this role permeates all others.
7. As with all of the other stages that will be discussed in this essay, the initial distancing from the role of prisoners will vary in duration from inmate to inmate. Various factors that will affect the reaction of the inmate to the many aspects of incarceration are mental and emotional maturity, strength of ties outside of prison, nature of the crime committed, length of sentence, and whether or not the individual has done time before.
8. For this section I am grateful to several ex-MRW residents who consented to talk with me about their experiences after they were released.

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