

Doing Time: Altered Perception of Time in Prison

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Abstract

First published in *Examples of Grounded Theory: A Reader*, this study developed a grounded theory of “doing time” as the core social-psychological process shaping inmates’ experiences of incarceration. Based on the on in-depth interviews with approximately 35 men, most of whom had served substantial time in maximum security, this grounded theory explains how time becomes problematic under conditions of confinement, abundance of unstructured hours, lack of meaningful activity, and loss of personal autonomy. The process of “doing time” unfolds in stages: an acute adjustment period, fluctuating periods of escape and “hard time,” and a heightened, ambivalent awareness preceding release. Inmates respond by constructing individualized “systems” to neutralize temporal awareness. These strategies organize prison social life and reshape attitudes toward self, society, and the value of time. The concept extends beyond prisons as a trans-situational variable, illuminating analogous experiences among the elderly, military personnel, and others subjected to confinement, excess time, and constrained autonomy.

Keywords: prison, incarceration, grounded theory, time, awareness, conditions, relationship

Incarceration in a prison usually means a drastic alteration in a man's life circumstance. Man's place in society means a number of things. It has to do with the physical environment which in some manner he can call his own, and which by a variety of different ways, he comes to make personal in some way, if only by carving his initials into it. It means his social status, his relations to his family, his peers, his society. It means that particular niche that he fits into amidst the network of customs and values that form his world. This covers a lot of territory. To understand what happens to a person in prison is to understand the disintegrations of all these things.

When a man enters the society of the prison, the entire substance of this network of his life is in some way altered. His physical environment becomes circumscribed, to say the least. Personal space becomes a thing of the past. His relations with other people undergo a drastic change. What he has come to think of as his rights, however fundamental, are no longer rights but privileges. He loses his name. No longer can he present himself to the world as he wishes, with long hair or short, clean shaven or bearded, in overalls or a suit. He must cry and despair, ache, have nightmares, get an erection, pray, and relieve himself, before whom the institution decides he will do these things. What he knew in the other world of sex and masculinity, has no meaning in this one. The reasons he has always known for taking a bath or not, of doing a good job or not, of being friendly or not, no longer have any relevance in this new existence.

But, of all the changes which constitute his new situation, the most fundamental and personally jarring is that of Time. What once was the atmosphere in which his world floated (although he may rarely have averted to it), now becomes the very fabric of his existence. That thing, Time which was most basically his own, is no longer under his proprietorship. He no longer has a moment of which he can say, "This is absolutely my moment with which to do as I wish." He can no longer structure it; he can no longer have it serve to make him what he wants to be. It no longer heals him. It becomes his most basic problem.

"Doing time" is the major thing one does in prison¹. The term, which at first appears to be a catch-all phrase for "serving a sentence," upon closer investigation turns out to be a profound expression of what the whole ordeal of prison is all about. All of us have been in situations where we have had to "do time", either on a job, or waiting for a friend, or savoring every minute of an all too short vacation. We are all aware of the bearing of our emotions on time's passage - fast or slow, heavy or light.

Data

The data for this study were collected during a series of tape recorded interviews conducted at a work release center² in a fairly large southwestern city.

The participants, about 35 in all, volunteered to be interviewed. Each of the men were serving out their flat time. In the majority of cases, these men were repeaters. At least half of them had spent the majority of their adult life in prison. Each of the men had spent some time at the main maximum

security institution, referred to as the "Walls," and most of them had spent the major portion of their sentences there. The offenses of the participants ranged from drug possession to multiple murder. While the assumption was that only the best behaved inmates ever got to a pre-release center, in reality, the only category of inmate that was not interviewed was someone with a severe psychological handicap. (See the appendix on Methodology for explanation of sample selection).

While the initial interviews were conducted formally at the Center, at least five of the inmates were interviewed on a continuing basis over a period of about nine months. This was possible because of the personal relationship that the interviewer was able to establish with a few of the inmates. Consequently in addition to interviewing these men, the writer was in a position to observe some of these inmates in a social setting removed from the Center, and to participate in peer group discussions. Any contacts made outside the Center were on an informal basis. The relationship of the interviewer to the institution was strictly academic. Cooperation was excellent.

The procedure of the interview was to ask a question such as "What was it like being at the Walls?" From there on, with the exception of one or two cases, no prodding was necessary except to probe certain key areas of interest. The interviews lasted from two to six hours apiece.

Most of the content of the interviews had to do with the time that the men had spent at the "Walls." There seemed to be a preoccupation with that phase of their

incarceration and discussion flowed most freely in relating that experience.

Emergence of the Variable "Doing Time"

Some key topics began to emerge from the preliminary interviews. Some of these included the political system among the inmates, hustles, personal relationships, sexual relationships, adjustment procedures, etc. One of the most significant phenomena to come out of the data was the inmates' concept of "*doing* time." Perhaps the first thing that strikes one about the phrase is the necessity to twist the language in order to get the concept across. In questioning the inmates about the terminology, it was ascertained that the use of the term connoted more than just a slang phrase. Rather, it captured one of the most problematic aspects of the inmates' lives³.

Doing Time; What is it?

The Problematic Aspect of Time

This paper will analyze the process of "doing time." It makes the basic assertion that time becomes problematic under certain conditions. While these conditions are found in a variety of situations⁴, they are epitomized in the prison setting. Under these conditions, the perception and experience of time undergoes a change. These are stages to the "doing time" process: first of all, there are periods at the beginning and the end of the prison term during which the "doing of time" is experienced in different ways. Secondly, there are conditions which aggravate "doing time," some of which are temporary and some of which "normalize" it to one degree or another. This altered experience of time has specific behavioral and attitudinal consequences which help to account for

modes of accommodation of inmates, both psychological and social.

The Subjective Experience of “Doing Time”

Heightened Awareness.

The most obvious experiential aspect of the process of "doing time" is that the inmate becomes intensely aware of it for perhaps the first time in his life. Several of the inmates made the remark that up until the time they went to prison, they had tended to live a day at a time. This sudden confrontation with their sentence that they usually experienced upon entrance into the prison, gave them a perspective about time that had been missing until this point. They suddenly became aware of their age, of how much of their lives they considered wasted.

Preoccupation with Time.

The inmates described a total preoccupation with the thought of time. This preoccupation takes several forms. First there is a sense in which one is aware of each moment, of having to live intensely aware of oneself with no possibility of distraction. Secondly, this awareness can take the form of the perception of time is dragging by slowly.

One week in that place can make a month go by. This is the sheer monotony of the experience. Thirdly, there is the preoccupation with one's sentence. At some point, each man had to come to grips with the length of time he knew he had to spend there. Each man seemed to be able to do his time by making up his mind to do "that much time."⁵ A distinction must be made with the men who were doing life sentences. These men did not attempt to do a given amount of time. They took the attitude of not knowing how much

time they had to do. To admit that one was going to spend the rest of his life there, would be to give up hope. So they set their sites on a parole date.

"Worrying".

The actual "doing of time" was often described by the inmates as "worrying." The term seems to describe to process as well as suggest an explanation as to why the language must be twisted in order to describe what one "does" in prison. "Worrying" is a number of things: it is the tension brought about by the fretting over the time that the inmate has to do; it is the way in which time is done when one has not "adjusted" to the institution. Those who have not found a "system" by which to escape the tediousness of their time, or those for whom their "system" has ceased to be an effective escape for any reason, are said to do "hard time" and "worry" over their time. There are certain stages involved in "doing time" during which there is more intense "worrying." These will be discussed at length later.

Another aspect of "worrying" has to do with the way that prison ages a man. With two exceptions, the participants all looked at least five or six years older than their chronological age. All of them acted older than they looked. In being asked about this, they responded that their "time" had aged them, not in the sense of the years that age us all, so much as the "doing" of it, the "worrying" about it, the being constantly aware of it.

The Stages of “Doing Time”

The process of "doing time" has several discernable stages. The first is the adjustment period. Once the inmate gets

through this initial difficult time, he has periods of "escape" during which he is able to avoid the thought of time. There can be more or less temporary breakdowns in the inmate's "escape system" by some crisis or by certain aggravating conditions within the prison. This is usually true of the days just previous to his release.

The Adjustment Period.

A significant number of men could point to the occasion when they were first confronted with the problem of their time. For most of them, there was a juncture on the receiving cell⁶ at which the burden of the years that they faced, simply overwhelmed them. The long sentence ahead of them became almost palpable. Following this confrontation came the realization that the inmate was either going to have to devise a way to "do this time," or else go insane. Several of the men described people who had "gone crazy" on the receiving cell because they let their time get to them. The men described their own recognition of the fact that they too could "go crazy."

Deciding to "do it" meant, first that they could do "this much" and no more.⁷ Perhaps as a consequence of being able to do only so much, each man, once he could see daylight ahead of him, kept a calendar. Some could tell you how many hours they had left.

Secondly, "doing their time" meant that they had to find a "system." That's what they call "jelling." "But guys doing easy time, they jelling, they adjusted. They got a system." Nearly everyone agreed that the first year or so was the most difficult. There are so many things to get used to. Also, it took time to find the most effective way to blank the

time out of one's mind.

The Period of Escape.

There was a large number of men who, when they were first questioned, passed off the prison experience as trivial and not particularly difficult. This was a typical response. It could be partially result of the attempt of the inmate to never let the institution know when they were bothering him. However, most of the men achieved a real conquest over their time temporarily, and learned to effectively escape the problems that it caused. In a later section, we shall consider some of the conditions that contributed toward an alleviation of the difficulty. Nonetheless, each inmate, before the end of the interview, also related experiences of doing really "hard time." While many of the men described to others who continually did "hard time," no one ever admitted to doing it all the time. There were some who seemed to find it harder to adjust than others.

"Hard time" seemed to be caused by certain aggravating conditions in the prison, which will be covered in detail later. It also recurred periodically when one's resistance had worn down.

Period Previous to Release.

The period just previous to release can be both easier and harder at the same time for the same man. The knowledge that his days are numbered eases a great deal of the pressure on the other hand, the anticipation of how he is going to cope, of whether his family will be there waiting for him, etc., makes the period a stressful one. The inmate who is about to be released is very conscious of tempo. Once again, he seems to live

through each deliberate moment. With the end in sight, the slow passage of time is aggravating in a different way. Before it dragged because there was so much of it. He tried to escape the thought of it because there was so much ahead of him. Prior to release, however, it drags in a new way. There is so little left to do, but still each minute of time must be done. Often there is such anxiety that escaping the thought of it is impossible.

Sufficient Objective Conditions Which Give Rise to “Doing Time”

There are certain conditions which, when found together, almost invariably result in time's becoming problematic. While these conditions are "writ large" in a prison, they are found in varying degrees, with varying manifestations in other settings. These conditions are: first, incarceration, by which is meant, (1) having a given duration of time in the situation, and (2) being physically confined. Second, there is the situation of having an abundance of time. Third, there is the lack of meaningful activity. And fourth, there is the lack of proprietorship over one's time, that is, the loss of personal autonomy. Each of these shall be considered in turn.

Incarceration.

There are two elements of the prison situation which seem to contribute the most to the fact that time becomes problematic. The first is that of the sentence, or the given duration that the inmate knows he faces, as has been mentioned above. Suffice it to say here, that the fact that the inmate knows he faces a specified amount of time in this situation, plays a significant part in his attitude toward time, both in making it an encumbrance, and in how he will eventually

face up to it. The sentence makes him feel trapped.

The second element is that of physical confinement. For the greater part of each day, the men are confined to a cell approximately 6' by 8'. In most cases, there are two men to a cell. Obviously, this limited space, shared by two people, greatly increases the mens' problem of having so much time and the probability of it getting on their nerves. Being confined to the prison grounds has like effects. In both cases, their options for distraction are greatly circumscribed.

The Abundance of Time.

The abundance of time referred to here is the actual amount of time that the inmate finds that he has on his hands each day, and in total. This is distinct from the subjective awareness of the slowness with which life passes for him.

In addition to feeling trapped by a sentence he cannot control; the inmate is also faced with having this time on his hands. Not only does he have many months and years of time facing him, he also has approximately fifteen hours of each day to spend with one other man in 48 square feet of concrete cell. The inmates are usually locked at 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. each evening. From then until around 7:00 a.m. the next morning, their hours are their own to fill the best they can⁸. In the next two sections, we shall consider the problems of structuring which this entails.

Lack of Meaningful Activity.

Finding something meaningful or even distracting to do in a small cell with another man is difficult enough. Added to this is the fact that even when the men are on their assignments or on the yard, there is little to

do. The constant attempt to find a distraction becomes a vicious circle. Even the education courses, training courses, etc., are participated in not because they are worthwhile and fulfilling. Rather, they are a filler for the intrinsic uselessness the time spent in prison.

Lack of proprietorship.

So far, we have made mention of the problems of the actual abundance of time that the inmate has at his disposal, and of the perceptual correlate of that abundance, that it goes by slowly. Rather it is the fact that its abundance and its slowness are not at the disposal of the inmate that causes the real problem. He is not the proprietor of his life. As was mentioned above, the conditions of incarceration are a difficulty for him. But even more basically than that, he is not the proprietor of his time, because at the very most, the institution says to him, "Here, you can have your moment, but you can do with it only what I will allow you to do." The inmate has an abundance of time which is simultaneously given to him and taken away. It is because he loses the prerogative of structuring this life that time becomes an all consuming preoccupation.

The dilemma here is not that the inmate has no choices to make over how he will spend his hours. Rather, it is that the institution has full discretion over the degree to which he can structure it. The discretion that the institution uses is totally haphazard. Thus, the inmates are always laboring in a state of ambiguity. They become frustrated by the sameness of each day, the presence of "dead time." But over and over, it was mentioned that they had learned never to

count on anything that was anticipated to provide a break in the routine.

There was no consensus on how much freedom a man had in making any choices about his immediate or remote future. Some men thought that anyone could get into an educational or training program simply by requesting it. Others thought that no matter how hard they tried, they had no say so about their future.

Not only were the men restricted in regard to their personal autonomy in planning their lives, but the policies of the institution seem to be inconsistent. Assignment to medium or minimum security institutions is made haphazardly or else with the aid of political maneuvering. Parole policies change with no warning.⁹ Parole plans are made without the consultation of the prospective parolee¹⁰. In short, planning of any sort is discouraged by a variety of institutional necessities and institutional inconsistencies. The inmate's time is simultaneously given to him and taken away.

Conditions Which Aggravate the Conditions of "Doing Time"

We have mentioned already those conditions which seem to necessarily result in causing time to become a problem. We shall now turn our attention to those conditions which aggravate the situation of the inmate and cause him to do "hard time."

Inability to Adjust.

The first such condition is that of adjustment¹¹. We have already mentioned the difficulty that the new inmate has. But even allowing for this, there seem to be some inmates that have more difficulty in finding a way with which to cope with incarceration

than others¹². They find it difficult to find a way to fill their time which does not seem absurd to them, or which absorbs their interest and attention. When asked about their observations of other inmates who seem to have this problem, there were no proposed solutions forthcoming.

Relationships Outside the Prison.

An area that has great potential for making the time easy or hard is that of personal relationships. The degree to which this is a factor depends on the commitment that the inmate retains to those of the outside. For some of the men, a vital factor in their making it through the long months and years depends on the letters and visits of their wives or girlfriends, and other members of their families¹³. Mothers seemed to hold an especially important part. By the same token, the fact that they were separated from loved ones, unable to help them, and causing them concern, was one of the greatest causes of "worrying." A good indication of the importance of outside support is the impact of mail time. This is, perhaps, the most traumatic time of the day¹⁴.

It is also very common for the inmate to break off all contact with family and friends when he goes to prison. The reason for this would seem to be that the disappointment of not receiving letters and visits is greater than not expecting them in the first place. Even among those who did not break off contact with their friends and families, many found their short and periodic visits more difficult to handle than no visits at all¹⁵.

Despite the variety of degree of commitment that the men indicated, the one

subject upon which there was unanimous agreement was that a man's relationship with his wife or girlfriend was the greatest single cause of worry. In the opinion of the respondents, the most crucial situation a man could face was the defection of his wife or "girl." It was probably also the most common. In every case where a man had kept contact with this person, he made it clear to the interviewer that it was not sexual fidelity that he expected, but that she not "get tight" with anyone else¹⁶.

Relationships Within the Prison.

An important factor in how a man's time is done is his ability to handle relationships within the prison. Does he choose his companions wisely minding his own business, etc.?

A feeling of tension caused by the possibility of controversy with another inmate seems to be a universal experience among the participants. This tension seems to be tangible. It keeps the inmates constantly on the alert, limiting their ability to concentrate on anything else totally. It also seems to prevent them from being completely relaxed at any time. The degree of tension depends a good deal on the inmates' abilities to handle the pressures that surround them along with their "political contacts" within the prison power structure. Probably since the reputation of being "good people"¹⁷ is top priority among survival skills, the respondents all presented themselves to the interviewer as people who minded their own business. This was in fact not the case¹⁸.

The other important factor in this regard is a man's being able to find the person with whom he can "rap." However, having a

true friendship was all but unheard of among the inmates¹⁹. There was nearly universal agreement that in order to do one's time, it was necessary to have somebody, at least for when the going got rough. There were some for whom companions were the most important means of psychological survival. There were others who tried to limit a really intimate relationship for times of crisis. But there were none who thought that another human being could be trusted totally.

Several of the inmates took great personal pride in the fact that they had helped someone over his worst time. There were several instances of men relating "sweating it out" over someone who had just received word about a girlfriend or wife who was breaking off a relationship, and whom they were trying to talk into not trying to escape, literally. In the section on "adjustment strategies" we shall consider the function of these relationships in more detail.

Lack of Privacy.

The amount of privacy that a man desires and is able to have, has a bearing on how his time is spent and therefore, how "easy" it is. For many of the inmates, companionship is vital to their "system" of adjusting. But there are those who are more introverted and reflective, who must find a way of creating solitude in a cage. Time is easiest to handle when a person can handle it in his own way. In constant company of others, around whom the inmate may or may not feel comfortable, it is difficult to do the things that may alleviate the meaninglessness and frustration of his life.

This lack of privacy may result in a man's not adopting certain "systems" by

which to while away his time. On the other hand, it becomes a necessity for him to create privacy which is strictly psychological, since physical privacy is no longer possible. What is more likely is that he will do things in the presence of his cellmate about which he nonetheless continues to feel uncomfortable. A man's bunk is sacred ground in which he may not be disturbed. It is the only refuge he has for writing poetry, for dreaming, for sexual release (either masturbation or homosexuality)²⁰.

Loss of Hope.

The hope of parole was extremely important among those men doing life or very long sentences. Some of these men said that they succeeded in not thinking about their time until it became reasonable for them to hope for parole. Refusal for the first few times before the parole board was something that the men seemed to expect. However, this single political decision regarding no paroles for those accused of crimes of violence, was used again and again as an example of what can happen to make a man lose hope. Hoping for a parole date was what made their time endurable. Without that hope, they had nothing to cling to. For some of these men, any hope of parole seemed extremely remote from the interviewer's point of view. Nevertheless, it was the only thing that kept them going.

Conditions Which Alleviate "Doing Time"

There seem to be certain conditions of incarceration which significantly alleviate the experience of "doing time." Some of the conditions are only temporary. Others seem to "normalize" the situation on a more or less temporary basis.

Temporary Conditions.

One of these instances occurs when the inmate's system is working and affords him some distraction from his condition. In this sense, all "systems" are designed with alleviation in mind.

A second circumstance occurs when the inmate has "schemed" to significantly "beat the Man." A good example of this is the inmate who hustles in a good supply of marijuana or some drug. (This is particularly satisfying when it is done without the assistance of the guards and administration, or better yet, when it is with their unknowing assistance). Any time an inmate can get the administration to do things his way without their being aware of it, his time has become a little easier. This becomes a way of life since most of the inmates consider themselves a good deal smarter than the guards. It would appear that this sort of "scheming" is done with a good deal of success.

The third situation of temporary alleviation occurs when a man becomes really involved and interested, either in his job or in his hustle, or in whatever means of escape he has concocted for himself. Thus in some instances, the inmate sees what he is involved in, not as escape, but as something which was really fulfilling to him. This is infrequent and lasts such a brief time as to be insignificant over the long run.

Normalizing Conditions.

There are some instances in which the conditions of the prison approach a sort of subjective normality for the inmate. There are three situations in which this seems to be the case. The first is when a man is "institutionalized." According to the inmates,

a man in prison becomes "institutionalized" when he is "happy" in the prison. Such a person is said to belong more inside the prison than on the outside. He is no longer able to cope with it. He comes back to the prison where he will be taken care of. "Institutionalization" is considered to be a permanent and irreversible state.

The second normalizing factor or condition is the instance in which the inmate finds that the prison is a refuge for him. Where the designation "institutionalization" is seen as a permanent state, the idea of prison being a refuge is not. It can be that the prison is a place to escape from things that trouble him on the outside. The prison provides a respite for him. There is also the possibility that the person can philosophically regard the prison as a temporary refuge.

The third condition is the situation in which a man is allowed some autonomy and/or recognition. Even being called by his name can relieve the tediousness of the prison existence for the inmate. There are other forms of autonomy foreign to the prison life style, most of which come about in classes and on some jobs, which are supervised by non-prison personnel, such as teachers, chaplains, etc.

Effects of the "Doing Time" Experience: Attitudes and Behavior

The "doing time" experience has very definite consequences in the formulation of an inmate's attitudes and values. Likewise, the ways by which the men deal with their time is very definitely an organizing factor in the day to day life of a prison. Let us briefly suggest how this is so, and then look closely at how "doing time" effects attitudes and



behavior. "Doing time" has a great influence on the interpersonal relationships that a man engages in both during his incarceration as well as after his release. It affects his attitudes toward society. The recognition of the need to escape one's time results in the men's preying on one another's vulnerability in this regard, and this way, is instrumental in setting the power structure among the inmates. Let us look at that these attitudinal and behavioral effects are so we can see this more clearly.

Attitudinal Consequences

Introspection.

An important outcome of the inmate's experience of time is that, under the pressures of the situation, his mind becomes a kind of incubator. All of the men interviewed spent a lot of time in reflection²¹. To each respondent, this was a major element of the experience. This type of thinking, even when it hurts, is to be distinguished from a "system," which one uses deliberately to avoid "worrying."

A significant part of this reflection consists in analyzing all the reasons why the inmates had ended up in prison in the first place. They probe into their own personalities, their relationships with their families, and other situations that they had been in, trying to come up with the explanation of why they ended up the way they did. In most instances they can resolve that they are no longer going to be the kind of person that they had been up to this point. These resolutions do not necessarily, or even mostly have to do with not returning to prison. Rather they center around how the inmate is going to handle his personal relationships, how he is going to live more according to his principles. An insight results in the inmate's seeing that his

relationship to the law was tantamount to playing "cops and robbers," and that this was childish. He therefore would resolve to stop playing the game. Some of the inmates said that they thought it was harder to do time as they got older. Therefore, the time had come to stop flirting with the possibility of coming back to prison.²²

This kind of reflection seemed to be the only thing that the inmates see as positive in their prison experience. They had come to know themselves better, something they would not have taken the time to do on the outside.

As important as the concept of "thinking" is the concept of "not thinking." The very purpose of having a "system" in fact, was to "not think." Just as there are men whose pattern it was to live in the past, there are those who do their best to avoid any thought of it. There was too much pain involved in not being a part of the things that they cherished. So too, there are those who find it too painful to look ahead. Even though hope was absolutely essential, most of the men had learned that it was far better to hope for nothing and be surprised than to hope for too much and be disappointed.

Consciousness of the Value of Time.

The lack of proprietorship over his time, his life as it were, does two things to the inmates' concept of time. It serves to intensify his awareness of its value. Second, it makes him conscious that his time is being wasted²³.

As long as the inmate was on the street, free to distract himself, this awareness of time's value was missing. In the joint, every moment that hangs heavy on his hands is being taken from him. The inmate feels



robbed of this part of his life. A natural consequence of this is that his resentment of the institution grows. While most of the inmates readily accepted the blame for their predicament, there was still some strong outrage at the prison for depriving them of their time, as well as other aspects of the prison experience²⁴.

Behavioral Consequences Adjustment Strategies Escapes and Systems

Now that we have considered the changes in attitude and thinking that the inmate goes through in prison, we must turn our attention to those things he does which organize his days. It is important that the inmate find "things to do" which will occupy his time and keep him busy.

There are certain things which characterize the "escapes" and "systems" of the men which are fairly consistent. In the first place, it is unanimously agreed that every person must do his own time. This means that each one will have his own style of dealing with the monotony. There is very little that anyone can do, (or will dare do) to ease the "hard time" of another. There are instances, however, where one's running mate will make this effort. There are also instances where a man will attempt to console someone with whom he does not "run". Generally though, this situation is fraught with dangers. The consensus is that each man must do his own time.

Another characteristic is that the inmates feel constantly compelled to make their activities count for something so that the time is not totally wasted. Therefore, they try to find "escapes" that are physically or mentally advantageous.

Third, the "system" must be as absorbing as possible. It must leave little time for thought and be thoroughly distracting.

We shall now turn our attention to what some of these "systems" are.

Escapes and Systems.

A system or escape is that pattern of activity in which an inmate engages for the express purpose of blanking out the consciousness of time. It is the observation of the inmates that a good many of the "things to do" participated in by the prison population, are a part of a person's system, his attempts to escape from and handle time, more effectively. This in no way detracts from the fact that a very important part of the motivation behind certain types of behavior arises from other sources. Unquestionably, many of these activities are based on considerations of economy, prison politics, mores, fear, sex, or just plain survival. Nonetheless, they are also "things to do." They take up time, they help it pass, they are an attempt to give meaning to the time spent in prison, and so they become part of a man's system.

Thinking.

There are some types of thinking that are systems. A good example of this is a case of a man attempting to totally reconstruct the past in his memory. This man spent one year in solitary confinement. During this time he was able to recollect in detail certain past experiences. He perfected this system to the point that he could reconstruct the thoughts that he had while sitting on the deck of his boat several years earlier. The past is for many the time when they were happy. They try to spend as much time there as possible,

whether in their childhood or just reviewing some of the good times that they had on the street.

Another favorite topic of thought is the future. The inmate plans in detail what he's going to do when he is released. He plans how he is going to compensate for this "lost time," how he is going to be a better person, or for that matter, a better burglar.

The inmates also spend time thinking about the general condition of the world, or of the meaning of life. Some men go deeply into the questions of religion and philosophy. (This type of thinking is not limited to those who are more educated or seemingly more intelligent).

"Thinking" is a way of transporting oneself mentally out of the prison, "always wishing you were someplace else, basically daydreaming all the time."

Jobs.

The fact that there is a need for men to create their own systems for helping time to pass arises partially from the fact that the institution, provides very little to keep them busy. Therefore, one of the things to do is to drag out one's job as long as possible. While the men are on their jobs for eight hours, they are actually busy only a fraction of that period.

Hustles.

Besides his job, almost all inmates have a "hustle," moonlighting, as it were. Hustles are primarily economic. There are some that are purely so, but most of them are "things to do" as well. At the upper end of the scale of hustles are gambling and money lending. At the lower end are those that are subservient, such as shining shoes. To one extent or another, each hustle becomes a

man's thing to do as well as something which earns him money.

Drugs and Alcohol.

Probably the most common of all the methods of escape are drugs and alcohol drugs of course, being number one. Almost the first thing the inmates look for when they arrive at the prison is a drug contact. Alcoholic beverages too are very common. Many inmates stay high every day for months at a time.

Sleep.

Very much related to the drug escape is that of sleep. To some extent, the purpose of finding drugs is to sleep. However, with or without drugs, sleep is a reputable system of its own. Those inmates who chose sleep as their system of escape said that they were gradually able to train themselves to sleep for eighteen to twenty hours a day, especially on the receiving cell or in isolation. But for those who do not go in for it in such a big way, sleep is still a very important means of escape. In the beginning, it literally provides the wings by which to leave the prison because all one's dreams are outside the walls. This means, however, comes to a very definitive halt, because there is a day on which one's dreams cease to be about the outside.

Homosexuality.

Homosexuality is one of the biggest problems that incarceration offers to an inmate. No inmate that was interviewed admitted to participation in such activity. However, from their discussion of the subject, it is clearly their opinion that such activity is very much a way of "doing time," an alleviation of the loneliness, boredom and tension.

Music.

For those who can afford to have stereos in their cells, listening to music becomes a great escape. Some of the men participated in music groups, spending a great deal of time practicing.

TV.

Television is one of the most important diversions that there is. Men would go to great lengths to obtain a set. Consequently, TV repair was a much sought after skill.

Handiwork.

For those who are inclined that way, art becomes the way out. Painting, drawing, leather work, are all favorites. Portrait artists are in great demand to do pen and ink portraits from photographs the inmates have.

Sports and Exercise.

Sports and physical development are priorities among many of the inmates. Many of them felt it was a release of tension. For some of them, there was a marked preoccupation with their bodies. One man spoke of the different periods of his incarceration, measuring them in terms of baseball season, football season, etc. For many, every moment of free time was spent in the gymnasium.

Self Education.

As was mentioned earlier, the inmates felt that they were being robbed of their time, and so felt a compulsion to make their time as productive as was within their power. One of the forms that this urge took was the discussion of how to do a better job of robbing a bank, of cheating at cards, of how to run a con game on the streets. And so, this type of education plays its part in "doing

time."

There were, of course, other modes of education. Much time was spent in reading. Many of the men read as many as two or three books a day. To an extent, this meant paperback novels, but for many, the reading was much heavier than that. Although formal educational programs were almost nonexistent at this institution, several of the men used this opportunity to educate themselves. Some did a good deal of writing, from poetry to philosophy and politics.

Rapping.

Probably the most common system of "doing time" is rapping. It is perhaps more complex than it would appear. First of all, sheer survival depends on not rapping to the wrong person. Second, rapping is selective. Everything cannot be discussed with everyone. Obviously, rapping would be most fruitful if one could find the "significant other" with whom to rap. This is a big problem because true friendship is very difficult. Of course, everyone has those people to whom he feels he can talk. Nevertheless, it is an extremely rare person who feels that there is anyone to whom he can speak without reservation. Such friendship is too fraught with dangers. So, what must be one of the greatest needs for the men in order to do their time is, in many cases, impossible to fulfill.

In the end rapping itself turns against the inmate and turns his time to "hard time." Still, there are those who made rapping their major system, spending hours and hours at it. With rapping, as with thinking, there are things that you talk about and things that you don't. For some, the first thing they want to

hear from someone new is what is going on on the outside. For others, this is a subject to be avoided. Some spend hours recalling earlier, more pleasant times. Others shun all reference to the things that they left. There are two reasons for this. One is that old memories are painful. The other perhaps more important reason, is that it is not safe for other inmates to "know your jacket," (past) lest they find some way to hold the information against you.

Then there is "joking your time off." People do not basically laugh very often in prison. There is nothing to laugh about. Laughing is a good way to do your time.

Summary.

This paper has shown that the conditions of incarceration have a profound effect on the inmate's relation to time. As a consequence of this, he experiences time and its value in a new and often unique way. In order to cope with this onus, he adopts certain attitudinal stances. His value system is acutely modified. His relationship to loved ones, to the establishment and to himself is altered, mostly for the worse.

Prisons have been called the microcosms of society. In many ways, a prison produces conditions in such an unadulterated state that are so intense, they are thought to be unique to prisons. They are not. In the next section, we shall consider some other situations which share the conditions which produce "doing time" and suggest ways in which they share the experience.

"Doing Time" in Other Settings

The implication of this study of "doing time" are significant in other areas of

society. The situation of the prison (that particular population and setting) explains one variation of "doing time." In order to develop this concept to a more sophisticated level it would be necessary to examine other contexts which the researcher sees as having similar conditions. There are at least two characteristics of discovery method of grounded theory that indicate the value of making such an investigation.

First, the concepts or core variables with which grounded theory deals are "trans-situational."²⁵ That is, they are applicable to contexts other than the substantive area which was the focus of the study. In this paper, the concepts as well as many of their properties are generic, and can be generalized to other settings.

Second, the concepts, drawn as they are from the reality of the respondents, usually strike a familiar chord in the experience of the reader even though he is a layperson in the substantive area or in the field of sociology. It is important therefore, to examine the concept of "doing time" in this light. It is believed that a scrutiny of the experience will produce an "aha" reaction in most who read it. Let us examine this idea. In what other contexts do people have a heightened awareness of time, become preoccupied with it, and become tense as a result of it?

The word "incarceration" could perhaps put one off, could limit the experience to the prison environment. But does it? In this society which is so highly mobile, does not the loss of freedom of movement suggest a type of incarceration? For the elderly person who is confirmed

either by infirmity or because he can no longer drive, physical confinement can be a definite reality. Although the reasons for his confinement may alter drastically from that of a prison inmate, the reality of his experience is no less vivid. For him, time is something of which he is acutely aware and with which he is preoccupied. It is a source of tension to him.

The sentence which the elderly person serves is an indefinite one and one which is terminal. Chances are his circumstance will not alter sufficiently to remove his condition of incarceration.

The situation of military servicemen is even more similar to that of a prison inmate. His physical environment is definitely circumscribed by an authority, to a barracks, for example; or a ship or boot camp or whatever. His sentence is normally pretty well determined. And whatever it is, it is most likely too long. He probably has every day counted until his hitch is up.

Having an abundance of time is likewise common to the elderly and the serviceman as well as to many others. Anyone who has waited hours at an air terminal for a plane to be repaired knows the problem of having too much time on his hands.

The condition that complicates the amount of time, of course, is that of having nothing valuable or interesting to do. These conditions, taken together, serve to make the hours drag slowly. One has only to think of the common reference to the bored employee who is termed a clock watcher. Or again, one can call to mind the teacher who covered the face of the classroom clock with the sign,

"Time will pass, will you?" and indeed, the time does pass, with agonizing slowness for the inactive elderly, the prison inmate, the person waiting in a hospital waiting room, the bored student, the lonely soldier.

The final condition that intensifies the experience of "doing time" is that of not having control over how one's time will be spent. The person stranded at the airport thinks, "If only I had brought my book". The elderly person would perhaps rather be working, the student to be playing, the inmate and the soldier to be training for a job they want. None of these people has control over how they will spend their "sentence." Some, it must be recognized, have more control than others. But no one of them would be doing what he is doing were the decision his.

In each instance in which a person does time, he also finds a way to deal with it. Just as the prison inmate devises systems, so do the elderly, students, servicemen, bored employees and all those who wait for anything.

The systems, of course, differ with the circumstances. Servicemen's systems are fairly close to the prison inmate - gambling, drugs, sleep, education, sex, etc.

Other groups too, participate in some of these same activities. Retired people often retire to games - gold, poker, bridge, fishing and so forth. It is likewise reported that rates of alcoholism go up with retirement²⁶.

There are other preoccupations for the elderly - their plants, their pets, their health. Things seem to need repair more often. Or at least there is some need to call the repairman more often. Could it be for company?

Bored students have innumerable

ways of distracting themselves. They bring a toy to school, or a comic book or a transistor radio with an earphone. Or perhaps they just annoy their fellow student. And on and on the list goes for bored housewives, hospital patients, asylum inmates, and so forth.

Whoever the people, wherever they are, if they live in the right circumstances in our society, they "do time". In a prison, as well as in other contexts where conditions are similar, time becomes problematic. Tempo is exaggerated. The person involved becomes preoccupied with time. He becomes anxious about it. The conditions are right when a person is confined to a limited space for a specific time. This time must be abundant and filled with little that is worthwhile and/or interesting. Finally, the person must have few options for how to fill the time.

Given these circumstances which must generally be present together, certain consequences follow. The time is seen as having greater potential in being spent another way. Certain strategies are employed to get through.

Time no longer passes. It must be *done*. Instead of being the atmosphere in which life is lived, it becomes tangible, something to be endured. Far from being that which heals, which allows growth, time becomes a problem, one which we must twist the language to express. That is "doing time."

Methodology

This paper was developed using the techniques of "grounded theory," as described by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967).

The purpose of grounded theory is to

provide a framework by which theory can be scientifically and methodologically generated. Whereas much research is often more concerned with theory verification, grounded theory is concerned with insuring that the theory which is being verified has been methodologically and meticulously developed. Consequently, it cannot be subject to the criteria of verification research. Its purpose is different; its procedures are different; its sampling is different; its results are different.

As in all good sociological analysis, grounded theory emphasizes the development of inferences that are lucid, that explain the most variation in behavior, that are rich in conceptual detail, that have a great scope of applicability and that are useful in predicting human behavior. But over and above these criteria for good theory, this particular method puts great stress on the generation of inferences that are grounded in data. What then is the process of this development?

First of all, grounded theory proceeds from the assumption that "theory is process". It is an inductive method arriving at hypotheses. This process begins with the collection of raw data. This data is then qualitatively coded as a first step towards developing properties of the theory. From the preliminary coding, the major variables emerge, instigating further questions. Therefore, new data must be collected which is again coded.

Many substantive questions derived from previous data analysis are also addressed. If the answers are not found in the data, rather data collection is indicated. It is

this consistent return to the data at each stage of development that validates the theory. The theory matures as elements of the data are integrated into the whole and the grounded network of relationships is established.

This "theory in process" procedure is called "theoretical sampling" by Glaser and Strauss:

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory where the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal. The initial decisions for theoretical collection of data are based only on a general sociological perspective and on a general subject or problem area (such as how confidence men handle prospective marks or how policemen act toward Negroes or what happens to students in medical school that turns them into doctors). The initial decisions are not based on a preconceived theoretical framework (1967:pg 45).

A further word needs to be said about theoretical sampling as it differs from

representative sampling. The purpose of theoretical sampling is to discover the categories of the phenomenon which is being studied and their interrelationships, so as to generate a theory. The scope of such sampling is determined by what is needed in order to enrich the theory, to discover more variation of data and different levels of relationships. This is opposed to representative sampling, the purpose of which is to gather accurate data on a representative sampling group of people. The group can then be taken to typify a larger group for the purpose of verifying the extent to which the properties of a theory pertain to a given population.

In grounded theory, a sample becomes "saturated" when no further categories or properties emerge from the data. When saturation occurs, there is no reason for further sampling, as the sampling task has been completed (i.e. the generation of theoretical categories). In representative sampling, on the other hand, the researcher continues to explore his sample no matter how many times his data is reiterated. The reason for this is that his purpose is to verify a theory using a representative group of people with the least amount of error possible.

References

1. "Doing time " is used by many writers, and indeed by inmates, as a synonym for serving a sentence. In *The Felon* (1970), John Irwin classifies "doing time" as a "prison adaptive mode" which involves: (1) avoiding trouble, (2) finding activities to occupy time, (3) securing luxuries, (4) forming friendships, and (5) doing what is necessary to get out as soon as possible (pp. 66-67).
2. The work release center is a minimum security institution to which men are sent 60 to 90 days prior to their release. There they are given outside employment so that they will have some money when they are released. The men must return to the center at night. After they have been there a certain period of time, they are allowed first a twelve hour pass and then two twelve hour passes. This information was given by the inmates and verified by the staff.
3. Goffman notes that harshness alone does not account for the quality of life generated by an institution such as a prison: " ...rather, we must look to the social disconnections caused by entrance" (in Cressey: 1961, p. 66).
4. Other situations where the conditions for "doing time" are present will be discussed in the last section of this paper.
5. The state in which this research was conducted does not make use of the indeterminate sentence for adult offenders. John Irwin has some interesting things to say about the difficulties that the indeterminate sentence imposes on inmates in the California system (1970).
6. The receiving cell is located at the main institution. It is an isolation area with the ostensive purpose of separating men in case they have communicable diseases. Oddly enough, they nonetheless, eat at the main dining area. Otherwise, they are completely isolated, although there may be two persons to a cell. They stay there until their FBI rap sheet arrive and they are classified.
7. No matter how much or how little a man had to do, it seemed intolerable to him. It seemed that it would be impossible to do more. Some of the lifers recalled how they had tried to help men doing two years who were having a hard time.
8. There were also periods during the day when they were out in the yard. In this situation also, there was often little to do.
9. According to statute, a man could appear before the parole board at any time, at the discretion of the board members. After one third of the sentence had been served, their appearance before the board was mandatory. During one administration however, certain classes of offenders were not allowed a parole.
10. A parole plan includes a job, a place to live, and a parole advisor. Often, these plans were arranged by families, friends, or agencies, with little or no communication with prospective parolee.

11. Most of the inmates agreed that it was necessary to make some accommodation to prison life so as to keep some kind of peace with oneself. However, to give in any way to the institution, or to become satisfied with prison life, was considered anathema.
12. Since none of the respondents ever admitted to being one of 'those who were not able to adjust, one wonders whether or not it is a matter of pride to be able to handle prison life. There seem to be definite indications that one reason that no one admits that they do continual "hard time" is that such an admission would be giving in to the institution.
13. The location of the prison has important implications for the degree of contact that a man can keep with the outside. In this particular case, the prison is located at least one hundred miles from any metropolitan area of the state. For the families of many of the men, visiting there meant a long ride on a bus which arrived at night, requiring an overnight stay. Since many of the families were in the room at the same time, hearing was difficult and privacy impossible. Until recently, even letters were limited to one a day, and only from a very circumscribed correspondence list. All these factors have a very damping effect on any possible alleviation of lonely hours that contact with loved ones could afford.
14. Mail time is also traumatic in other institutional settings where residents are separated for long periods from loved ones. The author verified this specifically in regard to convents and military bootcamps. In all three settings, the whole day is climaxed by mail time. The day's success or failure depends on getting a letter or not.
15. Some of the inmates who did not have, or did not choose to have, visitors of their own, did visit with families of the friends. These visits did not take place at the maximum security institution, however. Visiting with other inmates' families alleviated the monotony of the daily routing. At the same time, it did not entail the emotional upheaval that visiting with one's own loved ones did.
16. It was not uncommon for inmates to mention that after having had one or two bad experiences with their wife or girlfriend, that they had learned not to develop deep and meaningful relationships. At least, they did not develop permanent ones. From now on, intimacy was expendable.
17. Being "good people" is defined exclusively as never snitching anyone for any reason. This included hated police, as well as other inmates. Good people could be trusted never to incriminate anyone else. The consequences of this ethic could entail an added prison sentence or time in isolation.
18. The activities of some of the inmates indicated that they had to be snitches. Yet, under no circumstances would they admit that this was the obvious implication. These inmates upheld the "good people" ethic as vehemently as anyone during the interview.
19. It was nearly unanimously agreed that true friendship was inadvisable and unknown in prison. Many of the men were in prison in the first place because they had unwisely trusted a friend. But there were other reasons. If one was good friends with a person, then his enemies were yours also. By the same token, you were involving him in your affairs. Also being friends

with one person limited one's possibilities with others. The pressures of prison life could force a person to snitch on you and involve you in something that could be very dangerous. Then too, being friends with someone meant that you had to go along with them in the things they wanted to do, limiting your alternatives. On the other hand there were certain "running mates" who trusted each other completely where matters of business were concerned. They would go to any lengths to help each other out. Whether or not there was anything like affection is another question.

20. One could pay to be released from his cell or to have someone else released from their cell. Much homosexual activity was handled in this way.
21. The concept of "thinking" and "not thinking" that the writer has developed differs in important respects from Donal Clemmer's description of "reverie plus." In the first place, this type of "thinking" was not limited to those individuals with introspective personalities. Secondly, it seemed to be a direct function of the whole matter of "doing time," with its alteration of the time experience, etc., and not just something one did as a leisure time activity, although there are certain aspects of "thinking" that match Clemmer's description (Clemmer: 1940).
22. There were a significant number of men who said that if the opportunity to do something illegal again presented itself and were attractive enough, they intended to get involved again. There were others who could spout the rhetoric about being reformed because they thought it appropriate. Still others really thought that they were ready for a straight life. Subsequent information indicated that they got in trouble again after they were released. They were probably sincere at the time.
23. In this connection Goffman makes the remark: Among inmates in many total institutions, there is a strong feeling that time spent in the establishment is either wasted or destroyed or taken, from one's life; it is time that must be "done" or "marked" or "put in" or "pulled"...This time is something its doers have bracketed off as such for constant conscious consideration not quite found on the outside (1961).
24. Sykes adds an interesting point in his *Society of Captives*: Most prisoners are unable to fortify themselves in their low level of material existence by seeing it as a means to some high or worthy end. They are unable to attach any significant meaning to their need to make it more bearable, such as present pleasures foregone for pleasures in the future (Sykes: 1958; also see Goffman: 1961, p. 63).
25. In his unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stu Hadden refers to "basic social processes" as "trans-situational". The same holds for this core variable.
26. Reported in private conference in research done by the author for University of Tulsa Preretirement Planning Program.

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