

Suspended Identity

- prison sentences are a massive assault on the inmates identities
- thus we expect radical changes to happen
- the awareness of the prisoners is a kind of defense against this
- this study looks at first-time, short-term inmates
- ten months of participant observation in a maximum security prison for men
- about 50 daily contacts, some more personal ones, some for one-time interviews
- How do first-time, short-term inmates define the prison world?
- How do their definitions change over time?
- How do they adapt to the prison world?
- How does this adaptation change over time?
- How do their self-definitions change over time?
- Figure 1: the change of images and strategies
- Preprison Identity
 - inmates had little in common before they came to prison
 - they have no real idea of prison, but know it's different from their current social worlds
 - they see inmates as different and dangerous
 - they have fears including: assault, rape, death
 - they also fear that prison will change them
 - thus they prepare a survival strategy: avoid all unnecessary contact, defend themselves in any way possible, not to change or be changed
 - self-dialogue and imagining of prison situation in preparation
 - they also review their previous actions
 - this is generally the most thorough self-analysis ever for them
 - this is needed for an identity transformation process
- Self-Insulation
 - the self-dialogue continues for weeks to months
 - now they have some common features in vulnerability, discontinuity, differentiation, outsider's perspective on the prison world
 - these conditions are the same for all new, short-term inmates
 - the identity is reduced to emotion for some time
 - greatest conflict is between desire for insulation and for human communication
- Managing a Dualistic Self
 - prisoners develop a “prison identity” and an “outside identity” distinction
 - the former is seen as false, the latter as true
 - the outside identity is subjective, while the inside identity is objective
 - first they decide to “suspend” their preprison identities for the duration of the sentence
 - the hope is that they can resume their old identities when they leave prison
 - then they need to create an identity that allows them to interact
 - they need to be tough etc.
 - this is more like identity construction than transformation
 - this identity is like all others: it is learned from, presented to, negotiated with and validated by others
 - they believe that they are different, but they cannot show that difference
 - in prison, image management is everything: how you walk, look, talk...
 - they give up their unique looks in favor of fitting in to the general prisoner look
 - inmates realize that most other inmates do the same stuff as them
 - the prison identity has a shared element, as it is based on other inmates
 - prisoners become more familiar with prison and their identities as their sentence progresses
 - there are doubts about their ability to revive their preprison identities
 - the prison identity become the true identity is one of the main fears
- Identity Dialectic
 - at first there is little an inmate can do about his concerns about his identity
 - at some point, they will have to deal with this problem
 - they shed their adaptation strategies, change their prison image even further, reconstruct an image of the outside world, develop an outside plan
 - there will be a struggle between the prison and the outside identity

- the inmate has to come to terms with the actual differences between them
- they wonder how permanent the changes that happened really are
- they wonder how much the outside world changed in their absence
- it is unclear how they will manage on the outside
- this activity needs to be solitary, as they cannot learn their outside identity from other inmates
- the release identity is a synthesis of the preprison and prison identities
- Postprison Identity
 - all identities are different, so one cannot define a specific postprison identity
 - visits and interactions with people that use his preprison identity are a big help in preserving and strengthening it
 - additional support comes from self-reflection during his stay in prison
 - inhibiting things are: continued use of the prison identity, bad experiences with visitors, suppression of thoughts about the outside, sense of injustice concerning his treatment
 - they also realize that they changed in prison
 - surviving prison made them stronger
 - on the other hand, these tactics can also be used to prevail in the outside world
 - **the prison identity has become a part of their self**