

The Inside's Influence on the Outside

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To regret one's own experiences is to arrest one's own development. To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less than a denial of the soul.

– Oscar Wilde

INTRODUCTION

A professor whom I interviewed for a research project, having previously served many decades in prison, made a statement that I have internalized: “I am a criminologist who happens to be an ex-convict, not an ex-convict (ex-con) who happens to be a criminologist”. The wisdom he imparted to me was the process of moving beyond the stigma of the ex-convict status and defining yourself by your subsequent accomplishments within academia, which in this individual's case was extensive. Yet, an issue that many ex-prisoners in the United States who have overcome nearly insurmountable obstacles to arrive at respected academic and professional positions must face is the enduring and nearly permanent social stigma placed upon those individuals with a felony conviction (Ross and Richards, 2003). Thus, the question I seek to ask is: how is my journey through the federal prison system and subsequent return to society defined for a formerly incarcerated academic, convicted of meth distribution during the height of the United States meth epidemic?

During the “meth (methamphetamines) epidemic”, the already heavily burdened United States prison system swelled to epic proportions as correctional facilities filled with small-scale methamphetamine distributors and new prisons were constructed to contain the sudden influx of prisoners. Being convicted of meth distribution, I joined the incarcerated masses and then returned to society with a two-fold, educationally focused mission. First, how could I as an ex-prisoner gain a useful education, and second (this developed over the next five years after my release), subsequently use my education and life experiences to attempt to improve the life chances of other prisoners. Thus, through the use of auto-ethnographic methodology¹ (Ellis, 2009), I discuss how I define the journey from the street, to prison, back to the street, through graduate school, and to academia as a middle-class, white male convicted of a meth-related drug crime during the zenith of the United States meth epidemic (Reding, 2010; Semple *et al.*, 2008).

I examine how to apply my accrued experience to educational and pro-social endeavours and contrast my prison-to-academy journey with that of others in the Convict Criminology group. It is the responsibility of those who survived the prison system, and subsequently experienced a successful return to society, to educate and help others trapped in the de-habilitating confines of the criminal justice system find their way out.

LEAVING “OUT THERE”

As an ex-prisoner, I understand the scenario described above, yet before I learned about these experiences I had to undergo the transformation from a “citizen” to a “convict”.² While incarcerated within several holding facilities and finally a federal prison camp on a journey that took me through four states (Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and South Dakota), I quickly learned to leave my old “citizen” self, or what I will refer to as the “out there” identity, behind, as it was replaced with my “inside” prison self. The process of the forced construction of a new identity is not easy and was certainly not undertaken without powerful internal and external consequences to me as an individual (Winnick and Bodkin, 2008; 2009). This experience redefined my life; I entered prison as an ignorant kid, yet would soon receive a crash course in the realities of social inequality and injustice that define the American criminal justice system. This is an experience common to many prisoners in the late modern system of mass incarceration (Ross and Richards, 2003), even across the ocean in a European country also experiencing record rates of incarceration. Crewe (2009, p. 35), when discussing the attitudes of modern prisoners in overcrowded British prisons, explains: “Among prisoners, perceptions of fairness and justice fell”.

My experience as a former drug dealer, substance abuser, and subsequent drug offender, like many other ex-prisoners, happened in the midst of the War on Drugs (Jones *et al.*, 2009; Richards *et al.*, 2008; Tregga and Larmour, 2009) and the Meth Epidemic (Rasmussen, 2008; Reding, 2010; Semple *et al.*, 2008). Through my interaction with the correctional system, I quickly learned that the meth trade was largely a “white” phenomenon. Meth street and prison sub-culture incorporated many elements of rural/Midwestern/working-class American ideology, cultures that I was quite knowledgeable about, having grown up in a small Midwestern town and having worked on the family farm as a youth and in a welding shop in a small Midwestern city as an adult.

As a first-time prisoner who had never spent a previous day in a correctional facility, I quickly had to learn jail and prison cultural norms; then upon return to the street, I discarded my prison values/behaviours and re-conformed to life outside of the total institution (Goffman, 1961). Yet, prison had a powerful effect on me as an individual. Prisoners are different people when released from prison (Ross and Richards, 2003). The way I perceive reality has been negatively skewed, yet not without positive developments. The journey through a prison sentence taught me many lessons as a formerly incarcerated citizen, such as how to function under the complete control of others, the realization that social inequality is not just an abstract concept, and a firm belief that justice is not blind.

Suddenly, and without warning, I was extracted from society and placed in an environment that was completely foreign to me, an environment in which I would stay confined for the next two years as a federal prisoner. Thus, the immediate transition phase was a difficult process of adaptation. I divide this adaptation process up into two phases: the physical and the psychosocial adaptation phases.

PHYSICAL ADAPTATION PHASE

Directly after arrest, I was placed in a local jail that also served as a federal holding facility. My initial reaction immediately after my arrest, when being booked into the county jail (which served as my holding facility while awaiting arraignment) was fear. I had never been in a correctional facility before. The clinically bright lights that reflect off of the concrete floors and blandly coloured walls found in any correctional facility, coupled with the loud noises of heavy steel doors slamming and echoes of prisoners yelling and bantering, came as quite a shock to me. I immediately began an intensive process of introspection, which lasted for months, searching out the inner depths of mind and consciousness for clues as to how I had arrived in this predicament. I was engaged in a process of soul searching.

As a prisoner, I had to learn to adapt to the strange and intimidating new conditions that jail presented to me. Because I was incarcerated as a first-time offender, I suddenly became aware of the loss of freedom that incarceration entails and went into an initial shock. I became numb to my environment in a sense, which retrospectively served as a temporary buffer/coping mechanism against the harsh realities of my environment. All of my movements were controlled by correctional officers and the institutional administration where

I was placed. As a prisoner, I was classified according to my offense type and previous criminal record. I had to ask to use the telephone, ask to move from one section of your facility to another, and ask for more personal items, such as toilet paper, shaving supplies and toothpaste.

Another startling realization was the loss of the amenities of home, such as comfortable furniture, hot showers and baths, limitless possessions, the ability to arrange your home the way you want, an automobile, choice of the food and clothing, privacy, and Internet access. Sykes (1958) presents these experiences as the “pains of imprisonment”, outlining such phenomena as deprivation of liberty, loss of goods and services, deprivation of conventional sexual relationships³, and loss of privacy and autonomy. I discuss these examples not as a subtle means of filing a complaint against the system, but to demonstrate the actual conditions within a federal holding facility. For any recently incarcerated prisoner, the physical surroundings shift drastically, and the process of adapting must be carried out quickly, as there is generally no way to avoid interacting with the physical environment when suddenly placed in a correctional facility outside of extreme measures (Clemmer, 1940; Irwin, 1970; Jones and Schmid, 2000).

PSYCHOSOCIAL ADAPTATION PHASE

This section will discuss the social and psychological components of adapting to prison life. Although this is a sociological paper, it is important to include the psychological experiences in the explanation of what incarcerated individuals’ experience. The effect on self is a vital component when attempting to capture the prison experience. The social dynamic within prison often moves quite slowly and tends to be quiet and almost monastic in its monotony and routines. An issue that Hollywood simulations and sensationalized media reality shows fail to present when depicting prisons is the experience of boredom.

The vast majority of prison life is quite tedious and boring. Many prison facilities fail to provide adequate activities or employment to keep prisoners occupied (Elrod and Brooks, 2000). Prisoners are left to figure out how to fill up long hours of dead time without the resources to do so. Within prison, a strict daily routine must be adhered to, and deviation results in both formal sanctions from prison administration and often informal sanctions from other prisoners. Prisons bring large groups of people together in permanent close proximity who might not normally congregate together outside of

a correctional facility, which eliminates the option of distancing oneself from stressful situations and threats of personal violence. Consequently, the potential for chaos and extreme social disorder is constant. Daily routines and schedules work to balance this equation out, creating some semblance of social order, but the grinding reality in regards to serving time in correctional facilities that commonly lack programs and activities for prisoners is to figure out what to do with *all* of that time.

As a prisoner, I quickly learned to show much more respect for personal space, always using proper manners and saying, "Excuse me" if I accidentally bumped into someone in a hallway, as not doing so could be interpreted as a personal insult or threat of violence. My ability to use diplomacy to talk my way out of potentially violent or dangerous situations without having to resort to physical or extreme measures became all the more important. I also quickly learned from other prisoners, that following the rules (outwardly) makes your stay in jail and prison much more bearable. As Crewe (2007, p. 272) explains when quoting a prisoner, "There's ways and means you can do everything you've got to do and not get into a confrontation. If you get into a confrontation you're an idiot in this day and age [...] There's ways of being passive but still assertive". Appearing to walk the line was the best method of staying off the guards' radar and avoiding disciplinary actions that would make my life quite miserable.

If conceptualized in abstract terms, the prison environment can be thought of as a waltz, with many moves and countermoves, somewhat similar to the outside world, yet perhaps with the addition of several more nuanced moves and countermoves. Each additional nuanced dance move within the correctional environment must be learned through the process of acclimation to this environment, while removing some "outside" dance moves from the process. When re-entering society, I had to determine which values (prison moves versus street moves) to keep and which values to discard (Irwin, 1970; Ross and Richards, 2003).

When released, the "street" (outside world) soon brusquely reminded me that the heightened state of manners, defensive behaviours, and cautious social interactions of the correctional sphere were not the normal state of informal everyday interaction. "Street" people will bump into you without a second glance, and proper manners, while practiced by some (and within formal situations), are not required, and one should not act surprised if they are not offered or practiced at all. Examples of this would be someone opening a door right in front of you and letting it shut in your face, not

thanking you when you pick up something you saw them drop, and blatantly stepping in line ahead of you.

On the street, in most common social settings (barring some subcultures or countercultures), when a person does not follow through on a promise he has made to you, those actions do not result in threats or acts of violence. In prison, not following through on one's word is far more serious and has greater potential for severe repercussions, even violence. Within the correctional environment, owning property and large amounts of material possessions are not allowed. The total institutional environment acts as a levelling agent, taking away much of the value of pre-prison social status, thus "outside" traits that prisoners value must be redefined. As Goffman (1961, p. 16) explains when explaining the social and civil effects that prison wreaks upon the individual, "The inmate, then, finds certain roles are lost to him by virtue of the barrier that separates him from the outside world".

To be trusted, and considered an honest "stand-up guy" within the prison walls becomes a valuable asset, and to blatantly deviate from or not respect this behaviour places the individual prisoner in a very unstable position in relation to other prisoners (Irwin, 1970). This locates the dishonoured prisoner in a marginalized status in relation to the dominant prisoner population. Yet, it must be noted, that to conceptualize a prisoner population within a particular prison as a single body would be an oversimplification. Prisoner populations in modern prisons are comprised of multiple groups, affiliated by race, gang affiliation, religious groups, place of residence, and prisoners who choose not to be part of any groups (Irwin, 1987). The group demographics of individual prisons vary by several factors such as security level, location, state or federal facility, and type of administration that oversees the prison (Hunt *et al.*, 1993).

As discussed previously, the social dynamic within prison often moves quite slowly, tends to be quiet and almost monastic in its monotony and routines, and occurs within the majority of prison groups and across the boundaries of different groups. Most prison life is not as one-dimensional or violent as presented in mass media (Ross and Richards, 2003). Prison is actually a complex network of groups and intersecting social interactions. Most prisoners behave civilly most of the time. What must be expressed is that the total institutional setting itself, not the prisoners' intrinsic personalities, sets the stage for potential violent and extreme acts. Most prisoners, such as I was, are nonviolent men and women who simply want to serve their prison sentence and go home.

THE INSIDE

After sitting in federal holding facilities for ten months while traveling back and forth to court appointments, I finally received a sentence of two years in prison, three months in a federal halfway house, four years of supervised release, and three hundred hours of community service for a first-time nonviolent offence. During the ten-month court process, I was transferred to thirteen different federal holding facilities, moving from facility to facility for reasons unknown. Some of these lockups were county jails and smaller state facilities that the federal government contracted in order to hold the massive overflow of federal prisoners, and other facilities were private, for-profit prisons. The massive overflow of prisoners is due to the United States' war on drugs (Alexander, 2010; Austin *et al.*, 2001; Grey, 2001), which has played an integral role in generating the largest prison population in the world (Rose *et al.*, 2010).

It would be helpful to reference the previous ten months before I arrived in prison, when I was housed in county jails, private prisons, and federal holding facilities. Having been housed in five separate county jails for approximately ten months during the course of my federal sentence (some of these facilities multiple times), I can attest that serving jail time is a type of prisoner life that is far worse than prison time. Most people are surprised when I make this statement, yet the jail environment is far more stressful, less secure and more physically threatening than prison confinement (Irwin, 1985).

Within the county jail setting, federal prisoners and local prisoners are often housed together. Jails are often very dirty and quite crowded in comparison to most federal correctional facilities. As prisoners, we were held in very close quarters, with few amenities and even fewer diversions from boredom than within actual prisons. Many federal prisoners are housed in jails while awaiting court dates (as I was), such as sentencing hearings or the addition of new charges to their case. As such, the environment is often stressful. It is quite common for prisoners to receive news of new federal sentences, ranging from four or five years to a life sentence, or calls from wives wanting a divorce. Other stressors include losing their homes, property and children or being charged with additional crimes because witnesses from outside of jail are testifying against them in additional court cases.

Within this setting, emotions, depression and anger become intensified, as people must often deal with the worst news of their lives while confined in small spaces with individuals whom they often do not like or would never

associate with outside of the correctional environment. This atmosphere culminates in a pressure cooker effect. I watched many prisoners reach their limits of patience with other prisoners or have nervous breakdowns as we were often powerless to handle the situations that were being presented to us. I wanted to cry on many occasions, thinking about spending the next several years of my life in prison, yet would only do so hidden away in a bathroom stall because I feared that others would take this as a sign of weakness.

FROM JAIL TO THE FEDS

Once the courts handed me my sentence, I was transferred by the Federal Bureau of Prison's (FBOP) very own airline (old, full-size passenger jets) staffed by air marshals to the Federal Transfer Center (FTC) in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The FTC facility holds several thousand prisoners and is unique in that the prisoners walk directly off the jet and into the prison via a skywalk. You are housed in "administrative population", which means that prisoners from all security classifications, from minimum to maximum, are housed together.

FTC was an environment of contradictions, full of stress and uncertainties. Many of us were awaiting sentencing verdicts or on our way to trial dates that could re-determine the entire course of our lives. Yet, within this environment I came into contact with many interesting people from all over the United States who had many stories to tell, and once you befriended them, they were surprisingly often happy to talk just to pass the time. Some encounters were often quite sobering, as I recall a hopeless looking younger prisoner sitting on a stairwell. As I walked laps around the second tier of the pod (housing unit) I was housed in, he randomly asked me where I was from. I responded that I was from Nebraska and asked him where he was from, and he despondently replied, "Nowhere".

Within the FTC, prisoners are often under a great deal of stress and deal with much uncertainty about their futures. Whereas, I had been in jails and federal holding for the ten months previous to arriving at FTC, many prisoners enter this facility as new recruits to the criminal justice system. Consequently, the facility's rules and guidelines are unknown to new prisoners. The FTC does not come with an instruction manual for prisoners, and many guards and prison staff are not willing to take the time to explain how the prison routine works. In this predicament, new prisoners are often disoriented and confused, and must attempt to rely on the advice of other

prisoners (many of whom do not trust recently arrived prisoners), trial and error, and observing the routines of others.

Even with ten months of county jail experience as a prisoner, when I arrived at FTC, I was unable to immediately understand all of the rules of conduct and prison protocol within that facility. During “count”, a specific time during the day when all prisoners are counted throughout the United States federal prison system, I was sitting on my bunk in my cell reading a book. A guard came to the window of my cell and suddenly became quite angry. He sternly barked that my bunkmate and I (a white-collar prisoner who had also just arrived at the facility) were to be standing up by our bunks. He quickly left and returned with his supervisor, the original guard wearing a sardonic smirk on his face. The supervisor, being a little less irate, sternly asked us if we had been here before, and both of us replied that we had not. We politely stated that we did not know we were supposed to stand, and the lieutenant, wanting to quickly be on his way, replied that, “Now we did”. To elaborate, when counted, prisoners must stand and state their name and then their Federal Bureau of Prisons number, a number that once assigned, the prisoner generally never forgets.

While confined in this facility, my case was evaluated, and because I was a first time nonviolent prisoner, I was assigned a minimum-security (low security risk) status. Then, I was sent to a minimum-security prison in Yankton, South Dakota. Yankton Federal Prison Camp (FPC) is an all-male facility designed to hold around four hundred prisoners. Yet, at the time I arrived at FPC Yankton, the prison housed over six hundred prisoners due to prison overcrowding issues generated from the war on drugs. Rooms designed for four men were often crammed with six to eight men. As Yankton FPC was formerly a college in the early 1980s, the facility actually resembled a college campus, with many of the old stone and brick buildings registered with the South Dakota state historical society. The prison was located in the centre of town and encompassed several city blocks. Prisoners walked across town streets to access the cafeteria, drug treatment center and the gym facilities.

As a new prisoner, I was *processed* into the facility. To be processed as a human being is uniquely degrading process. As Garfinkle (1956, p. 421) states when describing successful degradation ceremonies, “I call upon all men to bear witness that he is not as he appears but is otherwise and in essence of a lower species”. Many of the guards looked at me and the other prisoners with disdain, barking orders at us and acting as if talking to us somehow disgusted them.

My picture was taken, and I was issued an ID badge and a card that served as a debit card, allowing me access to any money I had in my commissary (prison store) account. I was informed of general prison rules and guidelines through mandatory introductory courses. Using my ID card, I could buy food, clothing and personal items, use vending machines, and purchase various random items such as notebooks and art supplies. I was given several pairs of khaki pants, shirts, belts, white undershirts, boxers, a pair of boots and socks. Running or walking shoes and workout clothes could be purchased at the prison store. In the winter, I was issued a coat, stocking cap and gloves.

Next, I was assigned housing, placed in a temporary dorm room before the prison staff could decide where to place me on a more permanent basis. After two weeks, I was assigned a room in a large dormitory style-housing unit (an old college administration building). Throughout this process, I was learning how to think and behave like an actual prisoner. Jail can only partially prepare someone for the prison experience, bringing the prisoner's reality into alignment with how to understand and exist within a confined space with limited resources and controlled physical movements (Irwin, 1985). The prisoner, when suddenly transported into the prison facility, comes into contact with many new experiences, rules and people, all of which are quite overwhelming to a first-time prisoner.

THE DORM

The dorm was located on the second floor of a large, rectangular, brick building. The centre of the dorm contained the restroom and shower facilities, laundry rooms, microwaves for people to cook their own prison store food, and a couple of reading rooms for prisoners to study and read in. At one end of the hall were two large TV rooms, and at the other end of the hall was a game room with pool tables and vending machines. The dorm held approximately one-hundred-and-sixty prisoners. We slept in bunk beds, with older, disabled and long-term prisoners often occupying the lower bunks, while the younger, more physically able and "short-timers" (prisoners with shorter sentences) occupied the top bunks.

TO FIND A JOB

Once housed, it was up to me to seek out a prison job. There were several options, such as the maintenance shop, the grounds-keeping shop, baking and

cooking training programs within the kitchen, and the electrical shop. Prisoners could apply for apprenticeship programs within these shops. Generally, only prisoners with longer sentences were accepted to such apprentice programs because the programs required several thousand hours of work on the job to complete the apprenticeship process successfully. Jobs could be found in many places, such as working as a custodian (orderly) in one of the prison dorms or shops. Short-term prisoners such as I were more likely to find work in more monotonous jobs, like dishwashers, custodians or clerks.

After a few inquiries, I found a job as a custodian for the maintenance shop. While the pay was meagre – eleven cents per hour – I was fortunate to have a supervisor who was a fair and decent man. The daily eight-hour workload consisted of one to two hours of sweeping, mopping, buffing and polishing per day, and then the rest of the day was spent attempting to look busy and staying under the guards' radar. I often spent time reading or doing homework when I had enrolled in college correspondence courses towards the end of my prison sentence.

INTERACTION WITH THE HELP

As a new prisoner, I quickly learned that keeping contact with guards to a minimum was necessary if I was to have a semi-pleasant stay in prison. Some mandatory contact was unavoidable, such as at count times, at the workplace and during counselling sessions. Each prisoner is assigned a caseworker/counsellor who reviews your case files, determines your progress while incarcerated and implements any changes that will be made to your status as a prisoner. Changes to prisoner status potentially included an increase in security status due to violent behaviour, a decrease in security status due to good behaviour or determining which required correctional programs you were to enrol in. Yet, outside of these limited required interactions with staff, prisoners who followed the rules were respectful and avoided conflict with other prisoners generally reduced their contact with guards.

Within a minimum-security facility, incidents of violence are quite infrequent in comparison to that of higher security prisons, as violent prisoners are not allowed to serve time in minimum-security facilities. Prisoners with a history of violence are generally housed in higher security facilities, such as maximum-security United States penitentiaries (Maghan, 1999), and prisoners whom the federal courts designate as ultra-violent or dangerous are housed in super-maximum security facilities, such as the

ADX in Florence, Colorado (Briggs *et al.* , 2003). The average minimum-security prisoner is intelligent enough to realize that the conditions in camps are far less severe and far more desirable than in higher security prisons such as medium lows, medium highs, and maximum securities (federal penitentiaries), where violence, fighting, gang conflict and poor housing conditions are far more common.

THE PEOPLE ON THE INSIDE

Within prison, compared to jails, there is a shift in the average type of prisoner. Men in prison have often been convicted of more serious offenses, due to the felony charge that is necessary to end up in this environment. Yet, most prisoners are convicted of nonviolent offenses (e.g. persons convicted in relation to prohibited drugs). Many of the men in prison have very colourful personalities and are intelligent individuals with incredibly diverse life histories, ranging from dark and depressing stories of abuse and violence to gallant stories of traveling the world and wild adventures. My intention is not to project that prison is always a positive and exciting environment but to relay that the prison environment, and prisoner culture is far more complex and full of nuance than is often portrayed in the sensationalized versions of prison presented in mass media.

It must be stated that there are differences in prisoners between different prisons. The prison I was housed in was a minimum-security facility with only a decorative fence to separate us prisoners from the rest of the world. Of course, the first question I receive when telling others this fact is, “Couldn’t prisoners just walk off?” In a word, yes. If a prisoner wanted to escape, he would need only walk out of the prison yard and into the surrounding town and attempt to disappear. To do so added five to seven extra years to his sentence and resulted in a transfer to a far higher security, harsher prison with no chance of return to the lower security camp. In the fourteen months I was housed at Yankton no one attempted to escape and I heard of only one attempted escape that occurred several years before I arrived, in which a middle-aged, white-collar prisoner attempted to walk away from Yankton with only two years left on his sentence after he found out that his wife was having an affair with his attorney. The man was spotted walking through a neighbouring town by a prison guard who happened to reside there. He was promptly re-captured, returned to a higher security prison and assigned an additional five years onto his remaining sentence.

THE FEDERAL PRISON

Within federal prisons, average prison sentence lengths vary by race, with African Americans serving an average of 105 months and whites serving an average of 62 months, a 41 per cent difference in length (BJS, 2002). Minimum-security federal prisons receive many white-collar prisoners and prisoners who are nonviolent, first-time criminalized persons, many who come from slightly higher socio-economic backgrounds than other prisoners and have somewhat higher mean levels of education (Braithwaite, 1985). It is generally accepted among prisoners that a federal prison is a better facility to be confined in when compared to state facilities, which are often dirtier, have less educational and work programs (Crayton and Reusteter, 2008), often have fewer amenities, are poorly funded, and are generally of lesser quality (being older and/or cheaper in construction). The scales, however, tip in favour of state institutions when discussing the issue of sentence length. Federal prisoners often serve longer average sentences than state prisoners, with the average federal felony sentence being 61 months (BJS, 2003) and the average state felony sentence being 27 months (Wright, 2006) due to mandatory-minimum sentencing guidelines (Hofer and Semisch, 1999) and truth-in-sentencing legislation (Shepherd, 2002).⁴

Within the average minimum-security FPC, there are greater concentrations of white-collar prisoners, with many of them coming from wealth and privilege previous to incarceration. When housed in my permanent dorm in Yankton, my first bunkmate was formerly a lawyer from a large metropolitan area, raised in a wealthy political family, a graduate of a prestigious law school and a published author all before he arrived in prison. Several of my fellow dorm mates were formerly medical doctors, lawyers, and accountants, had PhDs or were successful businessmen. One was even a former Chicago police officer. The prisoners housed at Yankton FPC came from all over the United States, with an additional sprinkling of prisoners hailing from foreign countries.

There was some visible resentment generated by prison staff, focused on the wealthier and more highly educated prisoners, many of whom would enter and leave prison millionaires and who already possessed more experiences than most people would gather in multiple lifetimes. Many of my evenings and afternoons in the prison's central yard were spent chatting with such prisoners about those experiences. Hanging out and engaging

in such conversations lent many new perspectives to my own previously limited worldview.

Within Yankton FPC, the prison allowed a well-known outside public speaking group, Toastmasters International, to form a prison-based chapter, "The Gavel Club". This speaking group was run by prisoners and only attended by prisoners, the staff generally leaving us to do as we saw fit. I served as the group's secretary and prisoners took turns speaking each week. Occasionally, we were allowed to bring in outside speakers, such as local historians or local people of interest. This venue allowed for interesting discussion and opportunities for prisoners to hear the stories of people whom they might never come into contact with outside of this setting.

One of the prisoners, an accountant and wealthy businessman serving time for a white-collar offense, having previously served on a presidential accounting committee, spoke about the large, hotel real estate trade. Another prisoner, a former medical doctor, spoke about his medical practice, while many other prisoners spoke about their life histories and gained valuable experience in public speaking. From this venue, the often negative backdrop of prison life was transformed into a positive one, allowing prisoners to gain life skills such as public speaking, while concurrently learning about alternative worldviews, different cultures, and the personal backgrounds of their fellow prisoners. It provided a much needed refuge from the often chaotic and boring nature of prison life.

RECONNECTING WITH EDUCATION

After many long months of sitting in county jails with little or no access to formal educational opportunities, the prison allowed me to participate in correspondence courses. Such courses had to be paid for at my own expense, as no educational funding or grants are now available to prisoners due to the elimination of Pell Grants to state and federal prisoners after 1994 under the Omnibus Crime Control Act (Welsh, 2002). This legislation was enacted because of the misconception that huge sums of money in the form of Pell Grants were being handed to prisoners, when in actuality, the savings gained by eliminating the grant were virtually negligible (*ibid*).

I settled on two sociology courses (my discontinued college major from many years before prison) offered by a large, Southern university. I used

funds from a small savings account to pay tuition costs and soon received my textbooks and course materials in the mail. The prison provided study rooms, access to typewriters for homework and essay assignments (no computer access at this time), and proctors who would preside over my exams when needed.

Yankton FPC was considered a showcase prison within the federal prison system because of its relatively nice facilities and grounds, and unique educational department that offered the prisoners the opportunity to attain associate's degrees in business, science or horticulture through a local college. The local college, a Catholic institution, was instrumental in operating the college programs and keeping the educational department at Yankton, having advocated on behalf of the prisoners many times when the prison administration had threatened to eliminate the educational program. While this program was technically available to me, I did not participate in it because my stay at Yankton would not have been long enough to finish all of the required courses and I had already completed enough college credits to be ranked as a junior in college (at a western Nebraska community college and at the University of Nebraska) previous to incarceration.

THE TRANSITION

Often the former prisoner experiences an amalgamation of both pre-prison and prison identities, as s/he picks up many mannerisms and behaviours within prison, such as survival skills, how to navigate and talk one's way through difficult or dangerous situations, and how to interact with diverse groups of people. When the prisoner is released, some of these traits are transported to the outside world. Depending on the specific type of behaviours, traits and mannerisms the former prisoner learned, how these skills and behaviours are applied to everyday interactions in the outside world will determine whether such skills will be a benefit or a detriment to the newly released ex-prisoner (Jones and Schmid, 2000).

When re-entering society, the prisoner must attempt to "un-prisonize" himself, following what some scholars refer to as a U-shaped pattern of prison socialization (Wheeler, 1961; Garabedian, 1963; Jones, 2003). Within this pattern, I attempted to internalize prison culture upon entry into the prison and then divorced myself from prison culture when I returned to the streets, an incredibly difficult task that I initially struggled with. De

La Cruz (2012, p. 143), an ex-prisoner scholar speaks very eloquently to this issue: “As much as I hated to admit it, all those street freedoms had meant very little to me. After all, if staying out had been so important why did I always manage to return to the penitentiary? I clearly had become institutionalized”. Having journeyed through the criminal justice system several times before beginning his educational journey, De La Cruz sums up a common experience that many ex-prisoners experience: having difficulty transitioning to the chaotic streets from the very predictable routines of the correctional institution.

While I only served one prison sentence before beginning the journey to higher education, many of the courageous men and women I have met through the Convict Criminology (CC) group have had similar journeys, having served multiple prison sentences before finding the pathway to scholarship and academia, thus overcoming incredible odds.⁵

In addition, my journey from the prison to the streets differed from other CC members from the perspective of my middle class background’s providing more resources and support than that of many other ex-prisoners upon my release. Newly released from prison, Richard Hendricksen similarly speaks of being fortunate in comparison to many of his fellow prisoners when describing the initial months on the street: “I often felt a mixture of unearned security and guilt for simply having a room, a roof over my head, food in the kitchen, or that my mother could lend me ten or twenty dollars when I needed it from her tips she brought home from work until I found a job” (Hendricksen and Mobley, 2012, p. 115).

Many of my fellow ex-prisoner scholars and acquaintances have overcome not only prison, but also poverty, substance abuse, racism, and physical and psychologically abusive family backgrounds. Thus, their journeys are nothing short of incredible demonstrations of courage, steady ambition and strength of human spirit. This emphasizes that the difficulties of the shift from the mind numbing prison to the realities of society are experiences that society and family members of prisoners should be sensitive to.

THE “REAL WORLD”

Walking out of the confines of the minimum-security prison and back into the hectic pace of society was a shock to my prison-dulled “outside world”

senses. As a prisoner, I forgot the nuances of everyday life, such as the smell of cologne or perfume or the ability to go somewhere anytime without asking permission or filling out the proper paperwork. The bright lights and fast pace of everyday society is, at first, quite overwhelming.

With a felony conviction, ex-prisoners must often “out” themselves to employers, even though a large percentage of crimes harm no one but the individual doing it (Ross and Richards, 2003; West and Sabol, 2010). For example, 22 per cent of prisoners in state and federal prisons are convicted of nonviolent drug-related offenses (UCR, 2000). Additionally, ex-prisoner academics and ex-prisoners in general are forced into a position in which they must defend actions that took place in the distant past, even in the face of mounting evidence that after several years (six or seven) have passed without subsequent criminal convictions, the potential that an ex-prisoner will re-offend is reduced to the same level as those without criminal convictions (Kurlychek and Bushway, 2006).

I quickly learned that most job applications contain “the box” that asks for prior criminal convictions, which must be checked if any chance of employment is to be gained. If I checked the box, then I was often asked to explain myself once again, as if I were in a recurrent cycle of being re-convicted for an offense that I had committed many years ago. Yet, I had already repaid my societal debt through the process of incarceration, community service and probation (supervised release in the federal prison system).

In addition to the initial sensory overload and stressors that everyday society imposes on the ex-prisoner, comes the permanent changes that prison life has imprinted onto your general worldview, social mind and psyche. This phenomenon is often overlooked, as society expects us as ex-prisoners to immediately re-acclimate to the outside world as if nothing life-altering has happened. However, for me as a newly released ex-prisoner, I perceived the world differently. I now know what it is like not to exist in the eyes of my own culture, to be treated as a societal non-entity, to truly be nothing more than just a number in a long sequence of numbers, and to have your humanity taken away from you.

THE SHIFT TO SCHOLARSHIP

By December 2005, I had navigated through two years of coursework, finishing my bachelor’s degree. I caught the attention of some of the

professors in the sociology department who strongly recommended that I apply for graduate school. I took their advice and was accepted into the University of Nebraska's sociology graduate program a year later. Also, towards the end of my bachelor's degree studies, I began to develop a strong interest in crime and deviance research, and in early 2005, I presented at a large, regional, sociology conference in Minneapolis, where I fortunately made contact with the CC Group which would alter the course of my life.

To explain further, Convict Criminology is a group of criminologists who share the common bond of past incarceration, and/or a strong interest in critical, progressive, reform based criminological research and criminal justice policy. The CC group strongly believes in the power of mentorship and provided me with guidance and advice throughout the course of my graduate career. The CC group also places a heavy emphasis on research collaboration among members. The focus is the production of viable, relevant scholarship and publications, which is vital to the furthering of CC's mission of creating an academic space for formerly incarcerated academics' voices to be heard, critically examining the massive social inequalities present in the current American criminal justice system, and formulating progressive/rehabilitative correctional policy (see Jones *et. al.*, 2009; Richards and Lenza, 2012).

The coursework for my master's degree began in the fall semester of 2007. When I had been in graduate school for a couple of years and more fully understood how the academic world operated, I began to mentor the newer members of the CC group, providing advice and encouragement in regards to navigating graduate school applications, how to properly approach the academy in regards to securing future employment, and increasing marketability as formerly incarcerated academics.

I received my PhD in sociology in May 2013. My dissertation examined the educational pathways of formerly incarcerated academics/professionals from prison to academia. During the course of my graduate career, I have had the opportunity to travel extensively to conferences, study abroad, and conduct research in both in the United States and in Europe. In June 2010, the CC Group, in collaboration with KRIS of Finland and Tampere University, organized the International Scientific Conference on Global Perspectives on Re-entry at Tampere, Finland (see Ekunwe and Jones, 2011).

In the summers of 2009 and 2011 and in the winter of 2012-2013, I traveled to Scandinavia, spending time in Sweden and Denmark, and was

allowed to visit a Swedish halfway house and criminal/drug rehabilitation clinics and make contact with KRIS, a Swedish advocacy group for formerly incarcerated people that now has many international locations. Through my travels, I was able to make contact with formerly incarcerated people who would lend their expertise to my dissertation research and gain a valuable cross-national perspective on other more progressive, non-punitive, and rehabilitative forms of criminal justice policy and corrections.

DISCUSSION

Within this auto-ethnographic study, I re-examine and attempt to understand life experiences I have accumulated during the journey into incarceration, through incarceration, and my subsequent release and educational journey to academia. Auto-ethnography allows me to focus on the correctional and educational systems through my own cultural lens. My journey was not an easy path. While I must recognize the many socio-cultural advantages that I possessed (i.e. supportive family, as well as economic and social resources), the journey from no prior criminal record to the federal prison system within a matter of days was a brutal experience. Undergoing a complete loss of my former identity and subsequently being processed through the doorway of “out there” into the crushing pervasiveness of the total institution brought me to my knees (see Garfinkle, 1956; Goffman, 1961). I was confused and lived in despair, oscillating between feeling as if the world had somehow forgotten me and that a great mistake had been made. I kept repeating to myself, “How did I get here?” The impact of this experience has had far-reaching positive and negative effects on the rest of my life, even twelve years from my initial arrest date and ten years since my release from prison.

From a positive perspective, through a process of soul searching, I determined that the purpose of the remainder of my life was to return to and work within education in some capacity. My ideas and plans began to take further shape as the months and years passed by in prison, and I was able to bring these ideas to fruition as explained in “The Real World” section above. I became motivated to help others find their way from prison to education as a means of improving their general quality of life and decreasing their chances of return to prison. Overall, this journey has exceeded my wildest expectations, as I have not only had the opportunity to meet some of the

most inspirational people and engage in fascinating research, but actually watch as research and educational groups I am participating in are making real pro-social changes in the lives of the formerly incarcerated, many of whom are now my good friends, even if it is often the slow process of reaching one person at a time.

Future research could examine the educational experiences that women prisoners incarcerated during the meth epidemic encountered in the federal prison system and upon their release. A further qualitative examination of how social class and race affect the process of higher education within prison and post-release could provide much needed insight into how the forces of social inequality interact with prisoners seeking out education. Such qualitative research could provide the much needed and often overlooked human component to influence progressive, educationally-based, criminal justice policy, especially in light of strong evidence that education reduces recidivism (Berman, 2008, Pettit and Western, 2004).

Additional policy implications include providing increased educational resources, such as funding for currently incarcerated and recently released prisoners, and encouraging more prisoners and ex-prisoners to focus on higher education. Subsequently, employers should be encouraged to offer realistic opportunities for viable employment to ex-prisoners upon attainment of higher educational credentials, based on the positive outcomes that many experience when provided realistic opportunities to do so (Richards and Ross, 2001; Schmidt, 2002; Terry, 2003).

CONCLUSION

The process of imprisonment has left its scars upon my life, as I struggle with issues of anxiety, self-doubt and depression. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, I entered the prison system as a hard drug abuser (methamphetamines and cocaine), but I am now in recovery. Yet, this is a life-long issue that is part of me and my journey to prison, through prison, and through my educational experiences. Hard drug abuse led me to endure some of the darkest points in my life, yet my subsequent recovery has allowed me to experience the best parts of my life. In addition, prison permanently restructured the way I view the world. I must contend with the permanent stigma of a felony record that follows me for the rest of my life,

existing at times as a dark shadow from my past, waiting to wreak potential havoc upon my life, to snatch away what few precious accomplishments I have had the opportunity to attain through the advocacy, generosity, and mentorship of many great people whom I will never be able to fully thank for their help.

While some people may brand this fear as irrational, to me, it is a persistent dread that I must struggle with one day at a time. Yet, it is my duty to inform all of the newly released formerly incarcerated people that I become acquainted with about my experiences and provide mentorship to them. I explain to these individuals the message that over time and with a commitment to higher education, life can improve – that there is a way out. If I do not help my fellow formerly incarcerated peers, my education and unique experiences serve no purpose, and that would be an injustice in and of itself.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I chose the auto-ethnographic method due to my experience as a formerly incarcerated individual (a.k.a. ex-con), I needed a research methodology that would allow me to examine my experiences and construct meaning out of my observations. Auto-ethnography provided this venue. As Ellis (2009) states: "...reexamining the events we have lived through and the stories we have told about them previously allows us to expand and deepen our understandings of the life we have led, the culture which we have lived, and the work we have done".
- ² I must note that I do not currently define myself as a convict (or other labels such as prisoner or felon), because of the negative social stigma that society attaches to words such as convict, prisoner and felon. When referring to others who have been confined in prison, I personally refer to them and myself as formerly incarcerated individuals.
- ³ Sykes refers to loss of heterosexual relationships. Yet, I refer to deprivation of conventional relationships of both hetero- and homosexual nature, because even through homosexual relations can and do take place within the correctional setting, these relationships take on a different form, distorted by the uniquely closed/desperate environment presented in the prison total institution (Goffman, 1961).
- ⁴ Although the *average* federal sentence is greater, the actual time spent for specific crimes can be much longer at the state level. Homicide, rape, and armed robbery, which usually fall under state jurisdictions, generally carry the possibility of a sentence of life without parole, and many states, not only the federal government, also have mandatory minimum sentences for specific crimes.
- ⁵ A group of formerly incarcerated criminologists/criminal justice scholars, sociologists, and non-convict scholars who collaborate with us.

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