

Inmates' Conceptions of Prison Sexual Assault

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Two common-sense explanations of rape that are popular in the media are the "mad rapist" image and the "normal human male" image (Douglas and Waksler, 1982:250-56). The "mad rapist" image involves the idea of violent rape by a stranger, an act whose shocking quality makes it newsworthy. Mass rapists, those who rape a number of people, receive the greatest media coverage and also seem to serve as the model for the "mad rapist" image. This image generates a multitude of protective responses and widespread fear. The "normal human male" image focuses attention on the victim as provoker or seducer and the rapist as only responding as any normal male would. In this image, the victim is seen as causing their own rape or, alternatively, the rape is seen as just punishment for seductive behavior. Both of these images of sexual assault are not only a part of common-sense ideas, but have been involved as elements in social science explanations (Clinard and Quinney, 1973).

Research on sexual assault in prison has focused primarily on attempting to explain such phenomena. For example, Brownmiller (1975:285) explains prison rape as an acting out of power roles within an all-male, authoritarian environment in which the younger, weaker inmate, usually a first offender, is forced to play the role that in the outside world is assigned to women. An extension of this explanation is made by Carroll (1974) when he states that most sexual aggression in prison is interracial, having roots in the racism of the larger society, and black domination of whites in prison leads to attributions of power to black inmates (Toch, 1977; Scacco, 1982). A competing explanation (Feld, 1977; Bowker, 1980; Scacco, 1982) suggests that sexual aggression provides a way to reconstruct the male identity. Consensual homosexual activity would raise questions about one's masculinity, and so one way male inmates can preserve a masculine, heterosexual identity is to use force while engaging in sex with another inmate.

The purpose of this paper is to shift sociological thinking about prison sexual assault by examining how images of violent rape within prison influence how first-time inmates in a maximum security prison define and respond to the prison social world. We maintain that the imagery of prison sexual assault influences the way in which inmates come to make sense of their experience and organize their life in prison. In addition, inmates' understanding of prison sexual assault, and prison life in general, changes throughout the experiential careers of first-time inmates.

Data for the study are derived principally from ten months of participant observation at a maximum security prison for men in the upper midwest of the United States. One of the authors was an inmate serving a felony sentence of one year and one day, while the other participated in the study as an outsider. Relying on traditional ethnographic data collection and analysis techniques, this approach offered us general observations of hundreds of prisoners and extensive field notes that were based on repeated, often daily, contacts with about 50 inmates, as well as on personal relationships established with a smaller number of inmates. We subsequently returned to the prison to conduct focused interviews with other prisoners; using information provided by prison officials, we were

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able to identify and interview 20 additional first-time inmates who were serving sentences of two years or less.

The perspective of this paper is informed by the concept of "the definition of the situation," which expresses the idea that social action is not simply a response to the environment but rather an active effort to define and interpret the context in which we find ourselves, assess our interests, and then select appropriate attitudes and behaviors (Thomas, 1931). Individuals make sense of their experiences by defining the situation through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969). Thus, defining any situation is a process of "reality construction" whereby human actors make their experiences of the world around them orderly and understandable (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

This paper will demonstrate how images of prison sexual assault influence first-time inmates' definitions and responses to the prison social world. It is organized in three sections. First, we briefly discuss the image that first-time inmates have of prison prior to incarceration. Second, we discuss the impact of sexual assault and resulting changes in inmates' definition of the situation. We conclude by analyzing the institutional experience and discuss implications for policy.

Prison Orientations: Images and Problems

The principal change in inmates' prison imagery is easily stated: inmates progress from a view of the prison world that is dominated by the themes of violence and uncertainty to a view that is dominated by the themes of boredom and predictability (See Schmid and Jones, forthcoming). The specific meanings that prison has to the inmate depend upon the inmate's changing orientations to the prison world. Thus, as an inmate begins his prison sentence, he is concerned with avoiding, or protecting himself from, injury, rape, or death. As the inmate progresses through his prison sentence, survival becomes a matter of enduring the unchanging, regimented routine of the prison world.

Constructing an Image of Prison

All of us have some idea of what prisons are like. This idea, or *image*, is what allows us to talk about prisons with others and supposedly is what helps to discourage members of society from violating the law. We know about prisons as part of our general cultural awareness of our own society. The images we have of prison are generally based on secondary sources of information, such as newspaper accounts, novels, television programs, and movies. From these sources, we formulate images of prisons and prisoners. The primary image presented in these accounts is that of violence.

Lacking firsthand experience in the prison world, a newly sentenced felon must construct a prison image on the basis of various secondary sources of information. If he has served time in a juvenile correctional facility, his experience there will certainly influence his view of the adult prison. Likewise, if he knows others who have served time, his imagery will be affected by the stories they tell.

Most newly sentenced felons have to rely on less direct sources of information; their knowledge of the prison world is limited to the impressions they receive from television, films, and other fictional or journalistic accounts.

Well, my view of the prison was —actually I'd never been here, personally, never been to visit anybody, so I didn't really know. All I knew was what I'd seen on TV or in the movies, you know with George Raft and those kind of guys. And. . . I knew it has probably changed since then, but there's been TV programs on how violent it was. You hear about Attica and down in the Southwest, so I was scared. I was extremely scared. I don't ever think I'd been that scared before. [INT]

While awaiting the beginning of their sentences, felons grapple with the information they receive from these various sources and try to apply it to their own situations, as they project their participation in the prison world. Because the information tends to be incomplete and conflicting, most of these men do not develop unified conceptions of the prison prior to their arrival at the institution. Even personal reports from ex-prisoners and direct experience in juvenile institutions or county jails yield, at best, only a partial and biased picture of prison life. Nonetheless, felons do *construct* an image, using various sources of information as a foundation.

The personal fears that a new inmate brings with him to prison center around his concerns for safety. Like anyone who watches television or reads a newspaper, he has seen stories about prison riots, murders, stabbings, and beatings. Like most people in our society, he believes that the prison world is a violent world; unlike most people, however, he is about to enter this world, so this general cultural image becomes greatly intensified and personalized in his own mind. He is afraid of what might happen to him in prison. He is afraid of being hurt. He is afraid of dying. And, perhaps more than anything else, he is afraid of being sexually assaulted.

Dying. Getting sex from the rear entry. Being knifed or maimed so when I get out I will get out in two pieces. Being exploited. [INT]

* * *

I was worried about being raped for the most part, that's about it. You know, I had a good friend at PORT [a community treatment program] who was raped in St. Cloud [reformatory] and he's having a lot of problems because of it. [INT].

The typical first-time inmate thus approaches his sentence with the gravest of fears for both his physical survival and sexual integrity.

Building upon their images, fears, and expectations, first-time inmates generally come to prison armed with an isolationist strategy that could be described as an extreme version of what Irwin (1970) refers to as "doing time." Elements of this strategy include firm vows to avoid all hostilities with other inmates, to keep unnecessary contacts with other inmates to a minimum, and to ignore all questionable information received from other inmates.

Eat a lot; put on weight; try to look as sloppy as I could. Be rude to people; try not to appear as a pleasant person; try to make myself appear disgusting. . . . I'd say I was going to be less sociable, that's about it. I was going to mind my own business, and have as little to do with other people as possible. [INT]

By the time his sentence actually begins, then, a first-time inmate has formulated serious personal fears, negative institutional expectations, and a rudimentary anticipatory survival strategy. But he also recognizes that his conceptualization of prison life is very incomplete, and that he has a great deal to learn about prison, especially during the initial weeks and months of his sentence.

Sexual Assault and the Prison Career

A new inmate will enter prison in an acute state of wariness, expecting that his fears will materialize at any time, and yet not really knowing what to expect. Personal observations and experiences will be used to confirm or modify definitions of the prison world.

About 9 a.m. they stripped searched us. . . . As I was being searched, one of the guards mentioned that I was pretty and said I should let my beard grow; the other guard said I didn't have to worry because of my size. [JR]

* * *

One other inmate told me that outside his cell that first night was a card table with four blacks sitting at it. [He said] "They were constantly staring at me. They would look at me, then look at each other, and start laughing. I knew what they had in mind. [FN]

Experiences such as these only heighten an inmate's fears about the possibility of sexual violence.

Although a new inmate is unable to resolve completely his uncertainty about prison life, he is gradually able to reduce it. His developing survival strategy (based on prior fears and expectations and modified by actual experience and observations) makes his uncertainty, and the accompanying apprehension, more manageable. He doesn't feel secure in prison, but he does achieve a somewhat more realistic understanding of the prison world, and he begins to believe that he might survive his sentence. He takes comfort in minor victories; a night, a week, two weeks, or a month in prison are recognized as milestones—not so much because they represent the partial completion of his sentence as because they represent periods of time that have passed *without incident*. Whenever a new inmate reflects on the fortune that his worst fears have not materialized, he feels slightly less apprehensive about his situation.

Invariably, this emerging sense of security is abruptly shattered, when one of a new inmate's prison fears does occur.

Just when you get a grip on things and start to feel somewhat comfortable, something happens to upset things—a rape. . . . There is no way that anyone is safe in this place. You really have no protection at all. The only time you are safe is after 10 p.m. lockup. I don't know any of the details and don't care to know them. It just makes me sick to think about it. [JR]

The critical incident need not, and generally does not, involve the new inmate himself; the fact that he hears about the event is sufficient to destroy his feelings of relative security. A rape represents a powerful shock event. Because such incidents were a part of the inmate's prior fears about prison life, it can be said that he *expects* them to happen, although he certainly hopes—and perhaps prays—that they will not. That he expected them to happen, of course, does not lessen their impact.

The shock value of a rape is reflected in the inmate's image of the prison world, his adaptation strategy and, to some extent, his self-definition. The immediate effect is on his conceptualization of the prison world. If a dramatic event occurs during the first few days of his sentence, it instantly validates and reinforces his prior fears about prison life. If he has managed to serve several days or weeks of his sentence without major problems, a prison rape annihilates his sense of relative security and his guarded optimism that he will be able to survive the prison ordeal. Concomitantly, it restores the intimidating, terrifying image of prison life that he brought to the prison.

The effect of a reported sexual assault is so powerful to a new inmate that a temptation often exists—a few days after the event—to “write off” the incident as an isolated occurrence, and to struggle to regain the sense of well-being that had gradually been developing. Although some inmates are successful in recapturing a feeling of security, it is again sabotaged by another dramatic event, a few days or weeks later.

I would say that after two weeks I felt really calm about being here. . . . After about the third week, there was another rape. This really shocked me. It upset this comfortable, safe world I had imagined I was living in. I realized that the first rape wasn't an isolated event. It also made me paranoid all over again. I had to reshape my whole outlook on this place. [FN]

Prison rapes have an equally powerful effect on a new inmate's adaptation strategy. Depending on how long his sentence has been incident free, his initial, extreme “do your own time” strategy will have been modified to accommodate meaningful interaction with one or a few inmates, superficial contact with a larger number of inmates, and exploration of the cellblock and prison yard. While a prison rape is not likely to nullify these modifications entirely, it will increase the prisoner's caution and apprehension when exploring new territory and fortify his resolve to avoid any persons, behaviors, or

situations that hold a potential for confrontation. Prison rapes also elicit a self-analysis of the inmate's ability to protect himself; this resolution, of course, was the central component of his anticipatory survival strategy.

In contrast to the survival strategy developed during his anticipation of the prison world, the inmate now has some direct experience in the prison world. The resolve to defend himself is no longer an abstraction; he now knows what other prisoners look like and has a better understanding of what self-defense in prison means. On the other hand, this component of his survival strategy can receive group support through the few contacts that he has made with other prisoners, as illustrated by these excerpts from a prison conversation:

If some guys came into my cell with a knife and say, "Put out or get stuck," I don't know what I would do. It is a hard choice between death and the assault. Do you fight or take it? [FN]

* * *

If it happens to me they better be prepared to use that knife. They can just bring it on. [FN]

* * *

I was scared as hell, as [were] the others, no matter how brave they sounded. But I told myself that I would fight, even if they did have a knife. I figured I would rather be stuck then have to live with the rape. I couldn't just let someone get away with it. I would have to fight. [FN]

Whether or not an inmate would be able to defend himself successfully from a sexual assault, he has little choice but to believe that he would try—and the necessity of trying is reaffirmed by his prison partner and other prison acquaintances.²

Finally, prison rapes also affect a new inmate's identity. As he has been adjusting to the prison world, his periods of introspection have focused less on the behavior and motives leading to his incarceration and more on making sense out of the prison world, and his position in it. Throughout this time, he has been unable to resolve his identity concerns or to overcome his initial feelings of helplessness, and a prison rape, above all else, heightens his sense of vulnerability.

Probably the biggest fear that a new inmate has is that of sexual assault. The reason... is that it is not only a physical attack, but it also brings in a question of masculinity. In a place where macho is very important, this type of attack is difficult for the inmate to handle. It is considered very disgusting and demeaning. [FN]

Redefining Prison Rape

The shock value of a second or third rape is similar to the shock value of the initial sexual assault.³ A new inmate has not forgotten about the initial event, but he has optimistically tried to dismiss it as a prison rarity. A subsequent incident destroys this dismissal, reasserts the inmate's early fears about prison life, and reestablishes his vow to "do his own time" and defend himself as necessary if he should be attacked.

A second or third prison rape, despite its immediate effect on new inmates, does not fundamentally alter the inmates' activities in prison. Shortly after a sexual assault takes place, therefore, prisoners return to the same routine of getting up, going to work, taking breaks, and eating meals at precisely specified times. As this routine again becomes taken for granted, the inmate may wonder whether his reaction to the sexual assault reflects only his own paranoia about prison life. Over time, rapes, along with suicides, physical assaults, and murders, gradually lose some of their shock value for inmates. As a new inmate gains more access to the prison grapevine, he begins to redefine these incidents, based on the "explanations" offered by other, more experienced prisoners. He

may learn that the homicide that occurred the night before was a result of the victim's welching on a drug deal:

The murder that occurred while I was here was a stabbing that took place out in the yard. A guy was trying to collect a five dollar drug debt; the other guy wouldn't pay, so he killed him. [FN]

A rape in the next cellblock can be "justified" by the victim's judicious participation in the prison economic system:

These guys ask for it. They receive favors from these guys and get into debt. One day they want the debt repaid. Well, they know you don't have any money, so they say pay up or put out. [FN]

* * *

Look at P.C.U. [Protective Custody Unit]. Why do you think that place is packed? They aren't all pretty boys that can't take care of themselves. But they get into debt, and when collection time comes, and the bill collector bring along his companions. The guy either pays up, puts out, or gets raped. Not much of a choice but he deserves what he gets. [FN]

Such explanations serve both to insulate an inmate from the emotional shock of a violent incident and to teach him something about life in prison.

I was in the hall waiting to go to the theater when they dragged him to the hospital, but I didn't know what was going on. After the movie, as soon as I got back to the cell hall, I heard the story. Most inmates felt the guy deserved it. The stabbing was a matter-of-fact thing, no sadness or remorse; he deserved it. It was a lesson to us all. If you rip someone off, this is what happens. [FN]

Although the victim's "crime" may be a debt of only a few dollars, or other seemingly innocuous behavior, first-time inmates have become sufficiently acclimated to prison life to recognize the *symbolic importance* —the question of honor —that such offenses hold within the prison world.

Many of the prison explanations for rape and other dramatic events have some degree of validity, but they have a functional value over and above their validity, in that they reduce the apprehension and uncertainty of prison life. If the victim of a prison rape deserves his fate because he has violated inmate norms, then the incident no longer has to be viewed as a random event which could happen at any time to any inmate. And if most prison rapes (along with other violent incidents) can be explained in this manner, it becomes possible to rationalize that *all* dramatic events have an explanation. Homicides, assaults, and rapes are explained by the victim's behavior —"burning" another prisoner in a drug deal, failing to pay a gambling debt, or snitching. For incidents that lack an immediate explanation, a general rationalization will suffice:

You are ready for these things to happen after a while. You expect them, almost as if they are normal occurrences. I guess there is no reason to expect that murders, suicides or rapes wouldn't happen in here, since they happen on the outside. As long as [they] don't happen to you or your partner, there is little concern after you have been here awhile. [FN]

Besides emotionally insulating inmates from these incidents, prison rationalizations also can be given as assurances to friends on the outside, who are concerned about the dangers of prison life.

Dramatic events also lose shock value simply by virtue of their recurrence:

Something happened today that does happen from time to time, but I can see that my reaction to the event has changed from when I first entered the prison.

I am talking about a piping. Two guys tried to see how hard each other's head was, and both ended up in the hospital. This was the first time I knew both parties.

It was the result of an argument over a drug deal. My reaction was one of laughter but I don't know why. . . . I figure both had it coming because they are both a couple of fools. [JR]

Aided by prison rationalizations, a first-time inmate finds that each successive incident has a less intense effect on his image of the prison world and his sense of well-being. Particularly vicious incidents or incidents involving acquaintances continue to be emotionally difficult, but the inmate finds himself increasingly unaffected by the same kind of incidents that once caused him to fear for his life. He comes to expect that dramatic events will occur with some frequency; these events, in effect, come to be viewed as a normal component of prison life.

It requires many months and many specific incidents before prison rapes lose most of their shock value for first-time, short-term inmates. And even when these incidents have lost much of their shock value —when they no longer result in a sudden increase in the prisoner's uncertainty and apprehension —they still retain dramatic value. No matter how articulated a rationalization system becomes, these incidents continue to reaffirm the unpredictability of the prison environment and the personal dangers that inmates face. They also provide a dramatic disruption of an increasingly tedious prison routine. Prison rapes, as with other dramatic events, furnish new material for the prison grapevine. Inmates are able to read about these incidents in newspapers or watch them on television. Toward the end of his sentence, an inmate may almost welcome the news of a dramatic event, as relief from his monotonous daily schedule. This view of dramatic events, of course, will be held only by inmates who have avoided serious involvement in activities that hold a high potential for misunderstandings or reprisals, or by those who have otherwise managed to accommodate themselves successfully to the prison world.

Discussion and Implications

It is evident from our discussion thus far that the prison images held by first-time inmates cannot be understood solely in terms of what goes on inside prison walls. The images draw upon subjective meanings associated with the outside world, inmates' direct experience in the prison world, and subjective meanings inmates learn through their direct experience. Inmate's derivations of these images, moreover, depend on their shifting orientations between the prison and the outside worlds, and on the interpretive work required by the essential problems of doing time.

In order for first-time inmates to change their definitions of prison sexual assault from that of a random, violent act committed by some mad stranger to rape as just punishment for an inmate's violation of prison norms, their uncertainty about prison must be reduced. This reduction does, in fact, happen. A new inmate's entire prison career can be conceptualized as a process of decreasing uncertainty about the prison world. Because his apprehension about prison is tied directly to his uncertainty, the prison career can also be described as a process of decreasing apprehension. We have demonstrated that prison sexual assaults have a declining effect on the imagery of new inmates over their experiential careers in prison. This is possible because the dramatic events are subject to definitional changes as the inmate's sentence progresses. As a result, the inmate's adaptive response to prison rapes also undergoes change. Based on the violence of their outsiders' imagery, their earliest survival tactics are protective and defensive in nature. But they also recognize that their outsiders' understanding of the prison world is incomplete, thus they are driven to make sense of prison by acquiring more information about it. Throughout the prison experience, new inmates interact with more and more inmates, gain direct experience in doing time, come to acquire an insider's perspective on the prison world, and adjust their own imagery accordingly. In this sense, it can be argued that as an inmate becomes more integrated into the prison social world, the "normal human male" image of prison sexual assault becomes more common for first-time inmates. From this new perspective, inmates are now inclined to blame the victim for their assaults, maintaining that the victim asked for trouble by

accepting gifts, getting into debt, etc. Equally important, these dramatic events provide a valuable lesson to the overall inmate population.

The traditional way of looking at prison sexual assault is to explain why sexual assault occurs in prisons for men. We would like to add another dimension to this discussion of prison rape by focusing attention on how inmates come to understand prison rape and how these understandings, or definitions, change over time. We accept the importance of knowing that sexual aggression in prison may be a way of reconstructing the male identity or that prison rape has its roots in the racism of the larger society. But we believe that it is equally important to understand inmates' common-sense understandings of prison rape and how these understandings may influence the coping behavior of inmates.

Implications that can be drawn from the earlier research on prison sexual assault would necessarily focus on reducing the effects of societal and institutional racism, along with dealing with the denial of heterosexual relationships through furlough and conjugal visiting programs. While our research would certainly endorse such programming, there are certain practical and political realities that may impede their development. Our research indicates the necessity of developing improved orientation programs for new inmates along the lines suggested by Johnson (1987) and others (Janis, 1969; Toch, 1982) that "provide reassurance, information, and reinforcement of problem solving behavior as it applies in the new environment of prison." The primary purpose of this programming should deal with the fears and expectations that new inmates bring with them to prison, to make new inmates aware of the problems they can expect to encounter and the resources available to them, and to encourage inmates to develop reasonable strategies for dealing with these problems.

Johnson also suggests that improved classification of inmates can improve prisoner adjustment and prison management. A classification system of prisoners within the institution, such as the one suggested by Quay (1984), where inmates are classified and housed according to their likelihood of victimizing others, leaving others alone, or likelihood of becoming a victim, could aid inmates in developing more effective relationships to help them deal with the pains of imprisonment. It is our belief that implementing these suggested programs would greatly reduce the uncertainty and apprehension that confront first-time inmates and ease their adjustments to the prison world.

Footnotes

¹We are using the following notations to identify the source of quotations used in the text: JR refers to journal entries; FN refer to fieldnote entries; INT refer to entries from interviews.

²Partnerships generally form among inmates of similar age, background, crime, or among inmates with similar work assignments or neighboring cells. A partner is characterized as a friend in need. He is someone with whom you may share things (mail, information, problems). He also serves as a form of protection. It is felt safer to walk with someone than to walk alone. While interacting with partners, the inmate will not rely as heavily on impression management techniques (See Schmid and Jones, 1987).

³Carroll (1974) notes that an analysis of prison disciplinary records and interviews with informants place the number of sexual assaults at the prison he studied at 40 to 50 per year (the prison was described as a small state prison). For a variety of reasons, it is impossible to know how many sexual assaults actually occur in prison. This is less problematic for our research since we are focusing on the imagery of prison rape.

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