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Chapter 5

Collective Violence in Prisons: Psychosocial Dimensions and Ritualistic Transformations

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Prisons and Collective Violence: Reasons to be Concerned

In the past thirty years the number of prisons in the United States has grown from approximately 400 in 1965 (Task Force Report 1967) to over 1,300 in 1996 (American Correctional Association 1996). The number of prisoners has increased over 500 percent, from about 200,000 in 1976 to over 1,000,000 in 1996. By all accounts, prisons have become increasingly populated by racial and ethnic minorities, individuals involved in the violent drug trade, and persons serving longer and longer sentences (Irwin and Austin 1994). The penetration of gangs into prison has increased the level of violence between inmate groups, and changed the nature of prisons noncollective violence from an expression of individual coping to group exploitation (Crouch and Marquart 1989; Lombardo 1989). Courts continue to be involved in the management of individual prisons and entire state prison systems (Strum 1993), while at the same time legislatures and courts attempt to limit the ability of prisoners to bring their problems to the attention of the courts (see U.S. Department of Commerce PLRA 1996). Prison administrators and state legislatures promote and attempt to mirror public opinion with attempts to make prison conditions harsher. As a result, prison management problems have become more and more complex. It seems that we are waiting for the inevitable to happen: that is, explosions of prison collective violence on a scale much greater than ever before. Thus, it is vitally important that we struggle to understand this form of collective violence in ways that will help us turn the inevitable into the less likely.

Knowledge about Prison Collective Violence

Discussions of prison collective violence are always limited by available data. There is little opportunity for objective participant observation research,¹ and ethical considerations certainly preclude the collection of experimental data. Normally official accounts, newspaper reports, and after-the-fact governmental inquiries into causes and conditions leading to riots provide the raw material for analysis. Such data sources limit our ability to understand collective prison violence by making us rely on retrospective, politically, and/or market-driven accounts that are often conceptually lacking. (See Useem, Camp and Camp 1996, and Roland 1997 for recent descriptions of prison riots.)

Indeed, the number of events available for study is also limited by official definitions and the newsworthiness and availability of news about the events occurring within closed institutions.² This often makes only the extreme cases the subject of inquiry. Over the last thirty years extreme events such as Attica (in 1971 with forty-three dead), Santa Fe (in 1980 with thirty-three dead), West Virginia (in 1986 with three dead), and Lucasville, Ohio (in 1993 with ten dead), provide the contexts for our developing understanding of collective violence in prisons.

Incidents of prison collective violence have traditionally been explored as if their occurrences were singular events—aberrations in the life of prison communities and somehow apart from the normal life of prisoners and staff. Even though collective violence in prisons happens much less frequently than the fear or the possibility of such violence would indicate, prison riots should be seen as a collective expression of psychosocial processes associated with everyday prison life.

Though our popular images of prison riots portray inmates rioting, most explanations for riots implicate the correctional staff and administrations in creating and maintaining the conditions of confinement, in losing control of the prisons, and in not responding properly to events that trigger riots (see Useem and Kimball 1989). Thus, any explanation for prison collective violence must look at the impact and interactions of conditions and processes that affect both inmates and correctional personnel as they interact in what Goffman calls “two different cultural worlds . . . jogging along side of each other with points of official contact but with little mutual penetration” (Goffman 1969).

Explanatory Models

In searching for causes for riots researchers, correctional administrators and policymakers have generally pulled back from the dynamics of day-to-day prison life, focusing instead on the relationship between prison conditions and collective violence as they existed immediately before and during the time of the riotous event (see Montgomery 1994). Recent reviews of prison riot literature (Martin and Zimmerman 1990) generally identify the following conceptual models that have been used to explain why prison riots occur: (1) environmental conditions: poor food, crowding, brutality, and so on; (2) spontaneity: a triggering incident; (3) conflict: inherent in repressive function of imprisonment; (4) collective behavior and social control: changes in the balance of informal and formal mechanisms maintaining the status quo; (5) power vacuum: abrupt changes in personnel and/or direction of formal control mechanisms; (6) rising expectations: development of a gap between experienced conditions of confinement and what prisoners expect (Martin and Zimmerman 1990, 735). More recently, students of prison riots have attempted to get beyond these "first-order causalities" to include reactions of officials in crisis situations which may add second-order factors that contribute to the continuation of a riot.

In summarizing their analysis of these typological constructs of prison riot causes, researchers often call for the development of integrative process-oriented models (Martin and Zimmerman 1990) As Martin and Zimmerman conclude:

The fact that none of the current models alone is adequate to the explanatory task suggests the need to develop more integrative models. These new models must look beyond the simple, the obvious, and the static conditions that represent necessary causes. To be effective such models must integrate the fundamental structural, functional, and processual factors operating at all levels in the complex milieu that make up our correctional systems. (327)

An Integrated Transformational Model

The understanding of prison collective violence explored in this chapter attempts to work toward such a model. Focusing on problem solving, meaning creation, communication, and ritual, I hope to demonstrate how the historical, cultural, organizational, and behavioral contexts of prisons come together to transform normally stable environments into environments where collective violence occurs. The violence explained here involves both violence by inmates and violence

(often retaliatory) by prison staff. This approach to prison collective violence integrates our knowledge of the "complex milieus that make up our correctional systems" with more general psychosocial concepts that help us understand behavior in a wider variety of contexts. *Specifically prison collective violence is seen as the result of a transformational process involving problem-solving, meaning creation and communication processes which involve prisoners and staff/administrators and ritualistic interactions between the two.* Raising the level of abstraction from the milieu of the prison to the milieu of ideas will allow us to understand prison collective violence as simply one manifestation of more general behavioral processes that seem to govern human behavior in a wide variety of contexts. In addition, each of the explanatory models in Martin and Zimmerman's (1990) typology has contributed to the transformational process described.

The transformational process developed here moves us beyond the deterministic "why?" and leads us to address the more practical "how?" While the former places riotous events in contexts seemingly beyond our control, the latter helps us identify general psychosocial processes that lead to the riotous events and that, once recognized, are capable of being controlled by the actors (especially staff and administrators) directly involved in the process in a prospective rather than a reactive fashion. It is my feeling that it is more likely that prison officials and policymakers will have more success intervening to stop processes that translate prison conditions into collective violence than they will have attempting to remove the "causes" and "conditions" that would seem to be inherent in our concepts and operationalization of imprisonment as punishment.

Historical Grounding: Content of Prison Symbols and Rituals

Whenever we confront racial violence in the United States we recognize the importance of the historical context of race relations as a ground against which the figure of violent confrontations emerges (see Grimshaw 1969). The same can be said for international and intranational conflicts. Our understanding of collective violence in prisons, however, often neglects history in favor of the immediate. Collective violence in prison contexts is fascinating in part because of its historically grounded mythological dimensions. In prisons the history of the relationship between the prisoner and the state dominates everyday reality for both

prisoners and prison staff. Assumptions underlying this relationship define prison life as much as the conditions existing at a particular time.

In the relationship between the prisoner and the state we have the setting for classic battles between "good" and "evil." Just which side (authorities or prisoners) represents good and which evil depends on perspective. Just as the observation that one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter and one person's oppressor is another person's defender of public order, the actors in prison manifestations of collective violence have multiple identities, tied to multiple roles, tied to varying evaluations by those observing the events from the outside. However one understands the assignment of good and evil roles, the transformation of people in a situation (prisoners, guards, and administrators living and working in prisons) into symbols (e.g., symbols of state power, challengers to state power, the morally worthy and the morally unworthy) clearly informs the "ritualistic" (Nieburg 1970) nature of prisoner and staff participation in and responses to psychosocial processes related to collective violence in prisons discussed in this chapter. As Nieburg observes:

ritual may be thought of as the link in the network by which the social meaning of actions and relationships is exchanged and communicated. Thus ritual is an expression or articulation, often non-verbal, of the values, attitudes, theories, interpretations, potential actions, and expectations of individuals in a community. (1970, 60)

Many ritualistic and mythological moral and role dimensions that shape the perceptual and behavioral alternatives believed to be available to the actors (the prisoners and staff) have their origins deep in the historical forces that transformed political or power relations between the governed and the governing and that led to the development of the modern penitentiary and the components of the penal apparatus. Among these historical forces are: (1) the formation of the nation-state and the government's assumption of punishment/criminal justice functions (Hogg 1980; Giddens 1987; Spierenburg 1984; Garland 1990); (2) the development of dangerous classes and moral-class-punishment linkages (Rennie 1978; Himmelfarb 1984); (3) the consolidation of postrevolutionary state governments (Maier 1970; Rothman 1971); and (4) the long historical growth of the penal apparatus (Lombardo, forthcoming).

Each of these forces has its foundation in conflict and a specific type of conflict that takes place between unequals, a type of relationship that is

stabilized by rituals (Nieburg 1970, 58-59). Within the prison context, inequality and subordination in the name of order, discipline, or treatment create an atmosphere that generates the application of punishment. For as P.W.A. Immink writes, "In common parlance the term 'punishment' is never used unless the person upon whom the punishment is inflicted is clearly subordinate to the one imposing the penal act" (quoted in Spierenburg 1984, 2). In addition, it is through these historically rooted frames of stereotypes and inequalities and subordination/superordination that communications processes move prisoners and staff along the path from nonviolent status quo to a collectively violent interactional setting.

Perhaps Erving Goffman better than anyone captured the reification of these mythological conflicts when he described the inmate and staff worlds of "total institutions" in *Asylums* in the 1950s. Goffman's descriptions applied to the contemporary prison environment provide a picture of the archetypical forms that underlie the psychosocial forces that drive prison collective violence. The inmate experiences the mortification process, the privilege system, inmate adaptations of withdrawal, rebellion, colonization, and conversion; and staff struggles with the contradictory messages of people work and bureaucratic work and the behavioral pursuit of often contradictory organizational goals of incapacitation, retribution, deterrence, and reformation (Goffman 1969, 74-92). The ritualistic meaning-producing import of these inmate and staff struggles is recognized by Goffman when he writes, "Each of these official goals or charters is admirably suited to provide a key to meaning—a language of explanation that the staff, and sometimes the inmates, can bring to every crevice of action in the institution" (83).

These forms³ dominate and shape expectations and decisions, even though we know that prisons in behavioral terms are less total institutions than Goffman's analysis described. These historical forces set the stage for the ritual of conflict manifested in prison collective violence to be acted out. Nieburg (1970) writes that rituals are group-based, problem-solving, communication processes that provide meaning and rationalization for actors in violent contexts. Ritualistic responses to problems are known, comfortable responses with specific meanings attached. These meanings reinforce the actors' understandings of the problem action is meant to solve. Thus, as we explore the collective violence process in prisons we must understand that the actions and reactions of prisoners and staff often reflect comfortable and known responses that reflect understandings of prison social relations rooted in the history of the prison. Monro-Bjorkland (1991) illustrates the

importance of these popular cultural images and beliefs of prisoners and administrators as she describes their involvement in the Attica riot:

The Attica of 1971 occurred at this crossroads, at a juncture between the former hands-off policy of the federal courts, compliant Black inmates, plus absolute, unquestioned authority of corrections administration and the new thrust of inmates toward increased civil rights, better prison conditions, federal court assistance, and alternatives to incarceration based on notions of rehabilitation rather than retribution. Unfortunately when the Attica rebellion occurred, those in authority had very little understanding or acceptance of these new directions or of the men who populated the prison and led the rebellion. Those in authority reacted to a set of images and labels based on assumptions regarding the predominant races at the prison and grounded in their ignorance and fear of the changes occurring within the complex prison population. (50)

One of the most graphic (though least consequential) examples of the confrontational potential and power of prison role mythology and role expectations that lies below the surface of this combination of prison/staff "role behavior" (as opposed to the individual behavior of the persons occupying the roles) occurred during the "simulated prison" experiment conducted at Stanford University in 1971 (Haney et al. 1977). One interpretation for the "prison rebellion" at Stanford is that it was a reaction to the harsh conditions imposed by and on the students who participated and the readiness to do harm to others inherent in us all. However, the short time involved and the minimally harsh conditions make this rebellion seem more like the "thing to do." That is, it was assumed that "prisoners" are expected to rebel, that prisoners are expected to use violence to respond to prison staff, and that prison staff are expected to treat prisoners with harshness. It is possible that the "scripts" the Stanford subjects were following were derived from their expectations and assumptions concerning the behaviors of guards and inmates rooted deep in prison's historical development, rather than from their personal reactions to their immediate situation. They developed a group identity as they reinforced each other in their beliefs about the reality of their confinement. Instead of individuals testing and evaluating their own experiences, these student/inmates and student/guards accepted the "social definition" of their situation and they ritualistically acted out the expected rebellion.⁴

A Starting Point for the Process: Stress, Individual Problem Solving, and Prison Stability

The starting point for the development of the transformation to prison collective violence is found in the normal conditions of prison life and the manner in which prisoners and staff cope with institutional life. From this starting point the task then becomes explaining how the two, often taken for granted, defining characteristics of prison riots—(1) their collective nature, and (2) their violent content—emerge from these normally not collectively violent stable situations. The common motivational force for this transformation is *stress*, stress as it is experienced and coped with individually by inmates and staff with personal needs and motivations. Coping with stress connects the non-collectively violent prison status quo with expressions of collective violence.

The reality of prison life for most guards and prisoners is that prison is a lonely world. Though the popular image of prison life is one that sets prisoners as a group against the prison guards/administration as a group, that the normal prison world is an “atomized” world has been recognized in social science writing about the prison since its beginnings (Clemmer 1958; Sykes 1958; Toch 1977a; Lombardo 1989). Though the past twenty years have seen prison gangs in many prisons give prisoners more of a group context within which to engage in coping, contemporary prisoner biographies (see Earley 1992; Hassine 1996; Martin and Sussman 1993; Rideau and Wickberg 1992; Washington 1994) describing life at prisons throughout the country still betray the each-for-himself character of prison life. In the everyday world of the prison, environmental conditions or “context factors” associated with riots (e.g., crowding, idleness) present individual inmates and correctional personnel with problem-solving challenges as they struggle to meet their individual concerns for privacy, safety, structure, support, emotional feedback, social stimulation, activity, and freedom (Toch 1977a, 16-17; Lombardo 1989). These challenges provide opportunities for a variety of person-environment transactions (Toch 1977a): (1) “congruent transactions,” where individual needs and institutional resources match and stress is reduced; (2) “negotiable transactions,” where individual needs or institutional resources can be adjusted to reduce stress; or (3) “incongruent transactions,” where individual needs and resources of people, activities, and goods and services do not match or are in conflict, thus increasing stress, and sometimes leading to “immature coping” (Johnson 1996) characterized by violence and acting out behavior and/or

breakdown. Congruent and negotiable transactions often result in the development of "niches" (Toch 1977a) for inmates, and in the attainment of preferred job assignments for staff (Lombardo 1989). Such individual coping, based on personal needs, provides relatively acceptable places for individuals living and working in prison to pass their time. This is the status quo.

The status quo provides a relatively predictable environment even under harsh, primitive conditions (see Crouch and Marquart 1989). In this environment, staff and prisoners can reach mutually acceptable accommodations where the rituals of subordination and dominance can play themselves out in symbolic ways. At the same time, the inmate culture and the staff accommodations to it permit relative order, punctuated by individual acts of physical, economic, sexual, and psychological exploitation (Bowker 1982) to continue for long periods of time. This general conservatism of the status quo also helps explain why environmental conditions often associated with riots and that exist at many prisons most of the time do not always result in riots. It is not the conditions per se, but the meaning and interpretation of these conditions by prisoners and staff that make them relevant to collective violence.

Change: The Initiator of Transformation from Individual to Group Coping

While prisons are incredibly stable institutions in their day-to-day activities, they are subject to change generated both internally (by prison administrators) and externally (by legislators, Departments of Correction, the media, and the courts). Such change agents help initiate the transformational process toward collective violence by moving both prisoners and guards/administrators from individual to group solutions to the problem of stress. This movement is what Festinger (1968) calls a shift from "physical" (based on individual experience) to "social" (based on group identity) definitions of stress and coping strategies. According to Nieburg, such a shift from individual to "reference group" meanings of situations is also a characteristic of ritualistic behavior (1970, 66-68).

These shifts are associated with change in the prison status quo. Many of the explanatory models described above contribute to this change. Alterations in the prison conditions (environmental conditions model), changes in administrative policy or personnel (power vacuum model), programming changes and worsening or improving conditions (rising expectations model), tighter security procedures, restrictions on

visiting, and so on (social control model), publicity resulting from incidents, the intrusion of political campaigns, union contract negotiations (conflict model), or a variety of other incidents (spontaneity model) are situations that might alter individual inmates and/or officer perceptions of the prison environment, themselves, prisoners, and staff.

In the early 1970s Jayewardene et al. (1976, 33) surveyed Canadian correctional staff members concerning their perceptions of the "process leading inevitably and inexorably to a major prison disturbance." The staff members noted changes in the normal behaviors of inmates seeking to make adjustments to new conditions. There were increases in rumors, in transfer requests, and in inmates reporting to sick call. In addition, inmates sought new job assignments or began to engage in recreational activities where they previously had not (Jayewardene et al. 1976, 36). Analyses of Attica, West Virginia, Santa Fe, and Lucasville riots have found similar patterns (Martin and Zimmerman 1990, 726; Mahan 1996, 253). Talkative inmates became reticent and inmate responses to supervision (censorious behavior included) became signs of defiance. Inmates who were generally unpopular and isolated began to become talkative and sought out staff when "trouble" was brewing (Jayewardene et al. 1976, 37). A National Institute of Corrections training course for correctional personnel cites the following signs of tension among prisoners: restlessness; quiet or subdued actions of inmate groups; avoidance of visual or verbal contact with staff; increase in commissary purchases; increase in the number of absences of inmates at popular functions; and increases in the number of complaints (cited by Montgomery 1994, 245-46).

What is being described here as precursors to riots or signs of tension is the process that results when *change* forces inmates and staff to seek new niches when their old ones begin to be destroyed. Inmates are still reacting as individuals, but the groundwork for the development of a collective response to stress is being constructed (Janis 1968, 87). Such changes are often associated with other factors found to exist in the periods prior to the riots: increased inmate assaults, assaults on staff, poor communication, publicity about the prison, or changes in key administrative staff. At Attica, for example, the following conditions obtained during the months preceding the riot:

Inmates not only faced inexperienced officers but might face new officers everyday. The inmates could never learn what was expected from them from one day to the next, and the officers could never learn whether an inmate's unco-operative behavior resulted from

belligerence, indifference, illness or some other medical or personal problem. Inmates could no longer adjust to the officer who commanded them, but had to readjust to a succession of officers who changed from day to day. Officers, too, were adversely affected by this change. Likely to work with different groups of inmates each day, the officers had no incentive to establish rapport or respect with a group of inmates whom they might not see again for days or weeks. There was neither opportunity nor desire to develop any mutual understanding. (New York Special State Commission on Attica 1972, 127)

During conditions of change, correctional officers are also vulnerable to this process resulting from change-induced stress and breakdown in the predictability of the status quo. For officers, there is an increase in job assignment change requests and absenteeism. Officers used to writing reports for rule violations began to look the other way; while officers who use informal strategies start to write formal reports for inmate misbehavior.

The existence of an officer reference group capable of influencing the attitudes and behaviors of individual correctional officers is something that cannot safely be assumed. Rather than a cohesive group with widely accepted norms and sanctions, the officers may be better described as a highly fragmented collection of individuals. To be sure, their work requires a degree of interdependence, but officers express a high degree of independence in attitude, opinion, and beliefs. However, under status quo conditions, rather than maintaining close personal relationships with their comrades, officers tend to go their own way, seeking to avoid personal contact and communication with each other outside of the institution. Inside the institution, officers create their own "niches" (Lombardo 1989, 145-49).

In Festinger's (1968, 183) terms, these officers interpret stable prison conditions on the basis of a "physical reality." However, as objective prison conditions begin to change, and as absences and/or changes in key staff, poor communication, and publicity about prison conditions (Wilsnack 1976, 72) begin to impinge on the guard's world, the reliability of this physical reality diminishes. Conflicts between guards and administrators associated with prison riots start to become salient. Relationships with inmates (such as those at Attica described above) begin to take on an increasingly "formal" character, hence more incident reports and personal conflicts. And as inmates increase "censorious" responses to guard formality, hostility and mutual suspicion increase. Inmates now behave in ways more likely to be ritualistically interpreted by guards as

challenges to their authority and to their position as guards (Jayewardene et al. 1976, 37; Lombardo 1989, 93-6; Crouch and Marquart 1989). By sharing these experiences in communication that seeks to develop group support and to reduce uncertainty, guards begin to develop a "social reality" of themselves and inmates confirmed by the experiences of others, even though it is at variance with their normal subjective experiences.

Individuals who *live* in the prison are becoming "inmates," and those who *work* in the prisons are becoming "guards," in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. Ritualistic role-playing behavior based on a new socially determined reality begins to replace coping behavior based on individually determined physical reality. Guards and inmates now begin to behave in collective and symbolic ways, each interpreting and reacting to the behavior of the other in terms of the stereotypical images their new social reality has created. The stage is set for confrontation.

Communication, Group Processes and Collective Violence

Central to understanding the processes by which this transformation from individual to collective problem solving takes place are conditions that shape communication in social groups and the conditions under which individuals depend on social reality to determine the validity of their attitudes, opinions, and beliefs when they are unable to depend on experiences of physical reality to test these beliefs (Festinger 1968, 183). In prison environments that are *not* undergoing change, the certainty, predictability, and structure provided by environmental niches and other individual coping options mean that all participants can depend upon the physical reality. Niches provide opportunities for individual inmates to meet their needs in terms of perceived attributes of special prison environments, and without direct reference either to other inmates or to their "status as inmates." The meaning they derive from their experiences is tested against the reality that they as individuals experience to be true. Basing their attitudes, opinions, and beliefs on this physical reality, the social reality of what an inmate or prisoner is supposed to experience is largely irrelevant.

However, as niches begin to erode under the pressure of change, the abilities of inmates and staff to determine their own reality begins to slip away. Under conditions of uncertainty, increased communication among themselves becomes a method by which inmates get a fix on the social reality of the prison environment. This communication marks the beginning of inmates and staff moving forward and recognizing

themselves as "collectives" and/or groups (Janis 1968) and developing extreme and stereotypical attitudes and perceptions and, ultimately, engaging in violence.

Recent research and theoretical development in the areas of group dynamics and violence point to the importance of group processes and role assumption in dynamics of collective violence in prisons and the unique social reality on which it is based. As inmates and correctional officers move from viewing themselves as individuals to claiming group identities they are engaging in a self-categorization process (Turner 1987). In this context,

the group is not just a particular realm of social behavior . . . but is a basic process of social interaction. Psychologically, the group process embodies a shift in the level of abstraction at which the individual self operates, a shift from personal to social identity, which is not a deviation from but a part of the normal state of affairs of self-perception and social interaction. (Turner 1987, vii)

In this realm of group behavior, the availability of symbolic and heroic ingroup images (inmates as heroic rebels and corrections officials as the last bastion of state authority) and demonic outgroup images (inmates as dangerous threats to society and correctional personnel as oppressors of the human spirit) provide the conditions under which the self-categorization process results in group interpretations of reality that are polarized, that is, moved to extreme positions (Turner 1987, 156). This condition characterizes both inmate and correctional personnel's interpretation of the prison world under conditions of stress and change described above. (See Sam Keen [1986] for a discussion of the imagery of this "enemy making process.")

Kelman and Hamilton's study (1989) of the relation of support for violent alternatives and the assumption of group identities and roles ("inmate" and "correctional agent" rather than individual identity) also supports this link between group identity, decision making, and violence. Kelman and Hamilton find that such a shift (away from individual value orientations, "physical reality perspective") reflects a shift in orientation away from responsibility for individual actions that is more likely to justify and support violent alternatives. Kelman and Hamilton (1989) call this a "role orientation" (269). Assuming roles not only allows individuals to divest themselves of individual responsibility for their behavior (thus reducing inhibitions to violence as responsibility is transferred to the group), it also provides prescribed stereotypical scripts that direct

behavior along predetermined paths associated with the role expectations. For correctional personnel, a "rule orientation" (Kelman and Hamilton 1989, 269) characteristic of the hierarchical administrative structures of prison and supportive of violent alternatives supplements the correctional officer "role." The stereotypical responses described above support these shifts to perceptual frames of reference, which are themselves supportive of violent alternatives.

Another communication component of the prisoner and prison staff transformational process, the existence of a threat, is found in Bugental's (1993) "Model of Self-Maintaining Threat-Oriented Interactive Systems" analysis of communication patterns leading to violence in abusive relationships (also applied to communication patterns resulting in violence between nation-states). When individuals perceive the actions of relevant others as a possible source of threat they fall back on "scripted" responses. Such responses require little thinking and analysis of interactive situations. Indeed, they prevent such evaluations because the assumption of a threat-oriented interpretative frame requires responses that confirm the individual's inherent goodness and the wrongness of the threat. "Thus, they (actors under perceived threat whether prisoners or staff) can be expected to be more likely to use scripted, 'prepackaged' response patterns; they will be less likely to engage in more elaborated and gradual process of learning . . . and adapting behavioral responses to individualized information" (Bugental 1993, 296). At this point in the transformational process, learning, adapting, and structuring responses to individualized interpretations of environmental conditions, a characteristic of physical reality, is less likely to occur.

In addition, such threat-driven actors are more likely to use punishment sanctions and to escalate the punishment when it inevitably fails to achieve the desired results. The existence of threat-oriented frame and reactions is found in Mahan and Lawrence's (1996) analysis of Attica, Santa Fe, and Lucasville riots. In each case, prior to riots, staff began to describe incoming prisoners as a "new breed" or "more violent" than the "old-time" prisoners. In prisons experiencing riots, conflict between line-staff and upper-level administrators, and between treatment and custodial personnel (which are accommodated under conditions of stability) also surface in the period preceding the riot (Mahan and Lawrence 1996, 426). In addition, they found "officials responded to tensions with ill-designed efforts meant to tighten controls" (426). These escalating punishments and restrictions to cope with perceived threats

create inmate reactions that confirm the threat and create a need for tightening regulations still further in a process of continuing escalation.

The Violence of Prison Riots

I have thus far tried to show how the collective aspect of prison collective violence represents a shift from individual to ritualistic group solutions to change-induced, stress-produced, and threat-oriented communication processes upon which both prisoners and staff/administrators depend. The violence of prison riots, both that exhibited by prisoners and that exhibited by staff in the retaking of the prison and in retaliation for the riot, has its source in (1) the prison culture, (2) a reduction in the inhibitions to such violence, (3) institutionalized arrangements, (4) ritualistic responses to "trigger" incidents, and (5) the availability of justifications for the use of violence.

Subculturally, violence as an expression of power, manhood, and "self-image" has long been recognized as a subcultural norm in prisons. This applies to the staff world as well as to the world of the prisoner. As a result, a concern for safety is a part of prison subjective reality no matter how infrequently incidents of violence actually occur. When violence is perceived as a way of life, it is expected that violence will be used to motivate and settle prison disputes. One analysis of improvements and deteriorations of prison life over the past twenty years found increases in levels of violence and danger the most prominent negative feature (Conrad 1982). Jack Abbott, a long-term resident of prisons with expertise in the use of violence claims that in prison

everyone is afraid. It is not an emotional or psychological fear. It is a practical matter. If you don't threaten someone at the very least, someone will threaten you. When you walk across the yard or down the tier to your cell, you stand out like a sore thumb if you do not appear either callously unconcerned or cold and ready to kill. Many times you have to "prey" on someone, or you will be "preyed" upon yourself. After so many years, *you are not bluffing*. No one is. (Abbott 1981, 121-22; emphasis in original)

The violence in prison riots might also be seen as emerging when inhibitions to violence are removed. One such inhibition is the *legitimacy of the status quo*. Changes in the prison status quo can draw attention to the perceived *illegitimacy* of the conditions, even where conditions were improving in an objective sense (something that was happening at

Lucasville and Attica) (Fogelson 1971, 93 and 95). Pastore (1952) and Berkowitz (1981) have demonstrated that frustrations perceived as arbitrary or illegitimate promote more aggressive reactions than frustrations perceived as lawful or legitimate. Useem and Kimball's observations concerning this legitimacy of administrative and correctional regimes and prison riots support these findings. Useem and Kimball's (1989) study of prison riots points out that a key factor in many riots was the "disorganization of the state. The riot-prone system is characterized by certain ailments which, on the one hand, sap the ability of the state to contain disturbances and, on the other hand, convince inmates that the imprisonment conditions are unjust" (218). Useem and Kimball's emphasis on the *perceived* legitimacy of conditions (and not simply their objective existence) is supportive of earlier analysis of both inmate and staff responses to change that is managed poorly.

Legitimacy serves as a link between the behavior of the correctional administrators and staff and that of the prisoners. In prisons legitimacy operates at a number of different, interacting levels. Legitimacy may involve the *actions* of individual correctional officers and the manner in which they exercise authority and the way it is perceived by inmates. It may relate to the *procedures and policy* that govern the behavior of prisoners and staff and staff/prisoner relations and the manner in which they are applied. Here one specific instance of "unjust application" in the right context can trigger a crisis in legitimacy for an individual inmate. Under conditions of change when communication between inmates becomes frequent, one person's interactions with an "illegitimate" system can become the "inmates'" perception of illegitimacy. Perceptions of legitimacy may relate to the perceptions of the entire process and concept of imprisonment. It may be derived from a broader "crisis in political legitimacy" and reflect attacks in the media, in political campaigns or budgetary battles, or in contested legal issues associated with prisons.

Ritual-Stereotypical Responses to Crises in Legitimacy

When, in the context of change, prisoners and/or staff challenge the "legitimacy" (appropriateness, properness, legality) of correctional policy and practice, correctional, administrators and policy makers magnify the crises of legitimacy by responding to challenges to change in stereotypical fashion. These stereotypes are based on a mechanistic view of prison organizational arrangements that (1) dehumanizes both critical inmates and staff as "trouble-makers," "radicals," or "malcontents"; (2) assumes

that those who will be most directly affected by the changes (inmates and lower-level correctional staff) have no voice in change processes; (3) naively assumes that rules and policy can control behavior; and (4) relies on authority vested in role incumbency to manage change. Stereotyped reactions by prison officials to the first signals of problems (manifested in the search for new coping strategies under conditions of change) and to crisis situations (riot triggers) contribute to bringing about prison collective violence.

Such approaches as those described above serve to promote the transition from both individual to collective and from nonviolent to violent responses. By providing code words for group identification, by reducing to insignificance the concerns of those most affected by change, by ignoring the impact of power exerted from below, and by setting up authority for challenge, stereotypical management responses to criticism generate stereotypical responses from prisoners. The importance of such responses is that they are based on "social expectations" and a "social reality" rather than "objective" analysis of "real" situations. To the degree that such stereotypical responses guide decision making, *alternatives to conflict escalation are not seen as available options*. Without such options, violence avoidance and prevention rests on the ability to control (which is continuously under challenge) and not on the ability to manage.

Staff and administrative discontinuities are affected by and affect inmate perceptions of legitimacy. Staff behavior or institutional policy that alters accepted patterns of adaptation can be perceived as arbitrary and illegitimate by both inmates and staff. Thus, in periods preceding riots, inmate/staff conflicts not only increase, but the meanings of these conflicts and how they are handled are found in collective meanings not in those of individuals.

Other restraints inhibiting a violent response to stressful conditions include a concern for personal safety when faced with the perceived overwhelming opposition of the authorities, the fear of arrest (and an extended term of imprisonment), and a commitment to orderly social change and achieving improved conditions through established procedures (Fogelson 1971, 98-99). Under normal conditions these restraints operate in the prison setting, but as conditions change, they are subject to erosion.

Johnson (1986) points out that the violence of prisons (and other social institutions such as the police and the military) can be viewed as the product of institutional arrangements. As *institutional violence*, prison violence not only reflects a set of subcultural values adopted by prisoners and staff in the processes of social interaction, but is also "a result of

systematic efforts by institutions to structure situations and to generate dispositions and perceptions which yield 'contingent consistency'" (181). That is, the situation and situations one encounters in prison, whether one is a prisoner or a staff member, are prearranged, structured and rehearsed to promote predictable, guilt-free violence. The contingencies that promote such violence are: authorizations (both mission and regulations), dehumanization through bureaucratic processes, and isolation from observation and accountability and socialization (reference group and organizational definitions of appropriate behavior) (Johnson 1986). The greater the consistency among these contingencies in the context of the prison the greater the likelihood that collective violence will emerge as collective, group orientations develop.

Finally, the violence of prison riots is often attributed as the "trigger" event (Mahan and Lawrence 1996) or as an outgrowth of "spontaneity" (Martin and Zimmerman 1990). I have tried to demonstrate that prison collective violence is more complicated than a reaction to a single critical incident and that the transformational context for such incidents makes them meaningful in the collective context. Such confrontations can plausibly contribute to the development of a collective response by providing the conditions necessary for what Janis (1968) refers to as the "contagion effect." This phenomenon describes the spread of excitement or violence and the development of group identification when the group is faced with an external threat. The conditions for contagion, as identified by Redl (1966, 87), are

1. an initiator who must openly act out in such a way that he obviously gratifies an impulse that the rest of the members have been inhibiting;
2. the initiator must display a lack of anxiety or guilt; and
3. the other members who perceive the initiators actions must have been undergoing for some time an intense conflict with respect to performing the forbidden act.

Though increasing numbers of violent confrontations between inmates and/or between inmates and guards may in themselves represent last-ditch responses to stress, they are also sources of stress, stimuli for contagion, and occasions for group identification. Triggering events related to prison riots (e.g., a disciplinary situation handled badly) provide what Nieburg (1970, citing Goffman) identifies as a "focused gathering" or a "situated activity system" (65) that calls for some sort of resolution. In such situations,

values are born every minute as persons ratify each other's acts by imitation, signs of approval and mutual participation. The ritual of spontaneous ratification of innovative acts may have political consequences and characterizations. It may lead to uncontrollable situations, violent attacks and/or preemptive counter attacks. (Nieburg 1970, 64)

With the state of flux created by the erosion of established patterns of behavior, the development of collective, mutually stereotypical definitions by staff and inmates, and the loosening of restraints that curb riot tendencies, what is needed to unleash collective violence is a set of justifications for its use. Such justifications may be found in the social processes involved in individuals' reactions to stress and in the process of conversion from individual to collective response.

In analyzing situations in which individuals take action they personally believe is wrong (the infliction of violence on others) but that they pursue in spite of the disapproved effects, Duster (1971) identifies six conditions that contribute to defining the situation as one permitting such contradictory behaviors. Focusing on incidents from the Vietnam War and police involvement with the Black Panthers in the 1960s, Duster refers to these as "conditions for guilt-free massacre," a set of rationalizations with which individuals can shield themselves from responsibility for their actions. These conditions include: (1) the denial of the humanity of the victims; (2) organizational grounds for action that supersede individual grounds for action; (3) loyalty to the organization that supersedes every other consideration; (4) the fact that an organization uses secrecy and isolation as a cover for its actions; (5) the existence of a target population; and (6) the motivation to engage in violence (Duster 1971, 25-26). As the collective violence process proceeds as inmates and correctional staffs move into mutually hostile groups, these conditions (many supporting Johnson's [1986] analysis of institutional violence) increase the likelihood that violence will occur.

Intervening in the Collective Violence Process

Efforts to prevent and cope with prison collective violence are usually difficult to develop because many of the environmental conditions, policy, and personnel changes three create climates within which collective violence develops are beyond the scope of individual prison administrators to control. Budgetary politics, political appointments, judicial decrees, and

changes in law enforcement and prosecutorial practices (which alter the nature of the prison population) permeate the walls and fences with outside influence. However, many are beginning to recognize that it is not these changes in and of themselves that "cause" riots, but rather administrative and staff and prisoner assessments of and reactions to these changes. These perceptions and reactions, especially those of staff and administrators, are something that individuals can control.

If the development of collective violence in prison can be understood as a transformational process that moves from individual nonviolent to collectively violent coping with the changing conditions of the prison environment, and if this process involves inmates and correctional administrators and staff in a process of ritualistic mutually hostile stereotypical responses, then it might be possible for correctional administrators to monitor these processes and intervene before the process is completed. This approach does not assume that correctional administrators and their staffs have the ability to control all of the environmental conditions and state-wide policies that have an impact on their institutions. However, it does assume that they have the ability to control their own perceptions and actions. If they can do this, they can then stop the escalation process that moves prisoners and staff/administrators along the transformation process to collective violence. What forms might such interventions take?

Useem and Kimball (1989, 227-31) call for "good administration" based on principles that recognize all of the above "external forces" as parts of prison organization. The impacts resulting from implementation are administrative problems to be solved, not threats to be controlled in a militaristic fashion. Such an approach implicitly recognizes the importance of not perceiving forces affecting prison change as "threats" and "illegitimate." Such a perception widens the "solution repertoire" available to administrators. By forcing administrators to explore individual situations for meanings and possibilities, ritualistic escalating responses can be avoided.

Boin and Van Duin (1975 and their later work) emphasize an administrative "crisis planning-management approach" based on both organizational variables related to security and inmate perceptions of the legitimate nature of their living environment. Their approach emphasizes planning and preparation, and realistic expectations about human behavior; the continuous need for general planning; and flexibility and resilience in response to problem situations.

I believe such interventions should involve increased attention to monitoring behaviors and divergences from "normal" practices. Such monitoring and increased awareness should take place and be developed at the individual, organizational, and public levels. Such monitoring allows correctional administrators and staff to maintain perspectives based on "physical reality" rather than "socially defined" reality. Involvement of staff and inmates in such monitoring activities also helps to overcome the "pluralistic ignorance" (Lombardo 1989; Klofas and Toch 1982; Grekul 1995) that so dominates perceptions in the prison world.

Individual Awareness

Correctional officers and administrators should be aware that under conditions of stress the way they perceive inmates and their interactions with them will change. Authority must be understood as a variable that may be viewed as personal (as residing in personal characteristics and behaviors of officers) or something that derives from "role incumbency" and is thus legally derived. They should be aware that under conditions of change, confusion in prisoners can possibly create more conflicts.

As they interact in these conflicts, officers and administrators should also "watch their language." They should be aware of their tendency to redefine prisoners (and administrators) as threats using group stereotypes rather than defining them as individuals acting in specific stressful situations. Individual officers or administrators must realize that change will cause them to move in the direction of relying on law to gain compliance (or to where they rely on law, now ignoring its application). They should be tipped off that something is happening in their environment that is causing them to change; they should try to understand and adjust. As Kelman and Hamilton (1989) put it:

Mindlessness in response to authority needs to be replaced by mindfulness—by heightened awareness of information processing and attention to multiple perspectives. Sensitivity to opposing forces would be enhanced by individuals' mindful attention to the actor, to the action and to the target of the action—that is, to themselves as responsible agents, to the meaning of the act they have been ordered to perform, and to its human consequences. (333)

Training for Staff and Administrators

Training efforts should give staff and administrators realistic assessments of the dynamics of prison work and life. Staff and administrators should undergo periodic in-service training activities aimed at developing and sharing problem-solving strategies. Diversity of responses rather than prescription of responses should be sought. This will help combat the tendency of stereotypical responses to limit rather than expand behavioral choices. Critical incident approaches that demand analysis break down stereotypes and combat pluralistic ignorance. Such activities surface the complexity of correctional officer tasks, identify successful and unsuccessful work strategies, demonstrate how individual needs interact with officer tasks, surface sources of stress and positive and negative coping strategies, sharpen officer and administrator skills in environmental analysis, and support the development of positive correctional officer subculture (see Lombardo 1986).

Such approaches also help to link an individual's actions to the resulting consequences of his behavior. Such linkage is lost in the violence escalation process, which makes individual behavior group behavior and consequences not one's personal responsibility. To the extent that individual behaviors and consequences are linked, tendencies to violence are reduced (Kelman and Hamilton 1989).

Organizational Awareness

Staff and administrators should be trained to monitor correctional environments and changes in individual perceptions of those environments. The development of data bases linked to dimensions related to perceptions of correctional environments (e.g., see Toch 1977a, prison preference profile) should be developed to provide administrators, supervisors, and correctional officers constant feedback on the impact of change processes. Given the ability of most correctional agencies to collect a wide variety of data, one data set should be developed to monitor changes in inmate and staff behavior and in the those environmental conditions often linked to prison collective violence.

Summary

The model of prison collective violence put forward here draws on psychosocial concepts and principles governing human behavior in an

attempt to develop an integrative approach. This transformational approach has the advantage of being able to encompass all of the earlier types of explanations for prison collective violence while at the same time being grounded in the status quo non-collectively violent world of everyday prison life. In addition, the contributions of both staff/administrators and prisoners to this process can be understood. Exploring such violence as an outgrowth from normal prison life and as a movement from individual stress reduction efforts also allows us to account for many of the behavioral changes in prisoners and staff that occur prior to actual riotous events and to assess their contribution to the collective violence process. Finally, I believe this approach provides perspectives and opportunities for prison administrators and staff to develop good administration approaches that will give them more real, legitimate, and flexible control over their institutions and allow them to overcome the historically grounded ritualistic responses that collective violence in prisons often represents.

Endnotes

1. The author of this article had the opportunity to be a true participant observer of prison collective violence when he was a full-time teacher and fledgling student of prisons at Auburn Correctional Facility in New York when it experienced a riot in 1970 and when the Attica prison rebellion occurred in 1971. The transformational process described in the analysis is certainly informed by those experiences.

2. In a recent panel discussion of journalists reviewing activities of the Virginia legislature, reporters commented about the defeat of a proposal seeking to restore press access to prisons. During that discussion the reporters referred to an incident at a local correctional center during which prisoners burned the institution's library. The reporters commented that the Department of Corrections did not classify the incident as a riot, therefore their ability to view the damage was more restricted than if it had been classified as a riot.

3. See Alan Feldman's *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991) for an application of the concept of linguistic form to the analysis of collective violence. As Feldman describes it, such analysis involves a "genealogical analysis of symbolic forms, material practices, and narrative strategies through which certain types of political agency are constructed in northern Ireland." Feldman's study links history, culture, meaning, and political agency in ways that mirror the psychosocial analysis of prison collective violence developed in this chapter.

4. In 1979 students in a colleague's class attempted to recreate the Stanford Prison Experiment. As one experienced in prison matters, I was asked to play

the role of a guard supervisor. As the process unfolded, our student/prisoners went on strike, pounded their tables, and chanted "Hell, no! We won't go!" when they were asked to move from the dining area to the work area. The student/guards under my command immediately started to pull, push, and threaten the student/prisoners. After about thirty seconds of this, I called my guards over to the side. They asked about our next course of action and wondered how violent the confrontation might get. I told them to simply stand against the wall, away from but in clear visual contact with the prisoners. Let the prisoners chant and sit in the dining area, I instructed. The prisoner guards looked confused. Their supervisor was a wimp. But their supervisor knew how to avoid ritual responses that only served to escalate and call for more ritual responses from the prisoners. After two minutes of chanting with no response and sitting without being asked to move, the prisoners got bored and moved to the workshop and began to make their license plates.

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