

Chapter 3

Dirty Work and Discipline Behind Bars

Sarah J. Tracy

Clifton Scott

Over quesadillas at a local Mexican Restaurant, Nouveau Jail Correctional Officer Rick Neod described the most disgusting incident of his first six months working behind bars.

I was working in disciplinary, and I had an unprocessed person.... Big guy, probably about 250 pounds, maybe 5'8", kind of short, stocky.... The guy, who was breaking me for lunch, comes back and says, "Our guy in 12 is smearing shit all over the wall." And I've heard stories about people with excrement issues, but this was the first time I had dealt with it... I almost had a reflex. I almost threw up, just seeing it.... He was actually writing on the wall names of girls that he had dated in the past. So me and Derrick went to get him out of his cell to move him up to isolation where he could be seen by crisis management, since he wasn't all there.

We started talking to him, real laid back, like, "Whose are those names up there? Are those your girlfriends?" And he said, "Yeah." And Derrick was really good about it.... And the guy inserted his fingers into his mouth. And sucked on them. And that was just like, oh my gosh! It was a shock, but it's...kind of like a baptism for me, being exposed to that. He ended up, I mean, he was not combative with us. Derrick just opened up the door and the guy kept on licking his fingers. You can't stop him from licking his fingers.

Working as a correctional officer—the euphemistic and worker-preferred label for a “prison guard”—is a dirty job. Past research has classified the profession as a type of “dirty work” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), and officers’ activities are dirty physically, socially and morally (Hughes, 1951). Officers’ work in a dreary environment imbued with the constant threat of violence, and must engage in materially dirty activities such as cleaning up after inmates and conducting strip searches. They also deal with a socially stigmatized segment of the population (Davis, 1998), and therefore deflect the taint that rubs off from their inmate clients (Brodsky, 1982). Last, because officers feel disdain and moral questioning from the larger public, as well as from other criminal justice employees, officers continually must make sense of, manage and deflect moral taint associated with their job.

In this chapter, we provide a descriptive picture of the various types of dirty work correctional officers face and repeatedly combat. Examining dirty work among correctional officers is a particularly important issue given the profession’s high level of burnout, emotional stress, employee shortages and turnover (Tracy, 2004b; 2005). Many of these problems are directly related to difficulties officers have in managing a preferred identity in the face of work duties and societal perceptions that suggest correctional officers are no more than “professional babysitters” and “the scum of law enforcement” (Tracy & Scott, 2006). In providing a description of officers’ dirty work, we highlight the organizational practices and communicative interactions that continually reconstruct the filth associated with correctional work and the ways officers engage in “taint management” techniques to negotiate and temper the threatening “stain” of their work. Taint management occurs through day-to-day practices such as reframing dirty tasks as valuable and focusing upon positive aspects of the job.

Examining Dirty Work Behind Bars

This analysis is based upon participant observation and interview data gathered over the course of eleven months (May 1999-March 2000) with officers at two correctional facilities, *Women's Minimum Prison* (WM), and *Nouveau Jail* (NJ), both located in a western state of the United States. WM held about 400 convicted inmates, most classified as "minimum-security" who walked the prison "campus" at will. Nouveau Jail (NJ) held about 385 inmates, with about 92 percent male and eight percent female. About 60 percent of NJ's inmates were convicted and sentenced (generally for two years or less), while about 40 percent were awaiting court appearances. Depending on their security level, some NJ inmates were locked down in their cell, while others could wander into their pod's "dayroom."

Data Sources

The first source of data was fieldnotes from 80 hours of shadowing 68 different correctional officers, taking down notes and engaging in "ethnographic interviews" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Observations were focused on officers who interact directly with inmates, and barring the hours of 3 a.m. to 5:30 a.m., observations spanned all hours of the day. Second, 33 hours of training sessions were observed and numerous training documents were examined. These data included information on the inmate mentality, emergency protocols, professionalism, effective communications, inmate mental health and management, court procedures, managing stress and physical defensive tactics. Last, 22 in-depth recorded interviews were conducted with correctional employees: 10 with NJ officers, nine with WM officers, and three with organizational supervisors, including the WM Warden, NJ Captain and NJ Sheriff. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours.

Methods of Analysis

We viewed the qualitative data, not as a “mirror” of reality, but as a potentially promising way of opening up the scene (Denzin, 1997). We used an iterative, grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), analyzing the data for recurring patterns. This approach calls for researchers to classify data texts into categories, write analytic memos about the meaning of these categories, and add new incidents to categories until they become “theoretically saturated.” Categories for this analysis were inspired by Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) dirty work model and various types of taint management. Furthermore, other themes, such as “distancing,” “differentiating” and “blaming the inmate” also emerged as salient taint management techniques.

The Physical, Social and Moral Dirty Work of Corrections

A preponderance of prison and jail work is routine and executed in order to *avoid* problems. Officers continually engage in service and security routines, such as watching inmates, contractors and visitors; conducting inmate “count”; and searching cells and bodies for contraband. As one officer said, “A good day at work would be a day where nothing happens.” Of course, given the nature of the job, “nothing” is not always achieved. The routines of correctional work are punctuated with disgust, depression and danger, and officers must continually navigate the taint associated with the social and moral stigmas of the job.

Physical dirty work: Disgust & danger

Correctional officers often deal with behavior that most people would consider physically disgusting. For instance during inmate visitation (with friends and family), officers chaperone inmates to the bathroom (to ensure inmates do not hide contraband on/in their body), and conduct inmate “strip outs” after the visitation session. During strip-outs, officers (of the same sex as the inmate) check inmates’ every body cavity, including inside their mouth, between their toes, and around their genital area. Female inmates are required to “squat and cough” while male

inmates are required to “squat, cough and lift.” Officers described strip-outs as stomach-turning at worst and embarrassing at best (Tracy, 2004a). After strip searches officers said things like, “I’ve just returned from the depths of hell” and “Lord save me!” NJ officer Michael Martinez explained, “I’ve actually had to take a bar of soap and say *use* this.” Another officer said, “Some of the strip searches I have done would totally amaze you. The things that I have seen and the attachments people put on their bodies.... A ring attached to the guy’s penis, tongue things and earrings and stuff, nipple things, you name it. I’ve seen it in almost every place you can imagine.”

As vividly illustrated in the opening of the chapter, officers also have to deal with “excrement issues.” During the span of the research officers told stories about inmates who ate their feces and one who was well-known for “making M&Ms out of her poop” to throw at officers. Officers also spoke of having to deal with inmates who, for instance, would destroy property, try to hurt themselves, engage in exhibitionism, rape or assault other inmates, flood their cells, urinate out their cell doors, and throw soft drinks, juice or urine at officers. While these types of incidents were not common, discussion about them was, and correctional officers were responsible for cleaning up the messes that such occasions left behind.

The routines of correctional work are physically dirty not only because of close contact with material dirt and disgust, but also because of the job’s danger—a key factor in professions that are considered to be physically dirty (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). One officer cracked, “You’re dealing with people that would rather slice you up than talk to you.” While violence in the two facilities was rare, a preponderance of employee training involved preparing correctional officers for physically dangerous scenarios. During a particular “defensive tactics” session of NJ’s in-service training, the trainees put into practice all of the physical defensive tactics they

had learned throughout the week. The trainers, who were dressed in bright padded suits, played the “bad guys” and a group of three or four officers had to react. The training group was quite relaxed and somewhat excited to have the opportunity to “beat up” their trainers. However, in one scenario, one of the “bad guy” trainers pulled a (plastic) knife and proceeded to “stab” one of the officers. The stabbed trainee officer stopped in his tracks, nervously laughed and announced to the other officers, “I’m dead!” The other trainees also halted their defensive tactics activities, seemingly embarrassed. Then one of the trainers yelled sternly, “You’re still going—just because one of you is dead doesn’t mean you stop!” The atmosphere instantly changed from playful to somber. In the flash of a plastic knife, the high stakes of defensive tactics became apparent. The training wasn’t just a game. If officers didn’t correctly handle these incidents, they could die.

However salient, the attack during defense tactics training was pretend. Several months later, one of the officers involved in the preceding training recalled an *actual* assault that occurred during his shift. NJ Officer Fish Tyler said:

I was working in DSM [disciplinary/special management] one night, and there was this one guy that was having troubles, so I waited until later in the evening to let him out for his hour. Well, I opened up the guy’s cell and he looked scared to come out of his cell, so I kind of had to coax him out... Meanwhile, another inmate started yelling and throwing water out of his cell so I went over to talk to him and calm him down.

Then, I heard this awful scream. It was the most awful scream I had ever heard in my whole life and it just rung out through the pod. It was the other officer—a female—I was working with, and it was so awful I felt just sure that she was being stabbed. I can’t even describe how awful it was... I saw this guy with his hands around [the other officer’s] neck, strangling and punching her. I tackled him and he hit the ground hard

enough that it knocked him out. But that sound of the screaming—that was the most awful thing I had ever heard—it scared me so bad.

When Officer Tyler told this story during his interview, his face became increasingly red, and several times he formed his hands into fists. It appeared as though the poignant memory of his partner's "awful scream" was going to stay with him for a long time.

While several officers claimed they "very infrequently" or "never" felt scared by inmates in their job, officers nevertheless constantly dealt with the *threat* of inmate violence. Almost all officers said they had received some sort of inmate threat—some death threats, others somewhat tamer such as "You're going down." Officers said, "You're constantly on the lookout...you're constantly wondering whether the inmates are going to have a bad day and react and jump on you." As NJ officer Rusty Malloy said, "If somebody's in a fight, you may get hurt, somebody else may get hurt.... We found shanks [homemade knives] in the jail recently...so it's possible that somebody could really get deliberately hurt."

Social dirty work: Serving as "glorified maids" to criminals

In addition to physical taint, correctional officers face social taint because their work requires a servile relationship to clients who are already stigmatized. According to trainers, more than 30 percent of inmates are mentally ill, up to 85 percent are classified as anti-social, and 85-90 percent of female inmates have a background of physical and/or sexual abuse. In addition to these material realities of inmates, the public has "washed their hands" of criminals (Tracy & Scott, 2006). Correctional institutions represent a failure in social functioning and are thus hidden, isolated, invisible and silent (Brodsky, 1982; Foucault, 1977). Referred to as a "contagion effect" (Brodsky, 1982), criminal stigma rubs onto workers, and officers sometimes are regarded by outsiders to be not so different from the population they control. This contagion

effect is worsened because officers must not only interact with inmates, but often, must serve as inmates' "glorified maids."

Indeed, officers often remarked with chagrin that, in many ways, they served not only as "glorified maids," but also as "babysitters," "airline stewards / stewardesses" or "camp counselors." WM Officer Jack Clafin said, "I [feel] like an airline steward, really, walk around with a cart, 'what do you want now? O.k., here's your food.... Do you want juice or Coke? No you can't have both. You can only have one.'" WM Officer Dave LaBell said, "it's stress to listen to the inmates give you lip service every day and just want to tell them to shut up, but you can't." The service part of the job is so prominent that Nouveau Jail quit requiring college degrees for its officers. As NJ Captain Henry McMaster explained, a preponderance of the correctional job is not about inmate counseling, but rather is about "getting people toilet paper."

Training sessions and officer comments also indicate that inmates are considered emotional, verbal, whiny, untrustworthy and disrespectful. One officer said "you can go into law...if you can handle the emotional stress of everybody cursing you out or trying to spit on you." Another said the hardest part of the job was "listening to inmates run their mouth to you all the time.... You tell them to do something and they give you lip service for ten minutes." WM officer Jack Clafin said, "Women [inmates] are 'me, me, me' and each thinks their problem is the worst."

Inmates can also be stigmatizing because of their level of perceived insanity and intoxication. As illustrated in the following fieldnote, inmates can be non-cooperative and scream endless abuse at officers.

When I arrive at Nouveau's booking room, a man is strapped to a restraint chair in the back room. He is screaming, "Cancer upon you! Cancer upon your anus." He pauses for a

moment as I retreat from his line of vision. Then, imitating an officer he says, "What is your name?" Then responding as himself, "My name is I didn't kill [a girl who had recently been murdered in Nouveau City]. The Nouveau PD did!" Five minutes later he yells, "You don't have enough fucking dick to fight a man...you kill little girls with billy clubs." Ten minutes go by and he screams out, "Thank you, murderous pedophiles! Thank you, pedophile murderers! I'm glad you are pedophile murderers. Thank you for ruining my life." In response to this, one officer says to another, "I think he's had too much to drink." The other says sarcastically, "Do you think? No, I think it's his personality." The guy in restraints continues screaming at the top of his lungs, "Satanic fucking pedophile..." The officers are totally ignoring this, going about their work. Sgt. Tom Enriques walks by and says, "I think he's talking to me, but I tuned him out about an hour ago. I have auditory exclusion that hits after 2 a.m."

Despite the volatility of the inmate, Tom did attempt to counsel him. The sergeant explained to the man that it was his continuous screaming that was keeping him in the restraints saying, "You be cool with us and we'll be cool with you. Listen, you just be quiet for fifteen minutes or so. Show us that you can, and then you can lay down and go to sleep." Eventually, after an hour of screaming, the man kept quiet for the next twenty minutes. As promised, Tom let the man out of restraints. The inmate promptly flopped down to the cell-floor mat and passed out. There was never an apology or damage repair. A primary part of correctional officers' duties is to deal with and absorb this type of verbal abuse as endemic to the job.

Social taint also emanated from the sadness and guilt associated with working with imprisoned people. On a daily basis, officers handle situations that many people would view as depressing or sad. Officers accompany inmates to the doctor when they get sick, and write

detailed reports when inmates die—whether they pass away from natural causes, drug overdoses, or suicide. NJ Officer Derrick Garcia said he had witnessed a number of inmates try to hurt themselves, including a male inmate who committed suicide by “taking a nose dive” off the second tier of a pod, and another who burned his stomach lining by gulping down bleach that was out for cleaning. When these things happen, officers often feel guilty as well as fearful that they might be sued by family members, internally investigated by facility administration or stigmatized by coworkers.

More so than these shocking incidents, many of officers’ day-to-day duties are dreary. For instance, a number of officers indicated that they found monitoring inmate visitation sessions to be heart-wrenching, because as one officer said, it required seeing inmates as “parents, mothers, fathers and children.” During visitation, officers’ security duties include reprimanding inmates who hug their visitors for longer than ten seconds, or hold a visiting child in their lap. Long hugs and lap-sitting children can hide the transfer of contraband, and thus, the activities are prohibited. For inmates assigned to the segregation unit of WM, visitation logistics are even stricter. Officers are required to cuff, shackle and belly-chain inmates in front of their loved ones and stand watch, for instance, while bawling inmates kiss their children through the glass partition. As the WM nurse commented while passing through the visitation area on Christmas Day, “I’m glad I’m a nurse, or I’d sit here bawling.”

Moral dirty work: Working as the “scum” of law enforcement

In addition to physical and social dirty work, officers also manage perceptions that their work is morally dubious. Of course, it is of little surprise that correctional officers regularly face public misperceptions about the morality and importance of their job. As total institutions (Goffman 1961; Tracy, 2000), prisons and jails are purposefully cut off from most people’s life

paths. While correctional officers are able to escape the institution during their non-work hours, even when they do so, people outside of the correctional atmosphere largely denigrate the profession. Officers consistently manage the defensive attitude of facility visitors and members of groups affiliated with prisons. Among other things, the first author participated in an information session in which a Christian prison volunteer group negatively portrayed correctional officers as “non-Christians” who did not care very much about inmates’ well being. Furthermore, facility visitors consistently made sarcastic and rude remarks when they learned that they would be pat searched before entering the facility.

Indeed, officers indicated both spontaneously and in interviews that most outsiders do not understand the correctional environment and are largely confused as to why anyone would want to work behind bars. In response to the interview question, “Do your friends, family or the public in general have correct perceptions of your job,” NJ Officer Max Simpson responded passionately:

No, no, absolutely not. Not even this much (holding his fingers close together). Not even that much (bringing his fingers within a fraction of an inch of each other)... They think of all cops the same—as the guys that pull you over.

Another officer explained how friends and neighbors said things like, “Oh, now you’re one of *them*.” The officer never explained what “them” meant (nor, presumably, did his neighbors and friends); nevertheless, “them” was certainly not something good, but was rather dirty, stained, weird and unknown. Unlike some such jobs—say the Marines, FBI, firefighters or Navy Seals—that are considered mysterious or exotic, correctional officers were considered deviant and strange. Officer comments illustrate how the public viewed officers as lax and lazy, brutal, sexually deviant or silly and stupid.

First, a number of officers indicated frustration in public perceptions that the prison system was too easy. One officer said that after providing a tour of the facility for the public, some of the visitors made comments about how it was ridiculous that inmates could watch television, engage in arts and crafts or work out in a recreation center. He expressed confusion saying, “We’re supposed to be rehabilitating them and then the public gets mad because we’re helping them stay connected to the world and learn a few skills? I don’t get it.” While officers faced criticism for making inmates’ lives too easy, they simultaneously faced perceptions that they were too hard on inmates. The idea that officers are brutal is largely perpetuated in sensationalized mass media portrayals of officers. Indeed a new officer said that, based on movies that portrayed “terrible flashing, perverted talk, all that stuff,” he thought the job was going to be much worse than it was. WM Officer Dave LaBell said, “They think that officers have sex with the inmates, the drugs are rampant, you have no control.” WM Officer Luke Gollett said, “In movies, they depict us as brutal, disrespectful to them. We hurt them, we beat them up. You know, like *Shawshank Redemption*. One guy was going to throw a guy off the roof... It makes us look like we’re all brutal.”

Questions about the moral worth of the job do not just emanate from nameless, faceless media outlets. Officers said they also had to deal with disdainful medical personnel. One explained, “A lot of the times the nurses and doctors frown at us and make comments about us, like, ‘That’s cruel,’ because we’ll come in with women who are hand-cuffed, belly-chained, their ankles cuffed together.” NJ Officer Fish Tyler explained,

We had a nurse who was working here and taking some classes at [a nearby university] and when one of her classes found out that she was working at the jail, her classmates told her that she was working with a bunch of white male racists!

Male inmates at WM also commented on how they had to fight the perception that they were “lucky” to be working among all those “lonely, pretty women in prison.”

Others felt as though their friends and family thought their job was easy and stupid. An officer said he wished people realized “That we’re hard-working, not stupid. We do more than watch monitors and baby-sit inmates.” NJ officer Bobby Jon Herria said, “They think...you throw them their food... They really have no clue about the personal communication that we have with people.” Likewise, NJ Officer Rusty Malloy said that many of her friends thought her job was about “Pushing buttons and doors are sliding and that’s all there is to it.... I don’t think they realize the interaction.” Many of these comments sounded as if they were rehearsed, as if officers were quite used to defending and justifying the worth of their job to others.

Even though a number of officers said they hung out with cops, they ironically also had to deal with being disparaged by fellow law enforcement officers. WM Officer Nick Axel explained that at a recent neighborhood barbecue, cops who were guests commented that there was “no way” they could work corrections. He explained, “Corrections is like the crappiest job in the criminal justice system. Some agencies don’t consider DOC a law enforcement agency.” Other officers also complained about their subordinate positions in the law enforcement hierarchy saying things including, “Police officers don’t consider us to even be in their same category.” They said that police officers usually labeled correctional officers in one of two metaphorical categories—either as *scum* or as *babysitters*. For instance, officers said “we’re the scum of law enforcement” and “we are considered the dregs of the police department.” The scum metaphor is interesting in that officers also often referred to inmates using the same label. In this way, officers and inmates were in the same pond of scum, so to speak.

At least ten correctional officers also spontaneously indicated that other police officers referred to them as babysitters—a label that connotes low-status women’s work. Comments included, “police officers just think we’re glorified babysitters”; “They consider us professional baby-sitters, and on occasion, you start to wonder, well maybe I am”; “I’ve heard police officers...call us professional babysitters. That bothers me ‘cause we’re locked up and these police officers, they put them in jail and we’re with them all day long.” When officers are labeled as babysitters, they are put in a category of unimportant, low-status, feminine workers. So, how do officers manage the identity threats associated with work that is dirty physically, socially and morally?

Managing the Taint of Dirty Work

Correctional officers may face a very dirty job, but they also engage in a number of creative taint management strategies that help them manage their identity in the face of this identity threatening work. Such taint-management techniques enable dirty workers to achieve an acceptable collective identity and individual sense of self at work. The following discussion reviews the various ways correctional officers go about managing taint via Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) three specified methods of taint management: reframing, recalibrating and refocusing. We then introduce several strategies not specified by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999); taint management practices of distancing, differentiation and blaming the client also emerged as salient for helping correctional officers navigate their dirty work.

Reframing: Serving as societal saviors and just being part of the system

A primary way correctional officers do taint management is through reframing—that is, “transforming the meaning attached to a stigmatized occupation” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 421). Reframing is accomplished through “infusing” or imbuing the stigma with a positive value

or a “badge of honor,” and through “neutralization,” wherein the negative value of the stigma is negated, denied, or rationalized. As illustrated in the following comment, correctional officers infuse the job by discussing their unique abilities required for this difficult work. When I asked NJ Officer Dan Vernon the question, “What are some things that you think would be the hardest thing for me to understand or know [about your job]?” Officer Vernon responded,

The department psychiatrist probably has answered that in a way, but didn’t get the answer. She says, “*Why on earth* would you people want to deal with the people of society that society doesn’t want to deal with?” I can’t answer that question totally.

While Officer Vernon said he was unable to answer the question, he did go on to explain how an important part of the job was feeling as if he helped out where others could not.

Indeed, some officers chose to view their work role as serving as a type of societal savior—as people who would take on a difficult and disliked job that most people could not handle. WM Officer Chris Verner boasted, for instance, about how he convinced a particularly difficult inmate to fill out paperwork and that no one else had been able to do accomplish this. Furthermore, he was quite proud of being one of the few segregation officers at whom this inmate had not thrown soft drinks or urine. NJ Officer Dan Robbins told an in-depth story about helping an inmate whom he had first met fifty years earlier. Through the story, Dan framed himself as helping out in a way that other officers could not, and in this way, he saw himself as a “savior” to his friend. In similar vein, NJ Officer Max Simpson said, “I want to make this world a better place for [my children] and that’s my ultimate goal in life.... I like to teach some of the young [inmates] that.” Officers also talked to each other about the vital importance of their job, allowing them to feel good about work that many would consider dirty and distasteful.

In addition to infusing, officers also used the tactic of “neutralizing” wherein they tried to negate, deny or rationalize their role in the “dirty” parts of their job. For instance, officers would occasionally discuss their disillusionment with a justice system that they agreed did not work very well. An officer at WM said, “It’s amazing to me that these women get 25 years for killing their husbands and the husbands that kill their wives get five years. It just makes no sense.” WM Officer Lara Huanes also seemed sad and resigned as she discussed how she believed that certain programs should be set up in the prison. Huanes seemed to feel guilty that these programs did not exist and appeared to be confused about how she might play a role in making these things happen. Likewise, NJ Officer Kyle Johnson seemed disillusioned with the system. As he overlooked the special management pod on Thanksgiving Day, he mused to no one in particular, “I’m not sure our judicial system is doing justice to any of these people.” Another officer was upset that a mentally ill inmate kept getting recycled through the system. When I asked about this inmate, he shook his head as he said,

There are lots of people here that shouldn’t be. The thing is, mental health programs are meant for rehabilitation, not warehousing. So they put ‘em through a few classes and they get the tiny bit better and then they let ‘em out again. Also, if you’re not rehabilitatable, then they won’t keep you. So they end up here.

Even the Nouveau Sheriff, who had much more power than did officers, seemed somewhat cynical about the system, commenting that “the way we do probation is largely ineffective, because we’re trying to make silk purses out of sow’s ears.”

Officers managed this disillusionment by reminding themselves that they were only one small part of the system, and had very little power to change the policies and procedures that they saw as being problematic. They were resigned to just “following the rules” and “doing their

job.” By distinguishing their work of *carrying out* policies and procedures as different from the work of *constructing* them, correctional officers distanced themselves from the features of their work they viewed as ineffective and attempted to neutralize some of the moral dirt of the job.

Recalibrating: Danger and toughness as the best parts of the job

Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) describe a second family of taint-management strategies as “recalibrating,” wherein employees adjust their criteria of what equates to a valued attribute of dirty work and magnify the non-stigmatized parts of the job. Correctional officers engaged in recalibrating by emphasizing the most “dangerous” parts of the job as most desirable. For instance, at Nouveau County Jail, only the most tenured and experienced officers were allowed to work the “disciplinary pod” where the more problematic inmates were placed. In contrast, the duty of overseeing “visitation,” which required officers to be servile and polite as well as conduct physically disgusting “strip-ins” and “strip-outs” was largely devalued.

Recalibration is also evident in officers’ self-deprecating humor. For instance, one said to another, “Hey, did you hear our life expectancy has gone up to 57?” This comment may be particularly significant since the number quoted by the officer in this particular joking session—57—is actually two years below the 59-year life expectancy of officers (Cheek, 1984). In other words, the officers exaggerated their early deaths, and *laughed about it*. This type of joking allowed officers to portray themselves as tough, different and exotic.

Some officers also seemed proud, or at least resigned, to being framed as mean or unlikable. For instance, WM Dave LaBell described himself as an “asshole every day.” During a walk-through of the WM facility with Officer Stephanie Jones, she introduced two officers by immediately highlighting their negative personalities; both the officers seemed fine with it. First, she introduced an officer saying, “You’re probably the most hated officer right now, huh?” He

smiled in return and said, “Yeah, probably, but some of them are starting to stick up for me.”

Jones introduced another officer saying, “This is McDonald—He’s been written up by officers and inmates eight different times.” Officer McDonald laughed and agreed, unaffected by the insinuation that he was a bad officer. Some officers seemed comfortable and proud of framing themselves as mean. They turned a potential stigma into a sign of toughness.

Refocusing: “I do it for the money”

When a third type of taint management—called “refocusing”—is employed, discourse shifts attention away from stigmatized job features to valued employment aspects. Refocusing is different from recalibrating and reframing because it does not involve transforming meaning or valuation of task features. Instead, it enables members to overlook specific job dimensions entirely. Thus, refocusing requires members to “willfully disattend to features of work that are socially problematic” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 423) and focus upon features that are not inherent to the work itself.

Correctional officers “refocused” by playing up the nurturing and altruistic job features rather than the drudgery and disciplinary tasks. Many officers discussed how their job allowed them to help and interact with others and deal with difficult situations that others could not handle. As NJ Officer Rusty Malloy said, “I like talking with inmates and helping them solve their problems.” NJ Officer Derrick Garcia expressed self-satisfaction from being known among inmates as a “straight-shooter,” while Officer Sam Rule explained to me that he liked working along with inmates in order to give them a positive role model. These portrayals draw attention to those tasks and challenges that others would be unable to accommodate, and in doing so, the officers distinguish themselves in terms of their rare skills.

In addition to officers focusing on these “happier” parts of the job, many officers refocused on the tangential perks that the job provided for them. For instance, WM Officer Nick Axel explained that he stayed in the job because, “I make a lot of money.” The salary (more than \$30,000 in 1999) allowed Axel to focus on his “real interests”—running an outside business, spending time with his family and going to graduate school part-time. Another well-respected WM Officer, Dean Everlast, also refocused, saying, “I’ve got a lot of outside interests.... I own my own business with collectible art, designing athletic equipment, and then my karate.” NJ Officer Bob Traxler spontaneously asked the first author, “Why do you think anyone in their right mind would stay in a job like this?” Traxler said he did the job, at this point in his life, only because it was good money and he was too close to retirement to stop now. Even the officers, like Traxler, who complained bitterly and appeared extremely burned out in the job still offered up the motivation that “only a fool would leave,” because of the good money and enviable retirement benefits.

As illustrated, officers engaged in a number of taint management techniques that fall into Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) conceptualizations of reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing. However, the data analysis suggests several other taint management strategies that have not typically been identified by dirty work theorists.

Distancing, Depersonalizing and Blaming the Stigmatized Party

One of the ways officers managed the stigma of their work was through the techniques of distancing, depersonalizing and sometimes actively blaming the stigmatized party—which in this case is the inmate. By engaging in such tactics, officers were able to maintain feelings of control over the unwieldy, sometimes materially filthy, bodies of in their work, and achieve (an often superior) distance from the socially stigmatized criminal element of their jobs.

First, employees did a lot of work to physically distance themselves from inmates. Officers tried to avoid standing within six feet of or turning their backs on inmates, and most kept their correctional officer booths locked so that inmates could not enter without permission. While some of these tactics were used for security reasons, they also allowed officers to maintain distance from the “whiney, verbal” inmates with whom they preferred not to interact. Some officers maintained distance through refusing eye contact with inmates or by wearing sunglasses. Further, even though officers were technically allowed to shake hands with inmates, some officers avoided any type of physical contact. For instance, NJ officer Rick Neod discussed an incident in which he had counseled a potentially suicidal inmate. Apparently, after the interaction, the inmate had been really thankful. Holding out his hand to Neod, the inmate had said, “I really appreciate what you did for me.” Telling me about the incident later, Neod said, “I was like, uhhh, and I shook his hand, which I really shouldn’t do, but I was comfortable with him at the time.” I asked about his reticence in shaking the inmate’s hand, and the officer explained,

Oh, it just gives something to grab. A guy’s just in off the street, he could be just scamming you. You give someone a hand they can grab your hands and break your fingers. I personally just don’t like the health aspects of it all. You don’t know where they’ve been, what they do. You see some of the things at the jail, what people do; you don’t want to touch them.

So, part of Neod’s reticence was due to his suspicion of getting tricked, while part of it was his wariness of where the inmate’s hands had been. Given this officer’s experience with the inmate who ate his own feces (described in the opening of the chapter), it is understandable that he might attempt to avoid touching inmates in a variety of situations. Doing so serves to maintain physical distance from the social and physical dirt associated with imprisoned criminals.

To complement the technique of maintaining physical distance from inmates, correctional officers also evidenced an awesome ability for depersonalizing inmates and tuning out their abuse and complaints. Sgt. Tom Enriquez (described above as the Nouveau sergeant who dealt with the screaming male inmate in restraints) boasted of “auditory exclusion that hits after 2 a.m.” Officers “tuned out” and ignored inmates through closing the little window in their officer booths, essentially discouraging inmate questions, complaints or requests. For instance, NJ Officer Bobby Jo Herria gave an example of an inmate in special management who was really difficult. She said,

He’ll come and talk to you 15 times in a night. He just demands a lot of attention and for the most part, that’s fine, but there are definitely certain nights when a lot of things are going on when you just want to say, “Stay away from my window, don’t talk to me for an hour” or “don’t come back”.

Indeed, officers shut inmates out a number of times. For instance, inmates would come to the correctional officer window and ask for something and officers would say, “Yeah, yeah, okay,” without doing anything.

Ignoring inmates was also a way to avoid directly confronting inmate verbal abuse or unwanted sexual attention. Some officers indicated that when inmates were rude, they would just smile or ignore it. Female officers explained how they ignored catcalls and lewd gestures. The first author personally found herself avoiding eye contact with male inmates. In one instance, when a male inmate came to the correctional officer booth and offered Sarah “scotch and cookies,” she laughed, but also made sure she did not look toward that particular inmate for the rest of the observation. Doing so achieved a feeling of distance from the potentially threatening inmate, and effectively discouraged further interaction.

Sometimes correctional officers went beyond physical distancing and social depersonalization to actively blaming the inmate client. Employees engaged in such blame, in part, in order to neutralize their role in the stigmatized work. For instance, correctional officers consistently reminded themselves that inmates deserved their lot, and that they, themselves, were not responsible for inmates' complaints. For instance, when shadowing WM Officer Mindy Allen, an inmate decided to start complaining to the first author about the prison and its programs. Sarah just sat, listened and nodded her head as the inmate complained about issues ranging from "crappy public defenders" and "awful drug programs that don't rehabilitate you" to "unfair patrol officers" and "expensive meds." Officer Allen completely ignored the inmate during the complaint session. After the inmate finally left (after about 15 minutes), Sarah said to Officer Allen, "I didn't know what to do with that woman so I just kind of nodded and smiled." Allen said, "Yeah, that's what I do. Just nod and smile and think to myself, 'Yeah what got 'ya in here, huh?' Like we say, they have to work *really hard* to get in here."

Through turning the blame back onto the inmate, Allen was able to deny responsibility for the inmates' complaints and make sense of the dirty work in a way that did less to threaten the viability and value of the correctional officer position. While Allen did this through self-talk, other officers verbally reminded inmates that it was their own fault for being where they were. In an interview, WM Officer Nick Axel explained:

An inmate says something to you, "Well, I don't think my rights are being met because of this." I tell them, "Well, let's talk about the rights of your victim. You remember your victim, that's the reason you're here, because you have a victim.... Oh, you're not getting your hygiene, well, how about your victim? When you broke into your victim's house

and stole their TV, did you think later...that they couldn't watch TV? But now you're worried about soap?"

Through this comment, Axel negates his role in the problems faced by the inmate. Axel suggests that it is not his fault that the inmate is not getting his soap. Rather, it is the inmate's fault for being incarcerated in the first place.

The technique of blaming the stigmatized party goes beyond the practice of negating one's role in the stigmatized work. It also strategically suggests superiority over a dirty party. This is why "blaming the stigmatized party" is different than the "neutralization" category proposed by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999). Correctional officers would often refer to inmates as the "scum of the earth," and make fun of them calling them "stupid" and "lazy." As one NJ officer said in defending his job, "The thing that makes it easy is that they're all stupid. Their thinking process just isn't there." Some officers also engaged in practices where they would "inadvertently" punish inmates, for instance, by pretending they could not hear their requests, or loudly banging cell doors when delivering food or laundry (Tracy, Myers & Scott, 2005). Especially in these servile endeavors, when officers were forced to act like "flight attendants," they engaged in work to distance themselves from the role of the stigmatized party, and in doing so, engaged in taint management.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have illustrated the everyday practices that make correctional work dirty, and the ways that officers manage taint. Not only must correctional officers deal with situations that are disgusting, dangerous and depressing, but they work in an environment imbued with the social stigma of criminality, and must manage their identity in light of suspicion from outsiders that their job is immoral, brutal, deviant and easy. Despite these difficulties,

officers find a number of creative ways to manage the taint of their work. They reframe stigmatized tasks as badges of honor, refocus on tangential perks of the job and engage in a variety of activities that create physical and social distance (and superiority over) their inmate clients. These activities suggest that officers are quite resilient and creative in their taint management skills, and that a lot of effort goes into making sense of their job in preferred ways.

However, the analysis also suggests that correctional officers may face challenges in taint management due to their work environment. Unlike firefighters for instance, who can engage in sexual horseplay and fraternity-type antics (Tracy & Scott, 2006), or flight attendants who can gather in the galley and reframe a problem passenger as a spoiled child (Hochschild, 1983), correctional officers primarily work alone. While many dirty occupations foster cohesive work groups that in turn facilitate “esteem-enhancing social identities” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 419), correctional officers may serve as an exception. Because officers do not work in groups with their peers, they have fewer opportunities to collectively reframe dirty work. Indeed, the lack of camaraderie and social support in the correctional scene has been found to aggravate officers’ efforts at providing effective service (Tracy, 2005). Working alone also restricts opportunities to communicatively co-construct a preferred occupational identity (Heinsler, Kleinman, & Stenross, 1990).

Working alone is exacerbated by the total institution (Goffman 1961; Tracy, 2000) aspect of correctional organizations. Extra-organizational factors—such as the views of family, neighbors and the community at large—are no less important than intra-organizational factors in determining people’s attitudes to their jobs (Drory & Shamir, 1988). As illustrated, correctional officers face moral questioning from a variety of individuals inside and outside of the criminal justice profession. Unfortunately, the total institution aspect of their work makes it difficult for

officers to receive social support and reassurance even from their friends and family.

Correctional officers mention that the routine and pace of prison life is so different from the “outside” that family members would not understand their problems and even if they did, stories would only serve as cause for worry (Blau, Light & Chamlin, 1986). Indeed, “what are generally viable social support systems for individuals do not serve that purpose for personnel who work in isolated total institutions ... apparently, the regimen and isolation of prison work weakens the significance of marital support and community-based ties” (Blau et al., 1986, p. 139). Added to these challenges, correctional officers face an emotionally trying job and exhibit extremely high levels of organizational burnout (Tracy, 2005). Given this high burnout and the problems associated with working alone in a total institution setting, correctional administrators could engage in several practices that might help employees to better deal with the tainted and emotionally demanding parts of their job.

First, correctional facilities would function less “totally” for members if families and the larger communities that surround them were treated as stakeholders. While the prison industrial complex is booming (Schlosser, 1998), many communities take a “not in my backyard” attitude toward prisons and jails. As Brodsky, (1982) explains, “the belief that crime should not exist, and the reality that it does, contribute to a strong desire to keep prisons, prisoners, and facts about prison life invisible and silent” (p. 83). As such, correctional officers are left to try to manage a very difficult and tainted job on their own and in spite of disdainful attitudes that paint prison guards as brutal, stupid and lazy. Officer burnout and turnover may be reduced if correctional administrators better involved families, communities, media and government leaders in the correctional environment.

Furthermore, even if facilities do not have full control over outsiders' understanding of the correctional officer job, they do have control over everyday organizational practices and programs. As indicated, officers largely work alone among groups of inmates without regular interaction with colleagues. Given the importance of peer interaction for social support (Shinn, Leymann, & Wong, 1984) and making sense of threatening work in identity-affirming ways (Tracy et al, 2005), facilities should consider doing more to provide opportunities for interaction among correctional officers. The institution of post-shift (or post-critical incident) debriefing meetings, for instance, would provide opportunities during which correctional officers could provide social support and help collectively make sense of their (often very dirty) work in ways that affirm their involvement in the profession.

In conclusion, despite the varied challenges correctional officers face in doing taint management, the data suggests that dirty work can simultaneously serve as work enhancement when it serves to break up boring and monotonous job duties. Service and security routines make up the bulk of the correctional officer job. As one officer said, "Each day is pretty much the same. You let the inmates out and get them to where they need to go." However, when officers strip search a filthy inmate, manage a dangerous situation, or defend themselves against an unfair media report, doing so can also be fun and productive. From this viewpoint, dirty work provides the opportunity to tell stories, joke and talk with co-employees and manage boredom. Therefore, while doing taint management is a difficult and never-ending job activity behind bars, the dirty work of discipline also provides the opportunity for intermittent excitement, and proof that officers' security routines are indeed justified and necessary.

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