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THE CHALLENGES OF PHYSICAL
AND
PSYCHOLOGICAL SURVIVAL IN PRISON
A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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There are many aspects to prison life that those on the outside of the razor wire may not understand, let alone even consider. The components of physical and psychological survival are deep rooted in the sociological aspects of the day to day living with the prison itself. This brief essay will attempt to draw off of these social phenomenas, reveal them, and discuss the immense influence they have on life as a federal prisoner.

I have always viewed the world through what is called a "sociological imagination". This is the term used to view the world through a lens that reveals layers and unveils the hidden. Personally, I am near the end of my federal sentence with about 15% remaining, yet I have been about 15% remaining, yet I have been exposed to a culture of abnormal behavior that has widely been normalized, often as a condition of survival. The behaviors include but are not limited to extreme territorial behavior, routine behaviors, enabling unfair behavior to increase one's social standing in an in-group, staring at the floor as the inmate walks (possibly to avoid eye contact) as well as other social phenomenas unique and specific to prison life. I will provide examples of these behaviors and my interpretation of them. From prisoners and guards alike, the conditioning of the mind does not discriminate.

Guards are taught at the outset of their training to maintain control. I argue that there is a deep systematic ethos to dehumanize and deindividualize the prisoner. For example, in my personal observations the staff refer to meal distributions as "feeding", as if the prisoners were cattle. Staff deindividualize in order to protect themselves from viewing the inmate as a human with a personality as to detach themselves from the prisoner emotionally. It is a bad career move to be labeled a "hug-a-thug" (an internal slogan for staff who provide empathy to the prisoner). Staff also have appeared to have created a ranking system based on the prisoner's offense. Those at the top of the ranking system enjoy added conversation with staff, more humanized interaction and various subtle perks. These offenders often are limited to non-violent drug dealers and bank robbers. Prisoners on the low end of the ranking system face subtle forms of punishments such as dehumanization, slow

or no effort in administrative work for the prisoner. These offenders often include child molesters, and some, not all, persons convicted of sexual offenses. Rehabilitation is never distributed evenly.

Prisoners tend to develop various forms of coping with their environment, it's basic human nature. But I argue that these coping mechanisms are at the core, abnormal. Routine is a highly clutchèddform of comfort. Prisoners are very perceptive to anomalies in their respective environment. Deviations from a routine can and often do bring stress, anxiety and confusion. The prisoner is highly dependent on the rigid and predictable structure of incarceration. The television (TV) has an almost narcotic like, soothing effect for some. I personally have witnessed inmates rock themselves while watching TV, as iff the TV was some sort of maternal figure cradling the inmate to sooth them from the harsh realities of prison life. The TV is a prized possession in which those who "control" use any means to potect their ability to change the channel. They often mainètain a physical presence in the TV room through ut the day, often at the expense of their own deteriorating health (lack of excercise). These men often threater bodily harm to others. The TV is a status symbol in the prison environment. It is a reflection of one's (psuedo) authority, impotence and dominance. It projects to the uninitiated, "I am a man of importance, I am a man of resources, I am an Alpha-male". Sadly, this behavior is learned an perpetuated routinely. The abnormal, normalized.

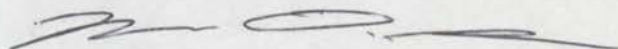
Another strange phenomena is the inmate conditioning that occurs when the inmate routinely vocalizes certain sounds and behaves in certain, specific manners that are situational. To put it simply, in my experiences, the most abnormal inmates seek to create a "signature" sounds, behaviors and/or visuals. For example, one inmate in this particular institution vocalizes the phrase "Bob the Builder" throughout the day, he makes sure to say this term only in the presence of others, seemingly to maximize the effects of the conditioning. Inmates now are conditioned to associate the inmate with the term and the term with inmate. Another inmate whistles over 100 times per day in a sequence of two sharp, high pitched whistles as he

walks thorough common areas. Inmates now associate the whiste and it's particular pattern with the inmate. It is unknown why inmates deliberately make these attempst at conditioning, however it is hypothesized that the root of this behvavior is attention seeking. It is a peculiar behavior with the end goal being attention. Under developed minds become more and more appparent as the inmate engages in these behaviors in their insatiable appetite for attention.

Why is this all important for the inmate, other's behaviors? Because this is connected to the psychological survival of prison. Subconsciously, I argue that these most abnormal prisoners are only at ease when others behave in a similiar manner to them. Therefore guarding one's mind while incarcerated is of the most importance. Defending the mind from the psychological conditioning, the attempts at priming and the attempts by the most criminal inmates to convert the inmate from "inmate" to "convict". A sociological distinction in the prison culture (one is simply trying to do their time while the other embraces prison culture). Guarding the mind is high on the priority list. Not falling victim to the hypnotic gaze and politics of the TV, being able to distinguish the grandiose lies of certain inmates who disguise it with pseudo leadership and simply not forgetting that the life here, behind the wired fence is a life of smoke and mirrors. It is a mirage that is not a reflection of the true world outside. We, the prisoner who has not fallen victim to the lies, immaturity and abnormality of prison life need to to never forget, there is a world outside the fence. One of truth. Collateral consequences of the conviction will always be present but we must realize, for our psychological survival, that we do not have to adopt the social norms of this abnormal environment. That we can still be our own man, that we don't have to be liked by everyone. After all, if you were liked by a sea of criminal minded con artists, wouldn't that raise alarms? After all, as the old saying goes, you are the company

you keep.

In short, there are multiple psychological and physical challenges or prison life. I have been fortunate enough to have only experienced few of these physical challenges. However, the psychological challenges have been immense. I argue that in order to overcome these challenges, we, the prisoner, must identify these challenges and peel them, reveal them for what they are. We must consider the source and never forget that the normalization of the abnormal is never appropriate. There is a world outside the razor wire, and it lies in wait.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. O.', written in a cursive style.