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Memoirs of a Guard-Researcher: Deconstructing the Games Inmates Play Behind the Prison Walls

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ABSTRACT

Recent media reports have attempted to shed light on correctional officers who end their careers in disgrace for either having sexual relationships with prisoners or for smuggling contraband into correctional facilities. In this article, I take an autoethnographic approach, reflecting on my seven years as a “guard-researcher” and demonstrate through real-life examples how inmates identify the weak links among prison employees, subtly feel them out, and then untiringly persist in establishing these inappropriate relationships. This article shows how seemingly benign gestures of inmates are actually calculated moves taken to gain leverage and exploit their marks, the weak correctional staff members, who fall for these tricks.

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Introduction

In June 2015, a media frenzy erupted when national news reports surfaced that Joyce Mitchell, a 51-year-old grandmother and correctional employee, provided chisels and hacksaw blades to two convicted murderers at the Clinton Correctional Facility in New York. Besides supplying these inmates with the tools necessary to pull off an elaborate *Shawshank Redemption*-style escape, Mitchell admitted in court to having consensual sexual relationships with one of the men on multiple occasions (Hill 2015). The disgraced prison employee also allegedly agreed to meet the two escaped convicts at a manhole and drive the getaway car, although she changed her mind at the last minute. In addition to Mitchell's involvement in these inmates' notorious escape attempt, a male prison employee, Gene Palmer, also crossed professional boundaries and unwittingly assisted in the escape by giving the two inmates unauthorized tools as well as permitting them to have access to restricted areas in exchange for artwork (Craig et al. 2015).

While Joyce Mitchell and Gene Palmer's close association with two inmate escapees was undoubtedly a significant source of embarrassment for officials within the state of New York, it is likely that staff-inmate boundary violations of this nature are perceived by the layperson to be anomalies within the world of institutional corrections. This misperception may be due in part to the fact that correctional facilities are what Goffman (1961) refers to as “total institutions” where prison administrators restrict access to outsiders and rarely grant entrée to researchers (Fox 2011; Trulson, Marquart, and Mullings 2003). This article will demonstrate that inappropriate relationships—personal interactions between inmates and prison staff that are consensual, often illegal, and usually economic or sexual in nature—occur with surprising regularity in day-to-day prison operations. This fact is “known” by those who presently work within prison facilities, many of whom have witnessed firsthand the devastating effects of what happens when staff members disregard the boundaries between themselves and the inmates they are paid to supervise (Elliot and Verdeyen 2003; Worley 2011; Worley, Tewksbury, and Fratzen 2010).

Since the passage of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), researchers at the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) collect data every year from offenders to make inferences regarding the nationwide prevalence of inmate–staff boundary violations that are sexual in nature (Worley, Worley, and Mullings 2010). One recent BJS study revealed that female staff members are more likely than male employees to have sexual relationships with inmates, and that 84% of the cases of sexual misconduct between offenders and female employees appear to be consensual (Beck, Rantala, and Rexroat 2014). In a related study, the National Inmate Survey, researchers found that staff-on-inmate sexual misconduct tends to occur in semi-private areas throughout the correctional facility, such as kitchens, laundry rooms, commissaries, and workshops (Beck et al. 2013). In light of the above studies, it is noteworthy that Joyce Mitchell, a work detail supervisor with access to private rooms, had sexual liaisons with inmates in the prison tailor shop that she managed.

Virtually all correctional facilities provide employees with specialized training to prevent inmate–staff inappropriate relationships from developing (Dial and Worley 2008). The guard subculture also discourages familiarity between inmates and staff; in fact, violating the “no-friendship with inmates” norm is akin to the incest taboo (Marquart, Barnhill, and Balshaw-Biddle 2001; Ross 2013). Nevertheless, even though correctional employees wield power over inmates and hold the keys to the facility, some inmate manipulators are extremely adept at establishing inappropriate relationships with prison staff (Worley and Cheeseman 2006; Lankenau 2001). Most correctional administrators realize this; in fact, it was once mandatory for all newly hired employees within the Federal Bureau of Prisons to read Allen and Bosta’s (1981) *Games Criminals Play*, a classic work, which posits that some inmates, in spite of their confinement, are capable of setting elaborate traps designed to exert power over their captors.

In this autoethnographic study, I seek to describe the dynamics of inappropriate relationships from the unique perspective of being a former correctional officer turned professor. While some scholars have criticized the autoethnographic approach as being ascientific, overly aesthetic, and nonobjective (Anderson 2006), this article illustrates that it is, indeed, a useful methodological technique, one particularly well-suited for topics where researchers have access as insiders to a group and can use their writing as a means to advocate for a more humane and egalitarian society (Ellis 2004).

A primer on staff–inmate inappropriate relationships

Even though prison researchers are just beginning to examine inappropriate relationships between inmates and correctional officers, Gresham Sykes (1958), in his classic book, *The Society of Captives*, argued that the operational realities of prison life encourage a norm of reciprocity in which officers overlook minor violations and reward inmates with privileges in exchange for compliance in major areas. He suggested that over time, if this trend continues, reciprocity between inmates and correctional officers can erode the professional distance between the keeper and the kept, possibly leading to the outright corruption of the authority figure. While Sykes (1958) did not set out to systemically study inappropriate staff–inmate relationships, this work is one of the earliest academic examinations to document the real dangers of inmate manipulation.

In one of the first modern day scholarly analyses of staff–inmate inappropriate relationships, Marquart et al. (2001) examined the personnel files of 549 Texas correctional employees who were investigated by the agency for violating Rule 42 of the “General Employee’s Rules of Conduct,” a regulation that prohibits staff members from continuing or establishing relationships with inmates or their family members. In this study, Marquart et al. (2001:878) referred to these behaviors as *boundary violations*, which they define as actions which “blur, minimize, or disrupt the professional distance between correctional staff members and prisoners.” One of the major findings of the aforementioned study is that 78% of the correctional employees who were

investigated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) for having boundary issues with inmates were female (Marquart et al. 2001). In this same study the authors found that staff members who were employed less than 36 months with the prison agency as well as those with significantly low scores on pre-employment tests were the most likely candidates to be investigated for having boundary violations with inmates.

Additional researchers have employed a quantitative approach centered upon the role of the correctional employee in staff–inmate inappropriate relationships (Worley and Worley 2011, 2013a, 2016). In an analysis of 501 completed self-report questionnaires from TDCJ correctional officers, it was discovered that staff members who perceived their supervisors to be unsupportive, reported engaging in more acts of deviance, including behaving inappropriately with inmates, than their peers (Worley and Worley, 2013a). In this same study, respondents who perceived their jobs to be less dangerous than that of other employees were more likely to admit to engaging in deviant acts, including behaviors which might lead to inappropriate relationships. In a companion article, it was discovered that correctional employees who perceived that their pay was poor, as well as those who lacked support from their families, were more likely than other staff members to have attitudes that were more favorable to engaging in a boundary violation with an inmate (Worley and Worley 2016).

There is a small but growing body of literature that examines inmates' attitudes regarding sexual behaviors that appear to be consensual between offenders and correctional facilities. Blackburn et al. (2011) utilized random and systematic sampling techniques to distribute questionnaires to various inmates within a large Southern state prison system. After analyzing 806 completed surveys, the researchers found that offenders who were younger, male, Hispanics, and those who had completed high school were significantly more supportive of sexual relationships between staff and inmates than other offenders. In a related study, Dial and Worley (2008) administered 475 self-report surveys to TDCJ offenders in order to ascertain how often these relationships occur. Of the 367 inmates who completed the questionnaires, 134 admitted to having inappropriate relationships with correctional employees, and fifty of these respondents (14%) claimed to have had engaged in some type of sexual act with a correctional employee. Also, inmates who admitted to engaging in inappropriate relationships with prison staff were significantly more likely than other offenders to have chauvinistic attitudes toward female employees (Dial and Worley 2008). For example, these respondents often perceived that female correctional officers used charm to manage male prisoners and lacked the necessary physical strength to control them.

While the above quantitative studies examine inappropriate staff–inmate relationships from both employee and inmate centered perspectives, there is also qualitative research that describes how boundary violations unfold from the inmate point-of-view. As part of a larger project designed to uncover the dynamics of inmate sexual behaviors, Fleisher and Krienert (2006) conducted face-to-face interviews with 564 male and female offenders across ten states. The authors discovered that it was common for both male and female offenders to have knowledge of at least one staff–inmate sexual affair. For example, 52.7% of the male inmate respondents who had served less than five years had knowledge of a staff–inmate sexual affair, while 76.8% of male respondents who had served more than five years had knowledge of this type of relationship (Fleisher and Krienert 2006). By comparison, 65% of the female inmate respondents who had served less than five years had knowledge of a staff–inmate sexual affair, while 82.4% of respondents who had served more than five years had knowledge of such an affair. In this same study, female inmate respondents were also found to be more likely than males to perceive that correctional administrators take actions to prevent staff–inmate affairs from occurring (Fleisher and Krienert 2006).

In a similar study conducted by Worley, Marquart, and Mullings (2003), the lead author interviewed thirty-two TDCJ inmates who had been investigated for violating boundaries with correctional employees and discovered there were at least three types of offenders motivated to

establish inappropriate relationships with prison staff, *heart-breakers*, *exploiters*, and *hell-raisers*. In a follow-up study, the interview data were reanalyzed from the same sample of inmates, and the investigation revealed that male offenders tend to initiate inappropriate relationships with female correctional employees rather than vice versa, an important finding which sheds new light on the dynamics of these forbidden interactions (Worley and Cheeseman 2006). Another major finding of the above study is that prison staff members who behave inappropriately with inmates are likely to have certain types of “non-shareable problems,” as originally described by Cressey (1973) in his classic examination of embezzlers. Worley and Worley (2013b) also published a qualitative article positing that inmates use masturbation as a strategy to assess how open female employees are to engaging in inappropriate relationships with offenders. According to the authors, prisoners watch closely to see how staff members, especially females, react to masturbation, a deliberate rule infraction. If this behavior goes unpunished, male inmates may believe a female employee is amenable to having an inappropriate relationship with an offender.

All of the aforementioned studies represent a body of literature where researchers have attempted to examine staff-inmate inappropriate relationships by relying on mainstream quantitative and qualitative research designs.

Theoretical perspective

Sociologists Judith Blau and Peter Blau (1982), are well known for developing the relative deprivation theory, a theoretical framework that draws heavily on both anomie (Merton 1968) and social disorganization theory (Shaw and McKay 1942). Relative deprivation theory posits that individuals make comparisons between themselves and others whom they perceive to be better off economically. As a result of these comparisons, some actors internalize negative emotions, become stressed out, and may even justify engaging in violent acts against others as a result of their frustrations. Blau and Blau (1982) specifically argue that perceived income inequality or the unequal distribution of wealth tends to elicit hostility and class resentment among the urban poor.

In a recent article, Worley and Worley (2016) expanded on Blau and Blau’s (1982) classic framework by purporting that an alternate version of relative deprivation theory, which they refer to as the *economics of crossing over*, provides insights into why some correctional employees violate sacrosanct boundaries that they are trained and socialized to enforce. The authors contend that rather than resorting to a violent reaction, some prison employees, especially those who feel inadequate or inferior compared to other professionals may occasionally seek comfort in actors who are even more deprived than themselves, namely the inmates, whom they exercise power and control over. Factors, such as, poor pay, low morale, inadequate supervision, and family-related problems, the *economics*, lead some correctional employees to perceive that the badge of honor holds no meaning anymore, thus, prompting them to form alliances with inmates across the sacred border, resulting in a *crossing over*.

The present article seeks to contribute to the burgeoning *economics of crossing over* thesis by providing real-life examples of how inmates identify the weak links among correctional employees, feel them out through exploratory gestures, and encourage them to violate boundaries. Many scholars have observed that the correctional employee-inmate relationship is not based on mutuality, and offenders are considered to be the more vulnerable of the two parties (Bowker 1980; Smith 2008). This autoethnographic analysis, however, will demonstrate that in some cases, adept inmate manipulators are able to simultaneously play the role of both the puppet and puppet master as they identify employees who feel relatively deprived compared to others and lead them down a slippery slope of boundary violations.

Methodology

Autoethnography is a newly emerging approach to qualitative research that aims to use one's personal experience (*auto*) to appreciate cultural aspects (*ethno*) in a scientific manner (*graphy*) (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Holman Jones 2005). It combines elements of both autobiography and ethnography; however, unlike more traditional qualitative methods, autoethnography does not purport to be value free (Ellis 2004, 2009). On the contrary, researchers who use this technique may embrace their biases, often making no attempt to pretend that their work is neutral or objective. This is due largely to the fact that autoethnographers tend to believe that it is difficult, if not impossible, for any type of social science research to be conducted in a truly unbiased manner (Bochner 2002).

It is not uncommon for autoethnographers to avoid, altogether, employing what Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as a *grounded theory approach*, a strategy where researchers immerse themselves in an environment and then generate explanations about a culture based on observations, interviews, and other data-gathering methods. Instead, scholars who utilize variations of the autoethnographic method retrospectively impart personal insights into their research designs and also tend to be much more likely than mainstream qualitative researchers to be part of the very culture they are writing about (Bochner 2002). Often, autoethnographers write about epiphanies and place special emphasis on memories and emotions long after the given event has transpired (Ellis et al. 2011). Although some critics are uncomfortable with this type of work and often accuse autoethnographers of relying too much on personal experience as well as employing research designs which are simply too unorthodox or unconventional (Anderson 2006), the autoethnographic method has the potential to be both liberating and empowering, for it frees scholars from the restraints associated with traditional research designs.

In the past, I have relied primarily upon established and canonical forms of social science inquiry to examine the phenomenon of inmate–staff inappropriate relationships, despite the fact that the vast majority of my knowledge of this subject comes, first and foremost, from my personal experiences as a former correctional officer. It has been over ten years since I was employed as a TDCJ correctional officer, and it is likely that I have forgotten more and remember less about what it meant to be a guard. Webb et al. (1966:196) stated that “the palest ink is clearer than the best memory.” Unfortunately for me, I neither took notes, nor am I blessed with an excellent memory—although autoethnographers are not overly concerned with details and accuracy anyway (Holman Jones 2005). More established ethnographic traditions that are embedded within traditional symbolic interactionist epistemological assumptions would have required me to have kept extensive and detailed field notes throughout my seven-year journey of employment with the prison agency (Wax 1971). These same realist ethnographic traditions would have also discouraged me from writing about a group in which I was once an established member on the grounds that I was too immersed in the culture to maintain any semblance of objectivity.

Throughout this article I draw on postmodern sensibilities, at times taking a descriptive, even a literary approach, to describe the phenomenon of staff–inmate inappropriate relationships. Unlike traditional ethnographers who have been trained to minimize their presence, my primary objective for this study was to look not only outward but also inward and to essentially treat my own observations and personal experiences as relevant rather than ignoring them and focusing primarily on the prison culture itself. The data from this article are derived from both personal observations as well as my several thousand hours of engaging in casual conversations with both inmates and officers while employed as a guard. Over the years, the TDCJ has assisted me in my research endeavors in countless ways. This article, however, is entirely based on my own observations as a guard-researcher, and the agency in no way endorses or concurs with the findings presented in this article.

Findings

Correctional agencies are punitive bureaucracies with a myriad of rules and regulations that must be followed by both inmates and officers alike. It would be fair to say that correctional officers frequently violate departmental regulations, which is often observed by inmates. For example, as a guard/graduate student, I routinely engaged in a rule violation by studying on the job whenever an opportunity presented itself. Technically, this was against policy, although it was often tolerated by shift supervisors, depending on their mood. Nevertheless, once inmates discovered I had an Achilles' heel, they would often attempt to use this knowledge as a form of leverage or as a way to win trust or build rapport. Inmates also attempted to provide me with an abundance of reading material ranging from health and fitness magazines to Sidney Sheldon novels to *Playboy* magazines (which, incidentally, were banned by the agency in 2005).

With the benefit of hindsight, I sincerely believe that the above behaviors did not occur out of a spirit of generosity or kindness but were instead deliberate attempts to keep me engaged in the breaking of institutional rules. The reasoning behind this is simple. If an officer flagrantly violates the rules, he or she will be more likely to allow inmates to do this as well. I never took the bait nor accepted anything else from offenders for that matter; however, many employees do. Over time there is a normalizing effect that takes place, and prison employees, especially those who perceive their work to be especially grueling, stressful, and dangerous (Garland, Hogan, and Lambert 2012; Lambert, Hogan, Cheeseman, and Barton-Bellessa 2013; Mahfood, Pollock, and Longmire 2013) may begin to depend on certain inmates with whom they work closely. As Worley and Worley (2016) contend, some staff members who work in these dreary environments, may begin to feel undermined and undervalued, *the economics*, and as a result of these feelings, might accept tokens of friendship wherever they are available, even if these come from inmates, *the crossing over*.

Fishing for favors

The rules of virtually any correctional facility prohibit inmates and officers from exchanging items of a personal nature because this creates too much familiarity and diminishes professional distance. Inmates know that providing an employee with books, a Dr. Pepper, or a bit of beef jerky, is against the rules, but many will often try to do it anyway. During my employment, I witnessed many of my fellow guards chastise and even threaten to write up inmates who offered them snacks. Whenever this happened, the inmate would act as though his feelings were genuinely hurt because the employee had rejected his open display of friendship. But this is only one of the many games that inmates like to play. An inmate offering a staff member a cookie, a magazine, a small bag of Cheetos, or anything can best be viewed as what Cohen (1955) described as an exploratory gesture—small, tentative, and ambiguous steps taken to gauge the intentions of others. In their quest to fraternize with guards, inmates make deliberate, yet incremental moves, to leave themselves with an exit strategy to retreat if they perceive that their manipulative behavior may be detected by others. One offender who was caught and disciplined for having a sexual relationship with a female officer admitted to me in an interview that it was a common manipulation tactic for inmates to give employees food items. He expressed himself in the following way:

Here a boss [correctional officer] may go a whole shift and not get a lunch break ... we might offer a boss a candy bar or a soda on a hot day. Sometimes we might offer them a sandwich or something, and this can lead to all kinds of things. Sometimes they take it and sometimes they don't. When they do, it's like a fish on a hook. You just got to reel them in slow. It takes patience. Hey, all I got is time, man, so time is on my side.

During my seven-year stint as a guard, I knew of several officers, all of whom were female, who were disciplined for accepting sodas and snacks from inmates. Based on my personal experiences as a guard-researcher, social norms within the prison regime often permitted male employees to take items from inmates more or less with impunity, yet when female staff engaged in this behavior, they

often risked being punished for committing what was essentially the same rule infraction. I can specifically recall a conversation with one female officer who told me she was given formal disciplinary action for accepting a Diet Dr. Pepper from an offender. Several weeks later, the shift lieutenant announced during turnout that this officer had resigned because she was an “inmate lover” who was not able to work in a penitentiary filled with “eye-candy.”

It was not uncommon for supervisors, as well as veteran officers, to publicly condemn and vilify former employees who they perceived had crossed boundaries by becoming personally involved with prisoners. In fact, the public degradation of officers who abruptly resign is one of the primary strategies that the guard subculture uses to enforce the no-friendship-with-inmates norm and to build solidarity among its key members. While this type of behavior may foster a sense of camaraderie among a small group of correctional employees, it may come at the expense of alienating other staff members from their coworkers, causing them to feel deprived in terms of having status and clout within the organization. Over time, staff members who feel excluded from the prison regime may develop feelings of resentfulness, loneliness, and isolation—all of which potentially put them at risk of finding solace in the very inmates they are guarding.

Tokens of friendship in dreary work environments

Accepting personal items from an inmate is technically a violation of agency rules. However, it is considered far worse for a guard to give a personal item of any kind to an inmate. Doing this would not only subject an officer to disciplinary action, but he or she could be ostracized by other employees for engaging in this type of behavior. For example, I remember one occasion when several officers, both male and female, secretly worked in cahoots to make sure that a female guard who had designed a homemade bracelet and given it to a male offender was reprimanded and punished by the unit warden. Although this may seem harsh to outsiders, the social norms of the prison organization permeated the belief that if a staff member gave an inmate minor, nuisance contraband, it would only be a matter of time before he or she was smuggling dangerous contraband such as drugs, money, cellphones, or weapons into the facility, which could put everyone at risk.

Shortly after the above officer was disciplined, I casually asked her why she had given the infamous bracelet to an inmate, knowing that this was against the rules. She justified her action as being merely a symbolic token of appreciation to an inmate, a wing orderly, who helped her fulfill her duties as a correctional officer by telling transient offenders [inmates who were not assigned to the unit] to take their mattresses off the floor. This was during the hot summer months when prisoners preferred to slumber with their mattresses on the cool concrete floor as a way to reduce the sweltering heat of the cellblocks that did not have air conditioning. Unfortunately for them, there was an interoffice memorandum from the assistant warden explicitly forbidding mattresses to be used in this manner, something that the shift lieutenant made sure to enforce while making rounds. The employee perceived that if the lieutenant saw one of his officers not carrying out a policy, this would be viewed in a dim light and might even be remembered in future performance evaluations. The officer admitted to me that she was afraid to enforce the mattress mandate out of a sense of fear that some inmates might retaliate against her when she opened their cell doors to release them for breakfast. The fact that she was unwilling to perform a fairly basic component of her job made the officer acutely aware of her shortcomings, especially when she perceived that other officers were able to do this without incident. It is noteworthy that the officer used her coworkers as a reference group, and by making these comparisons, she realized not only her own incompetence but also her lack of status within the organization. To resolve these feelings of professional inadequacy, the officer solicited another inmate's help. In this case, the employee's alienation from her coworkers, *the economics*, led to her trusting an inmate who was even more deprived than herself. The final act of *crossing over* took place with the gift of a homemade bracelet as a token of friendship, thus, crushing the boundaries between the keeper and the kept.

Inmates are acute observers of their captors

Even though I neither accepted nor gave anything to an inmate, offenders still liked to subtly remind me of the fact that I was breaking rules every time they saw me cramming for an exam. Often, while I was busy studying, inmates would stroll down the hallways and ask me, always in a friendly manner, if I was enjoying the book. This was done not because they genuinely cared, but rather to let me know that they had currency on me that could easily be shared with shift supervisors. It was an indirect form of blackmail and another example of how inmates employ exploratory gestures in an attempt to manipulate staff. To me, the message was clear: “We see you breaking the rules too. You better cut us some slack.” Of course, if an inmate had actually been brave enough to have said something like the above, he might have incurred my wrath. A lesser officer can retaliate by shaking down an inmate’s house [cell search] or writing a disciplinary case. Inmates are acutely aware of the power that guards hold over them and tend to use the art of subtlety to get what they want.

My experiences as a guard-researcher have taught me that inmates have nothing but time to observe and familiarize themselves with the habits of correctional employees, and they realize fairly quickly that it is in their best interest to do so (Allen and Bosta 1981; Cornelius 2001; Elliot and Verdeyen 2003; Worley and Cheeseman 2006). I am convinced that many of the inmates knew that every time I entered the prison gates to report for duty, I was sneaking study material into the facility. To the outsider, reading on the job seems like a very trivial offense, especially when one considers the egregious ethical violations committed by former prison employees, Joyce Mitchell and Gene Palmer, who both assisted in two inmates’ escape attempt from the Clinton Correctional Facility (Craig et al. 2015; Hill 2015). Nevertheless, at the time I was doing this, I was fairly nervous about being caught reading and made every effort to ensure that my supervisors never happened to walk on my cellblock and see me studying for an exam. Much to my chagrin, a few offenders even took it upon themselves to become my accomplices in this sneaky rule violation. For example, one inmate who saw me reading informed me that he would whistle if he saw a supervisor approaching, which would give me ample time to hide my study material. By doing this, the inmate was trying to make himself a co-conspirator in my deliberate infraction of the rules. Looking back, this was definitely a manipulation strategy; the inmate was making a deposit of goodwill that he would hope to withdraw one day with interest.

Inmates frequently act as a *lookout* for staff members they seek to manipulate in an attempt to build rapport and develop trust (Allen and Bosta 1981; Marquart et al. 2001; Worley et al. 2010). I once interviewed an inmate manipulator who explained to me how he held *jiggers* (alerting staff members that a supervisor is approaching) for a correctional officer, which allowed her to sleep on the job. This inmate who claimed to have received oral sex from this officer on multiple occasions expressed himself in the following manner:

At the time, this boss lady was going through a lot with her family and didn’t have any time to sleep. I told her that she could take a nap and I would just “watch her back.” Pretty soon, we became good friends and we would stay up all night talking, even though I was supposed to be cleaning the wing and she was supposed to be guarding the other inmates.

In the above instance, the employee’s turbulent family life, coupled with the stress of working the graveyard shift, constituted *the economics* that led to her trusting an inmate, one further deprived than herself, which ultimately resulted in a slippery slope of boundary violations, *the crossing over*.

The “touch game”

Although some inmates often tried to use the fact that I studied on the job to their advantage, one offender took this to a whole new level when he lightly touched me on the foot one morning while I was reading in a dark dayroom with both feet propped comfortably on the benches. I was shocked, for this constituted a very serious disciplinary infraction known as “unauthorized contact,” a

violation that could land an inmate in a great deal of trouble. This may not sound like an egregious rule infraction to outsiders, but the social norms of correctional facilities are quite different from those in what inmates commonly refer to as “the free-world.” Unauthorized contact was considered such a serious infraction of the rules that no distinction was made between intentional and accidental contact between an inmate and correctional officer. In other words, even if an offender accidentally bumped into a staff member, he still ran the risk of being written up and disciplined for this offense and could easily lose privileges and even good-time credits [time deducted from a prisoner’s sentence for exemplary behavior].

I immediately pulled the inmate out of the pod and ordered him to produce his ID card, because I had every intention of writing him a disciplinary case. This inmate who had deliberately touched me on the foot was consciously violating both the official rules and norms of behavior dictating the appropriate boundaries between staff and offenders. He was clever though; the inmate insisted that he only tapped me on the foot to get my attention in order to remind me that I might hurt my eyes if I continued reading in the dark. He knew, even before I did, that I would not write him a disciplinary case, since doing this would require me to have to admit to my supervisors that I had been studying when I was supposed to be guarding offenders. This inmate engaged in a well-documented behavior that Allen and Bosta (1981) refer to as the “touch game,” which consists of seemingly innocent touches designed to manipulate staff (Cornelius 2001; Marquart et al. 2001; Worley 2011; Worley et al. 2003). In this case, the leverage that the inmate had on me for reading on duty, a lapse that may have occurred due to a combination of low morale and inadequate supervision, constituted *the economics*, which could have potentially led to a *crossing over*, had I accepted the inmate’s gesture of friendship.

Simple touching, even if appears to be accidental, diminishes the social distance between the keeper and the kept. Inmates are aware of this and will go to great lengths to touch a staff member, so long as they believe they can get away with it. Because the inmate perceived he had leverage on me, he openly defied the rules. He used an exploratory gesture by presenting this as a nonthreatening, benign action that was intended to help rather than being an attempt to manipulate me. This type of behavior is quite common among inmate manipulators. I once interviewed a male inmate serving a life sentence for capital murder who managed to convince a female guard to smuggle marijuana and tobacco into the facility and have sexual relations with him. The guard was later terminated from the agency and took up residence with this inmate’s mother. This offender admitted to me that inmates use touching as a strategy to ascertain whether or not a staff member is open to having an inappropriate relationship. He stated: “When a boss is opening a door, we might grab for it too and touch hands for a moment. After a while we might be touching something else.”

Conclusion

Throughout the history of prisons, correctional administrators have taken measures to prevent inmates from becoming overly familiar with the staff. Social distance between the keeper and the kept is established through both physical and socially constructed barriers ranging from the use of gun towers, to uniforms, to grooming standards, to the establishment of institutional norms requiring formal modes of address (Sir, Mrs., Ms., Mr., Officer, Boss) (Goffman 1961; Marquart et al. 2001). From their first day of employment, correctional employees are indoctrinated into the custodial mindset which legitimizes and enforces boundaries between prisoners and staff (Marquart et al. 2001; Worley et al. 2010), yet some offenders are extremely adept at breaking down the power differentials and establishing inappropriate relationships with correctional employees.

My observations as a guard-researcher support Worley and Worley’s (2016) assertion that correctional employees who feel relatively deprived compared to other professionals may be especially likely to violate institutional norms by establishing friendships with inmates that could lead to a slippery slope of boundary violations. In this article, I also expand on the burgeoning *economics of crossing over* thesis by providing real-life examples of how some staff members use other correctional

employees who work in the same facility as a reference group to whom they compare themselves. If a correctional employee feels particularly deprived when making comparison to other professionals or even his or her coworkers, this may lead to feelings of professional inadequacy that may manifest itself in a friendship or even an inappropriate relationship with an inmate.

The Clinton Correctional Facility escape attempt in New York is an extreme example of what can happen when inmates run the asylum (Craig et al. 2015; Hill 2015). Nevertheless, my experiences and observations as a guard-researcher have led me to the conclusion that events such as these should not be viewed by the layperson as isolated incidents. During my employment with the agency, I personally knew of at least seven staff members who were terminated for engaging in inappropriate relationships with prisoners, and it would be a conservative estimate to say that as many as 50 other employees left the agency under very questionable circumstances, often amidst a backdrop of rumors that they were bringing contraband into the facility or having sexual relationships with an offender. Inappropriate relationships between inmates and staff occur much more frequently than outsiders would care to believe, and in male facilities, they are often initiated by offenders. These actors, or “ballbusters” to use Sykes’ (1958) terminology, can be extremely persistent and will often go to great lengths to compromise correctional employees and disrupt the security of prison facilities.

The findings presented in this article have limited generalizability and do not reflect the underlying dynamics of all the staff–inmate inappropriate relationships that are occurring throughout correctional facilities. It should also be noted that the data for this study are derived from personal observations and experiences from working with male inmates in two male penitentiaries. This is important to point out because much of the literature indicates that when female inmates are involved in inappropriate relationships with staff, particularly those relationships of a sexual nature with male correctional officers, the interactions may more often than not be initiated by the employee who uses his power for the purposes of sexual coercion and exploitation (Calhoun and Coleman 2002; Cheeseman and Worley 2006; Culley 2012; Marquart et al. 2001). Obviously, the above type of behavior is quite different from what is being described in this article. Nevertheless, in spite of its limitations, this exploratory study sheds light on the dynamics of staff–inmate inappropriate relationships and will hopefully raise the public awareness of this issue, which might ultimately make correctional facilities safer, as well as more egalitarian and therapeutic places truly capable of rendering positive, life-changing, and transformative experiences for offenders.

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