
Coping Strategies of Prisoners in a Maximum Security Prison: Minimals, Optimals and Utilitarians¹

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Adaptation, or coping, has historically been an important aspect of prison life for students of penal policy. Sociologists, in particular, following Donald Clemmer, have focused much of their attention on the processes of assimilation into the prison culture. Data gathered in a maximum security population of a large midwestern prison calls into question the salience of the prisonization concept in contemporary prisons. In particular, the solidary model, at the heart of the prisonization concept, is absent and findings suggest that contemporary prisoners, far from joining their peers in solidarity and opposition to the administration, are overtly self-serving in dealing with prison life.

Enduring Models of the Prisonization Concept

Much of the study on prisoners' adaptation to the challenges of prison life completed by American sociologists in the past fifty years has concentrated on the social activities of prisoners. Among the more outstanding works are those of Donald Clemmer (1940); Gresham Sykes (1958); Stanton Wheeler (1961); Irwin and Cressey (1962); Rose Giallombardo (1966); Esther Heffernan (1972); James B. Jacobs (1977); and, Hans Toch (1977, 1992). The works of these authors certainly do not exhaust the literature dealing with studies of prison life, but they are representative of the type of emphasis that generated most of those studies. The emphasis is on a description and analysis of life in prison in terms of socialization, community, and culture.

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In his landmark publication, *The Prison Community*, Clemmer describes the process by which prisoners internalize the prison culture and coined what is, arguably, the most widely used term in the sociological literature on penology to describe that process, namely, *prisonization*. Prisonization refers to the internalization of convict values, attitudes, roles and language. Since then, prisonization has remained the dominant focus in studies of adaptation to prison life.

Following Clemmer, Wheeler (1961) further clarified the socialization process in prison with his conception of a U-shaped curve of adaptation to depict the three important phases of the inmates' prison career. They are, the early stage which describes the entering prisoner and his proximity to free society; the middle phase in which prisoners are conditioned more by the inmate culture; and the late phase in which inmates are nearing the end of their sentences and are most likely to conform to staff expectations.

A major reference point of the prison as a social system is the work of Gresham Sykes (1958) in which he analyzes the structure of a mens' maximum security prison. His study examined the attempts of prisoners to come to terms with the deprivations of prison life and discovered that the situation of imprisonment is the source of the prisoner social system. In other words, he found that prisoners' ways of dealing with deprivations is to create a society of their own for the distribution of scarce resources and the maintenance of social identification

Two informative studies of women's prisons (Giallombardo 1966; Heffernan 1972) also look at the inmate social system from the perspective of the organization of social relationships based on the differential orientation to male and female roles in American society. Rose Giallombardo stresses the importation of certain aspects of macro social culture into the prison, particularly the way in which male and female roles are defined and how they influence the definitions made by prisoners. Esther Heffernan stresses the importance of "familying" in the way female prisoners construct organized pseudo families in prison. Both studies project the prison as a microcosm of the larger society.

Hans Toch (1975, 1992) undertook one of the largest studies ever of the stress and suffering of incarcerated men and women in which he examines incidents of human breakdowns in jails and prisons. His study explores the evolution and climax of individuals in crises. His most salient finding identifies social factors in breakdowns, such as the lack of outside support systems for prisoners' failure to cope with prison life.

James B. Jacobs (1977) found new patterns of social organization within the prisoner population which he attributed to the rise of prison gangs. In his influential study of Stateville he found the sheer numbers and solidarity of militant Black gangs had replaced the old prisoner subculture, and the prevailing prisoner/staff relations were replaced by gang/staff relations.

Generally, the literature tends to emphasize the prisonization concept in studies of the adaptation processes of prisoners as they face the challenges of prison life. Prisoners are perceived to band together in opposition to the staff because of the power differential. Inmates are depicted as having little or no power except for that which they exercise among themselves. The staff, especially the line officers, conversely, have virtually total power over the prisoners. Yet, contrary to widely held beliefs about prisonization, my research revealed that there is only a small amount of solidarity among prisoners. Prisoners, I discovered, are leery of involvement with anyone inside the prison and strive to minimize interaction with both fellow-prisoners and staff. Toward this end they will try to avoid all situations where they have to take a side with staff or other prisoners, or otherwise become involved. There are, of course, exceptions to this practice, e.g. gang members and "snitches." Gang members who fail to support, or deviate from, the gang position do so at great personal risk. "Snitches" are the conduit for inside information about the inmate world to the CO's. In general, however, all inmates are particularly distrustful of correctional officers whom they view as capricious and strictly custodial, with a few notable exceptions.

The Research

Research for my study took place in the maximum security section of a midwestern state prison that housed 904 prisoners. I randomly drew my initial research population of 40 inmates, and a backup population of 60, from a list of the maximum security

prisoners that was supplied to me by prison officials. Nine inmates of my initial population did not agree to participate and they were replaced from my backup list. I went through the prison's orientation program with employees of the prison, after which I was allowed to move about the prison without an escort. I was given the use of a private office in the maximum security area and each morning as I went through security I picked up a personal alarm device that is called a "panic button." This device was issued to prison employees to summon help in situations where a breach of personal security was perceived. My interviews took place between the hours of 7:30 and 11:00 in the mornings and 12:00 to 2:45 in the afternoons. All interviews were conducted in private. Three interviews took place in the segregation unit. Two of these interviewees were in protective custody, and the third was in administrative custody. The latter was the only prisoner who was in restraints during the interviews. My interviews followed no specific format but I did try to keep the interviews focused on the areas of activities in prison, contacts with the outside, interpersonal relations, and psychological adjustment to prison life.

From the beginning of my interview activities a variety of prison constructions were characterized by distinctive responses to the pains of imprisonment. For example, the first two interviewees were very depressed and seemed to lack any semblance of self-efficacy. My third interviewee was the complete opposite of the first two. He was upbeat and confident, and very interesting to talk with. The fourth interviewee, likewise, was pleasant, interesting and informative but not, seemingly, well adjusted to prison life. On my second day, the first interviewee was cautious during the initial stages of the interview, but soon relaxed and the interview proved interesting. The remaining interviews continued along these lines. They were either distinctly depressing, distinctly upbeat, or somewhere in between.

Data Analysis

When I finally began work on the analysis of my data, I was again reminded of a variety of prison constructions and, in the end, coping strategies converged around three distinct aggregates that I have named Minimals, Optimals, and Utilitarians. Twelve (30%) of the forty men interviewed were Minimals. The term Minimal, as it is applied here, denotes a self-conception of being the refuse of society. The term represents a category of

people to whom constructions of convicts as social outcasts have been successfully applied. Minimals, then, reacted to their status as outsiders by bearing the stigma of the convict label which acted to isolate them from the rest of society. Consequently, they had few, if any, family or friend connections on the outside. One Minimal explained,

Naw, don't no one write to me nor visit. They (mother, sister) be tellin' me to call 'cause they don't want to write. Sometimes I call. It depends how I feel. There be times I might not use the phone for two or three months, or they'll write and I won't write back for two or three months. I don't want to be bothered, you know what I mean?

They appeared to have no strength of purpose, no ambition, no plans, and nowhere to go. They had a fatalistic view of their lives and believed that they were destined to be losers because everything in life was stacked against them. A typical expression of this belief was, "I mean I ain't never had no breaks as far as the system goes an' it seems like they is no way out for me." In their construction of reality nobody understood them, or cared about them. They were persuaded that even when they do get out of prison, it would not be long before they were imprisoned again because, they believed, nobody was going to help them. Here's how one respondent described the situation,

Like they kick you outta' here with a hunert bucks. You can't even rent a motel room for that, so what position are you left in? An' if you find a job, okay, you found a job, what'a you do about rent until you get a paycheck? The parole office don't care, the place in here don't care, the public, sure as hell, don't care. Parole office don't help you here an' now you gotta pay 'um twen'y five bucks a month to be on parole. So now you' walkin' outta' here with seventy five bucks, with no job an' you got no place ta go. So now, whad'a you s'posed ta eat? Where you s'posed ta sleep?

Minimals appeared, in comparison to the other two aggregates, to have the least motivation to do anything about their lives. They were convinced that they could not make it on the outside. In essence, they accepted the inevitability of rejection.

Optimals, who comprised 5 (12.5%) of the 40 interviewees, were the polar opposites of Minimals in many important areas. As the term is meant to imply here, Optimals strived to be the best they could be in terms of their fitness to participate in mainstream

society. They believed that doing something because it was the right thing to do according to the values and norms of the larger society, benefited everyone and was, ultimately, in their own best interests. Their most distinguishing characteristic was that of inner-motivation. One Optimal explained,

Time is not somethin' that control you, you know? 'cause, you know? even if they got you' body locked up they don't hav'ta lock you' mind up. An' if you let 'em, you know? this place here , it can take you' life, you know? It could be really terrible.

Optimals enjoyed strong and consistent family support, such as letter writing, family visits, and occasional financial help from family members, all of which were instrumental in helping them to maintain a high level of self-esteem. Typical responses were,

Compared to most people I know I'm blest 'cause I get visits practically every week an' that makes my time a lot easier.

I love gettin' letters. I love to write. I get about 10 letters a week an' I answer every one of 'um.

In turn, they strived for personal and situational improvements that emphasized their desire for proximity to mainstream society. Those improvements included getting medium or minimum custody level because that would mean better quality visits. At the lower custody levels prisoners and their visitors were allowed to eat out of doors on prison property and to eat, picnic style, with their own food. Another improvement that Optimals worked toward was to get a minimum pay job so they could earn enough to send money home in the interest of their children on special occasions such as birthdays and Christmas.

They accepted responsibility for the activities that brought them to prison. One prisoner remarked,

I did the crime by myself; nobody helped me to make that decision. This is the price I have to pay. It's not whether it's fair but that it is the price, and I must pay it.

They established routines and a living standard that helped them steer clear of trouble. Being religious, for instance, was a high priority in their lives,

Everything I involve myself in now is based on my faith as a Muslim. That is the number one thing now which is why it's so easy for me not to get caught up in the little things, you know? See, you gotta lead a good life an' the Koran tells you it's never too late, you know? God forgives everyone if they only ask an' lead a decent life. Religion, you know?, teaches you how to do that, you know?

Education, also, was important and they would continue to educate themselves if programs were available. They stayed away from hooch (prison-made alcohol), drugs, gangs, and close relationships, and anything else that might lead in the direction of trouble with other prisoners or prison staff. Optimals would help others but worked primarily on trying to improve themselves,

I won't say that I won't help a person with a problem, you know?, but if I'm spendin' my time off into other people's business an' their problems, I don't have time for myself, you know?, an' I feel that myself is what I got to work with in here, you know?

They were aware of their surroundings, respectful of self and others, and tried to follow the rules.

Optimals rejected the convict label by continuing family ties and saw themselves as respected members of society, and by conforming to the norms and behavior that is expected of that segment of society. In principle, then, they rejected rejection.

Between these two extremes, another aggregate emerged that appeared hedonistic and self-serving that I have named Utilitarians. Twenty three of the 40 respondents (57.5%) in my study were Utilitarians. Since looking out for number one is, arguably, a highly prioritized factor in the U.S. as a whole, it is no surprise that Utilitarians comprised the largest segment of my study population.

Utilitarians assumed that things were right or wrong according to how they made you feel. It did not occur to them that people had rights that may not be violated no matter how it made others feel. Thus, Utilitarians, in my study population, were concerned foremost about their own happiness. A principle which described them best was "What's in it for me?" This was the principle that motivated them to action. Utilitarians engaged in active associations with other prisoners but expected to gain

more than they contributed to those associations. Likewise, even though family bonds were weak, they maintained contact because family provided psychological and material support in prison and opportunities for social reintegration after release from prison,

Yea, the mail, the visits, it makes me feel part of somethin' you know? An' when I get out I know I got someplace to go where I don't hav'ta worry none about where I can stay an' eat an' all that, you know? I got my family to go to. I don't hav'ta worry, but a lot of others do. People who don't have anyone or anythin', you give 'um a hundred dollars an' they ain't gonna get anywhere. So they'll have to go pick up a gun at a pawnshop. They can't even go to a halfway house unless one will accept you. That's just it, they're so overcrowded, if one will accept you, if not, basically they just throw you out.

Utilitarians acknowledged that they did the crime but denied full responsibility for it. They looked for ways to transfer blame for their criminal acts, and generally found the system at fault. In the words of one Utilitarian, "It's only a crime because I did it. Others do worse and nothing happens to them." They also denied the negative impact of their crimes on society. Instead, they found extenuating circumstances such as their passive participation, a misunderstanding about what really happened, or that it was a business rather than a person that was the target of their criminal act which, in their view, made it less of a crime. Here's how one respondent put it,

If you got a dollar an' this other person got three thousand, I'm not gonna mess with you; you're barely makin' it. I want this person who's not gonna be deprived of everythin' he's got. That's why I'd never steal a private car, always get the car lots.

Strategies for Improving Coping

Each of the three aggregates had a particularized approach to coping with the challenges of prison life. Overall, there were eight major strategies.

1. One interviewee identified the first strategy as, "Do your own time and don't be doin' no one else's." This meant staying away from others as much as possible, especially when they were experiencing problems or other difficulties that might lead to a

violation of the rules and trouble with the administration or lead to difficulties with other prisoners.

2. Staying away from the correctional officers as much as possible. Nearly all officer contact was seen as undesirable, whether confrontational, as in the case of rules violation, or non-confrontational, such as friendly interaction. This attitude derived from inmates' construction of the relationship between prisoners and officers as, fundamentally, one in which the officers did not trust, and had no respect for the inmates. By extension, inmates interpreted friendly advances by officers as attempts to gain inmate confidence for ulterior motives.

3. In line with doing their own time and staying away from the correctional officers whenever possible, a corresponding coping strategy was to minimize contact with fellow inmates except, perhaps, for those who belonged to prison gangs. By "minimizing contact" I imply a reluctance to form solitary groups for the purpose of developing group policies and procedures for a systemized approach to doing prison time. The preferred inter-relationship dynamic among the prisoner population in my study was one that was low key and was concentrated, primarily, in areas dealing with the distribution of goods, such as reciprocal borrowing activities, and personal security, such as protecting each other's back from sneak attacks. In this latter activity, the expectation of the relationship appeared to be that one would alert his contact of impending danger. It did not appear to include an agreement to stand by each other in altercations or other confrontational situations. Again, though, gang members may be an exception to this latter point.

In relation to these three strategies, Minimals were the least involved with others in the prison and kept all interaction to a minimum. Optimals were careful not to get too close to anyone but they were not afraid to give help to others if they could. Utilitarians were cautious about getting involved with others but made that decision on a case by case basis. If it seemed beneficial to them to get involved, they did so.

4. An emphasis on doing prison time "one day at a time."

5. The formation of small cadres of inmate associations for commercial purposes and personal security.

Both of these strategies were considered necessary and basic to survival in prison by all the respondents in my study population.

6. Employment was an important coping activity for inmates for two main reasons. First, it provided income for the acquisition of some of the necessities of life. For example, coffee, snacks and cigarettes were not available to many prisoners whose only income was derived from job earnings. Second, prisoners who did not work had to remain in their cells during the work-day time-period. They were not allowed onto the yard, for instance, if they were not working or engaged in some other officially approved activity. So much cell time would raise boredom to nearly intolerable levels.

Minimals, however, did the least amount of work possible. Optimals took pride in doing a good job and put their best effort into their work. Utilitarians were interested in getting the better jobs such as those requiring outside work, and being around areas that might offer them opportunities to get extra materials or information.

7. For those who professed religious beliefs, and turned to those beliefs for help with the challenges and pains of prison, being religious was a valuable coping mechanism.

Minimals were the exception because they did not believe that God, no more than anyone else, would help them. According to Minimals, if there was a God then everything was predetermined and "how it is, is how it is." Optimals derived substantial coping help from their religious beliefs. Utilitarians turned to their religious beliefs for help with an immediate concern but did not allow those beliefs to take precedence over their physical lives. One Utilitarian put it this way, "You gotta live here an' so you gotta take care of that first."

8. Family support, or the lack of family support, appeared to be at the heart of coping strategies.

In situations where family support was strong and/or consistent (*i.e.* for Optimals and Utilitarians) it provided a sense of identity that appeared to bridge the gap between prisoners' displacement to the periphery of society and mainstream society. Family support also provided a sense of security for post-prison life because it assured prisoners of a place to go for food, shelter, and companionship upon release from prison. On the other hand, the absence of a family support structure isolated

prisoners on the periphery of society and tended to support anomie ideas such as those expressed by Minimals in this study.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions that I have drawn from my study are that there was:

1. no solidarity among the inmates
2. no organized opposition to the administration
3. no organized violence
4. no meaningful rehabilitation taking place

Additionally, I found that;

5. modes of coping depended on inmates construction of reality (their world view), and there was a concerted effort by all inmates to confine interaction with others inside the prison to a minimum
6. religion was an important factor in the coping strategies of some inmates
7. families played a central role in prisoners' constructions of reality and in their coping strategies.

Implications of the Study

The most obvious practical implication of this analysis is that correctional programs should find ways to facilitate offenders' construction of world-views characteristic of the aggregate called Optimals in this report. This could be done with the introduction of self-help programs aimed at getting prisoners to pay attention to who they are internally and how to use that knowledge to construct a world view that allows for meaningful ecological interaction.

Several such programs, that have focused on religious teaching and practice, have proved successful (Tone 1996; Lozoff 1994;

Hunt 1991). I am not suggesting that religious programs are a panacea for inner development but the idea of turning people inward to another dimension of their lives is conducive, it seems to me, to the development of a world-view based on a perspective of self that has potential for improved self-worth and greater social interaction. Finally, though by no means exhaustively, family interactional therapy might be considered as a means of maintaining, recreating, or creating bonds between prisoners and their families, since this study reveals that families play a central role in prisoners' construction of reality.

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BOOKS: REVIEWS AND ESSAYS

L'investissement symbolique. By Pierre Lantz, with Ariane Lantz. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996. 249 pp. 128 FF.

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Viewed from this side of the Atlantic, French social theory often appears far more limited in scope than in its actual unfoldment on native ground. This is because most Americans writing today confine their discussions of French theory to structuralists, post-structuralists, and postmodernists such as Althusser, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Kristeva, or Bourdieu. Not only have giant figures of the past on the more humanist and subject-centered side such as Sartre, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Goldmann, and Lefebvre faded nearly into oblivion in today's American discussions, but there is also a tendency to ignore even contemporary French theorists who are quite prominent at home, if their orientation does not fit into the post-structuralist wave. For example, while every utterance of a Baudrillard, no matter how idiotic, is rushed into English, a very well-known theorist such as Edgar Morin is little discussed or translated here. The same is true with regard to an important younger sociologist such as Michael Löwy, whose work on Marxism, the Frankfurt School, and Latin America has helped bring about the recent resurgence of interest in Marxism in France.

Pierre Lantz, a student of Lefebvre, is the author of two earlier books, *Valeur et richesse* (1977), a study of Marxian political economy, and *L'Argent, la mort* (1988), a work in which he moves toward his present concern with social psychology and the symbolic structures of power. The volume under review here was written in collaboration with his wife, Ariane Lantz. Both have been involved for years with anti-racist, labor, and democratic movements.