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RUNNING HEAD: WATCHING THE WATCHERS

Watching the watchers: Making sense of emotional constructions behind bars

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For nearly one year I engaged in participant observation with correctional officers at a county jail and state women's prison. My quest? To better understand and tell a story about the emotional dilemmas faced by those who keep, watch, care for and guard society's deviants. Criminal justice research paints a picture of correctional officers as hardened, cynical, stressed out, ritualistic and alienated (Poole & Regoli, 1981; Walters, 1986)—problems that have been linked to high levels of turnover, job dissatisfaction, psychological distress and a life expectancy of 59 years old (Cheek, 1984). Survey studies have pointed to a number of variables related to officers' stress and burnout, including danger, strained relations with administration and co-employees, lack of influence, negative social image, and lack of social support (Huckabee, 1992). However, the past burnout and stress research with correctional officers has rarely gone beyond measuring certain variables and comparing them to officers' self-reported burnout levels (Tracy, 2001). While past research provides information on the amount of stress and burnout among officers, it does little to examine why certain variables play a role in officers' emotional well-being and how emotional challenges are constructed through day-to-day work experiences.

This shortcoming is not unique to the criminal justice literature. As noted by Fineman (1996), concepts of emotion have generally been subsumed by seemingly more "rational" categories, such as employee morale, attitude, affect, or job satisfaction. This issue is more than one of semantics; these conceptualizations encourage an understanding of emotion as a "state" that can and should be counted or measured, leading to research questions that ask "how much" rather than "what kind" (Hochschild, 1983). Solely counting and measuring emotion in organizations, however, is somewhat akin to asking someone at the end of a gourmet meal, "how much taste did it have?" Such a question ignores the subtleties of spices and textures, the spiffiness of presentation, and the harmony of flavors working together. Likewise, a sole focus

on “how much emotion” glosses the nuances and contextualized nature of interactions and communicative processes—fundamental ingredients of the organizational emotional experience that can best be understood through observing ‘real-time’ emotion.

To better flesh out the interaction picture, I thus turned to ethnographic methods. As Fineman (1993) declared, “the method makes the feelings” (p. 221). As such, I utilized “a ‘tracer’ form of ethnography where the investigator follows people and their moments over time, in situ” (Fineman, 1993, p. 222). Over the course of eleven months—May 1999 through March 2000—I traced the work life of correctional officers, interacting with 109 research participants who were employed at a county mixed-gender jail, Nouveau Jail (NJ) and a state women’s prison, Women’s Minimum (WM). The primary source of data was fieldnotes from 80 hours of shadowing correctional officers in their day-to-day work and 33 hours of serving as a participant or participant-observer during training sessions. Additionally, I examined a number of training documents and conducted 22 in-depth recorded interviews 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.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter provides a mini case study that illustrates several puzzling emotional constructions among officers and how these constructions make sense in light of the norms and contradictions that mark the correctional officer profession. My hope is that the overview demonstrates how participant-observation was a critical method for being able to understand how and why correctional officers evidence certain emotional constructions.

### Emotion Behind Bars

Upon entering the correctional scene, I knew that I was interested in better understanding the burnout and emotion dilemmas faced by this largely misunderstood and ignored group of

workers. Specifically, I wanted to better understand how officers' engaged in emotion labor, a term coined by Hochschild (1983) and considered to be work that includes "knowing about, and assessing as well as managing emotions, other people's as well as one's own" (Hochschild, 1993, p. x). Furthermore, using social constructionist notions of emotion (e.g., Harré, 1986), and post-structuralist viewpoints of identity formation (Foucault, 1977; 1982), I was interested in understanding how officers' emotional demeanors were constructed in relation to organizational discourses and micro-practices. The lion's share of past emotion labor research examines employee groups who, as part of their work product, labor to display a pleasant demeanor. These include studies of Disneyland employees (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989), cruise ship activities coordinators (Tracy, 2000) and supermarket cashiers (Rafaeli, 1989). In contrast, correctional officers labor to be unemotional, stoic and tough as part of their job. Correctional officers likely face many of the same emotion labor hurdles as do police officers (Martin, 1999; Pogrebin & Poole, 1991; Stenross & Kleinman, 1989) and 911 call-takers (Shuler & Sypher, 2000; Tracy & Tracy, 1998). However, little is known about emotion issues among correctional officers—an occupational group that differs from others in having to deal with convicted criminals on a day-to-day, long-term basis. Furthermore, very little research has examined the mundane organizational practices that encourage and construct particular emotional outcomes among employees. Considering all of this, I entered the correctional field with several loosely-structured research questions, two that I discuss here: 1) What emotional constructions are evident among correctional officers?, and 2) What organizational discourses normalize, encourage and make sense of these emotional constructions?

### Puzzling Performances

In the early stages of my data collection, I met with a number of “puzzling performances” or emotional stances among correctional officers that, on their face seemed strange, and in some cases, even irresponsible or deviant. While few officers explicitly discussed (admitted?) these emotional constructions, as I shadowed officers in their daily work and took part alongside them in training sessions, I observed officers to evidence an us-them mentality, a literalistic attitude, a withdrawn demeanor, and a sense of paranoia.

Officers were generally disdainful of inmates; they called them the “scum of the earth,” and “disgusting filth.” They seemed cold and detached; oftentimes when inmates or members of the public asked questions, officers avoided eye contact, or would use eye contact as a power game—nonverbally daring others to stare them down. Likewise, even though officers were told that part of their job was to help rehabilitate inmates, they nevertheless evidenced an us-them attitude, displaying a distinct joy at busting inmates and learning they were doing something wrong. For instance, when officers found contraband during inmate strip searches, I heard them refer to it as a “pay-off.” One said, “You want to make a bust so bad. It’s a wonderful thing to find something,” while I heard another exclaim after a search, “We love to catch ‘em—we LOVE to! It’s all a game—who’s smarter, them or us.” Likewise, in the booking room at Nouveau Jail I observed an officer whose eyes glittered with excitement after he found a small amount of (what he thought to be) methamphetamine in an inmate’s wallet. This officer asked another with anticipation, “Do you think it would be introduction of contraband?” He clearly hoped that he would be able to charge the inmate with this crime.

Furthermore, a fair share of officers seemed to evidence a literalistic, “just tell me what to do” attitude. Indeed, some officers felt as though organizational administrators actually desired unthinking, robot-like employees. One officer said:

They want you to follow the rules...and if in the rule book there's a Y, you either go left or right.... The person that doesn't know how to get there is the person that they want, because...if you don't know what it is, look it up. It's right there. "What do I do?" It tells you what to do in every situation, so there's no room for you to think.

A number of officers echoed the idea that "thinking too much in this job can get you into trouble." One of the most interesting illustrations of literalistic thinking I observed involved a scenario in which a front lobby officer at Women's Minimum was serving as the facility gate-keeper. An attorney was attempting to gain entrance to visit his inmate client. In order to enter the facility, the lobby officer told the attorney, among other things, that he could not bring in dollar bills because "that's the rule." The officer did not explain the reason behind the rule: that paper money can be transferred easily as contraband to inmates. The frustrated attorney demanded that he be allowed to enter the facility with his dollar so he could use it in the (dollar-accepting) soda machine inside. The officer responded by robotically repeating different variations of, "No dollars allowed inside." I left the scene just as a supervisor emerged and (presumably) solved the dilemma. This situation illustrates how literalistic thinking precluded an officer's ability to consider, or at least articulate, alternative options. Obvious solutions included allowing the visitor to use the staff's soda machine in the adjoining break room or having the escort officer take the attorney's dollar and buy the soda after they all went inside the visitation area. However, the officer merely repeated the rule. Perhaps he did so in a desperate attempt to cling for a resource of power in the situation. Regardless, the incident serves to illustrate the literalistic construction that I observed to be common among a number of officers.

Throughout my research I was also struck by the withdrawn, complacent and detached ways in which many officers approached their job. I observed in multiple training sessions that

officers did not ask questions or interrogate problematic issues with supervisors. In one training session, for instance, officers did not complain or question the surprise announcement that no one would be allowed to take vacation between Christmas and New Year's Day, something that countered ordinary policy. When the jail captain asked if anyone had questions, a couple officers grumbled to themselves and another yelled out sarcastically, "No questions 'cause we're so satisfied, sir!" The captain just laughed, shrugged his shoulders and proceeded in the meeting. This behavior was par for the course; in almost all the training sessions I attended, doodling was a far more popular activity among officers than discussing the issues or asking questions.

I also observed this withdrawn attitude among officers who failed to question or attempt to change organizational policies that appeared to be problematic. For instance, at Nouveau Jail I asked a tenured officer why it was fair that medium-security inmates were locked down in individual cells for the majority of the day, while maximum-security inmates were only locked down at night (and could spend the rest of the time hanging out with other inmates in the dayroom). She responded that being locked down was an incentive for the medium-custody inmates to go to life skills or G.E.D. classes. However, she did not attend to the issue of fairness and mentioned that it was not worth her time to pursue the issue with supervisors. In contrast, an officer who had just been with the jail for just six months agreed with me about the unfairness issue and said he wondered the same thing. However, this officer also admitted that he had not asked colleagues or superiors about this seeming inconsistency because he was still "learning the ropes" and did not want to be a "know-it-all." While the longer-tenured and shorter-tenured officers differed in their reasons, both believed they should keep their questions to themselves.

Officers also appeared suspicious and paranoid. As one officer explained in an interview, "You're constantly on the look-out. You're constantly wondering whether the inmates are going

to have a bad day, react and jump on you.” Indeed, when I hung out with officers, they rarely looked directly at me; rather their eyes roamed behind and around me, ready and waiting to spot trouble. Officer comments also suggested mistrust of colleagues and organizational administrators. One said, “You never know whether someone wants your job.” Officers’ watchfulness and suspicion stayed with them even when they left the doors of the facilities to go home. I held my officer interviews in various restaurants, and noted that 18 of my 19 interviewees chose a chair that faced out toward the restaurant during my interviews (rather than in toward the wall). One officer explained, “I’m always aware of where I’m sitting, where my back is. And that’s something I’ve kept with me.” Another said, “I find myself fighting to not be so paranoid. I’ll go to the store...and I’ll look at somebody and you’ll think, he looks like an inmate. I have no idea where it comes from.” Officers commented in interviews that their family perceived them to be overly-protective. Several indicated that their paranoia negatively affected their marriage; one even thought paranoia played a role in his recent divorce. Indeed, I found myself to be increasingly paranoid and untrusting as I spent time in the correctional field, eyeing strangers with suspicion and even envisioning fictionalized encounters in which I might have to talk tough or get into a fight!<sup>2</sup>

As discussed, correctional officers evidenced an us-them attitude, literalism, withdrawal and paranoia. A goal of my research was to make sense of these emotional demeanors. As I spent more time with the officers, and began analyzing my data, I realized that these emotional constructions, while puzzling prima facie, make sense in light of the organizational structures and emotional norms that shape the micro-practices of officers’ work routines.



### Making Sense of Emotional Constructions Through Organizational Norms and Contradictions

From a Foucauldian point of view, discourse transmits and produces power, which in turn continuously produces and constitutes the self (Foucault, 1977, 1982). From this point of view, identity is constructed in relation to surrounding organizational discourses and norms. Through an interpretive analysis of data sources including training sessions, officer and administrator interviews, training manuals and correctional day-to-day behavior, several organizational “norms” emerged as integral to the construction of emotion among correctional officers. I use the word “norms” to refer to organizational expectations for officer behavior, rather than because they are accurate descriptions of the ways members usually behave (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985). Organizational norms are communicated not only through supervisor mandates and official organizational messages (Sutton, 1991), but also through informal communication channels and peer control (Barker, 1993).

Probably the strongest and most often repeated organizational expectation for officers at both Nouveau Jail and Women’s Minimum was that officers should continually suspect and mistrust inmates. In officer training sessions supervisors discussed how inmates were “game players” who sat around “24-7” looking for ways to “set you up” and “suck you in.” A training manual warned that “inmates will use flattery and appeal to your ego,” and in a session on “working with the female offender,” officers watched a video called “con games inmates play” and took home an “employee susceptibility traits self-test.”

Officers were also encouraged to be tough and maintain detachment. The “be tough” norm was infrequently espoused officially by organizational superiors, but rather served as an implicit message sent through physical training sessions and various correctional officer activities. For instance, hours of physical training taught officers how to hold, take-down, hit,

kick, cuff and apply pressure points to inmates. During these training sessions, officers also volunteered to be sprayed with mace or hooked up to inmate restraining / punishment devices so they could “prove” to other officers that they could “take it.” Officers reiterated the importance of toughness in their informal talk, saying things like a good officer is “hard” and “not a chocolate heart.” They would also occasionally engage in tough banter with each other, telling dirty jokes, bragging about their latest sexual exploits and making fun of inmates. Indeed, “talking tough” is a common social ritual among criminal justice employees, serving, among other things, to serve as a “social test” to ensure that co-employees can be relied upon to back each other up in an emergency (O’Donnell-Trujillo & Pacanowsky,1983).

Confusing the situation, however, was the fact that officers were also expected to respect and nurture inmates. Espousing philosophies common to supervisors at both facilities, the Women’s Minimum volunteer trainer said, “Speak [to inmates] as you want to be spoken to, just as we do with our kids,” and the Nouveau jail captain said, “Treat them like human beings, give them a little dignity and respect.” Officers manifest this norm in their talk, saying, for instance, that officers should not “snub their noses” at inmates. Closely affiliated with the respect norm, officers were also expected to nurture, listen to, interact with, and protect inmates. Supervisors said that good officers, “have to believe they can help,” and training manuals maintained that “interacting with inmates is essential for the development of a positive climate.” Officers also discussed the ways they should serve as a nurturer. For instance, many officers referred to inmates in child-like metaphors, and explained how their role was to care for and protect inmates.

Officers’ work was also structured by norms about rule-following. On the one-hand, officers were expected to follow the rules, and be consistent in “writing-up” inmates and fellow

officers for rule infractions. Indeed, supervisors and line officers alike internalized, memorized and continually repeated the organizational mantra that officers should be “firm, fair and consistent.” However, at the same time, officers received stronger and more frequent messages that they should be flexible, use common sense and treat cases and situations on an individual basis. I observed supervisors verbally denigrate officers who “wrote up” inmates when a “good talking to” would have worked just as well. Likewise, officers said they preferred colleagues who were not “badge happy.”

While most of the officers’ rules directly dealt with their experiences with inmates, officers’ work was also marked by norms that structured their relationships with one another. First, officers often heard that they should rely on each other for support and back each other in a crisis. For instance, trainers told officers that they should feel comfortable talking to one another or to institutional counselors, especially if they were having trouble with a particular inmate. An informal facet of this norm was that officers were unofficially supposed to keep officer problems among officers and refrain from “running to the boss” about colleague missteps. Indeed, officers who “told on” each other were ridiculed by inmates and officers alike, being called “snitches.”

At the same time, officers were officially encouraged to inform on each other if they saw colleagues engaging in behavior that was against the rules. They were also told in various ways that they should not “be needy.” The paramilitary organizational structure, separation of duties and physical layout of the facilities implicitly sent the message that officers should be emotionally independent. Organizational training sessions explicitly told officers that they should not turn to each other for personal support. For instance, one trainer said, “If you want to talk about your personal life, there’s two times to do it—at role call and at home.” Role call, saturated with employee announcements, usually lasted 10-15 minutes.

As I classified myriad data from interviews, shadowing, and training programs into “organizational norms,” I began to see how the discourses that characterize correctional work life are largely contradictory and dilemmatic in nature. As outlined above, officers face organizational expectations to: respect inmates; nurture and protect inmates; suspect inmates; be tough and detached; follow the rules; be flexible, rely on each other and not be needy. My analysis, organization and labeling of the norms purports a clear-cut representation of the organizational edicts—something that is far from the scattered fashion in which the norms were presented and absorbed in the correctional setting. Table one summarizes these contradictory tensions and the norms encompassed by each tension.

**Table 1: Contradictory Tensions That Mark the Correctional Officer Job**

Organizational Norms in Tension		Contradictory Tension
Respect inmates	Suspect inmates	Respect ⇔ Suspect
Nurture inmates	Be tough Maintain detachment	Nurture ⇔ Discipline
Follow rules and procedure	Be flexible	Consistency ⇔ Flexibility
Rely on others Handle problems among officers	Don't be needy Inform on fellow officers	Solidarity ⇔ Autonomy

When I articulated these contradictions to officers late in my research, many shook their head, smiled wryly and agreed. However, employees rarely explicitly acknowledged or discussed the contradictions. Organizational structures and training sessions obscured how much of correctional work is intrinsically paradoxical. For instance, when officers did inquire about contradictions, supervisors would often soothe their concerns by saying, “Well, just be professional.” Despite the fact that officers did not explicitly discuss these norms, or the contradictions among them, I argue that they nevertheless played an important role in the construction of emotion among correctional officers.

First, consider the us-them mentality. Why would officers, who are supposed to be helping inmates get back on track in their life, be excited when inmates did something wrong?

Although officers are supposed to nurture and empathize with inmates, the norm of suspecting inmates is even stronger. Furthermore, correctional officers' central duty is to monitor inmates—which includes conducting strip searches, doing rounds, overseeing visitation and simply watching. While these duties make up the primary share of correctional officer work, I found that officers only occasionally catch inmates in wrongdoing, and thus, officers rarely see tangible “fruits” of their monitoring efforts. As one officer said, “Unlike a carpenter or even a computer worker, at the end of the day, you have nothing to show for your work. Here the goal is to do as much as possible to prevent incidents.” Considering this, it should come as no surprise that, just as street police officers strive to construct drama and excitement in their rather mundane work (Trujillo & Dionisopoulos, 1987), correctional officers likewise find a thrill in “catching” or “busting” inmates; it serves as “proof” to officers that their never-ending, monotonous monitoring routines are actually important.

The literalistic construction also make sense when we consider how officers have to balance contradictory organizational expectations that they be consistent with the rules, yet act with flexibility. A small minority of officers were skilled at manipulating organizational rules in ways that allowed them to feel consistent while maintaining flexibility. However, others saw following rules “by the book” as a way to keep themselves out of trouble. Furthermore, rules served as one of few resources of power for correctional officers. Reconsidering the aforementioned officers' literalistic reaction to the attorney's request to take a dollar bill into the visitation area, the officer could appear to be respectful but still get his way by robotically repeating, “Sorry, those are the rules.”

A withdrawn construction is also plausible and should be expected when we consider several organizational norms. First, when officers offered suggestions or asked questions during

training sessions, supervisors often met them with bureaucratic explanations that discouraged further discussion. In fact, trainers directly rewarded non-question-asking by allowing trainees to leave early if they did not generate enough discussion. Furthermore, I found that officers felt stymied in their attempts to formally change organizational procedures or alert administrators about inmate problems. For instance, one officer told me that he was not going to write up inmates any more for rule infractions, saying, “It’s frustrating because you write them up and then they [administrators] just let it go. And then the inmates just laugh at you.” One way to avoid frustration was to withdraw from the process altogether.

Officers’ withdrawn emotional construction also makes sense considering how “not caring too much” ironically assisted officers in their endeavors to attend to the organizational norm that they treat inmates with respect. Supervisors suggested, and officers seemed to agree, that by not learning the details of an inmate’s (potentially heinous) criminal background, they could better treat inmates nicely. However, not knowing inmates’ history also made it easy for officers to actually ignore the fact that they were working with criminals altogether, and thus, in many ways, this situation encouraged a complacent and withdrawn emotional construction. By not caring too much, officers could avoid inmate hassles and attend to the organizational expectations that they should respect and nurture inmates.

The construction of paranoia also makes sense in relation to organizational discourses in the correctional field. For instance, while officers were told to follow the rules by the book, they also were told to be flexible. In order to achieve this mandate, a number of officers engaged in their own personal brand of creative rule-following, a technique that was largely organizationally-condoned. However, there was always some uncertainty in whether officers’ creative solutions would be judged by supervisors as creatively flexible or as creatively

inappropriate, and thus, managing the tension of Consistency ⇔ Flexibility may have led to an unintended emotional consequence of paranoia. Indeed, I experienced some mild paranoia myself due to this tension. During my orientations to the facilities, I was told in no uncertain terms that “gum-chewing” was not allowed because “gum can be used by inmates to jam locks.” I fully expected to maintain consistency with this rule. However, during the course of my research, officers and supervisors alike offered me gum. I usually accepted, largely because I did not want to appear to be a “goody-goody” researcher. Nevertheless, I was simultaneously paranoid that they could use this as grounds for kicking me out.

A paranoid construction is also understandable considering the mandate that officers suspect inmates as well as the contradictory expectations about trusting colleagues on the one hand, but not being needy on the other. Indeed, a number of officers felt confused about whom they could trust and when they should trust. When officers admitted to colleagues that they were upset about troubling incidents with inmates (e.g., suicides, aberrant behavior, etc.), they often met with unfortunate ends. For instance, after one officer told several colleagues that she would be a “happy woman” if she never had to violently “take-down” an inmate again, she was summoned with a mental health referral herself—an action that suggested she was “just as crazy” as the inmate. Incidents such as these served to reinforce the norm that officers should be continually suspicious, not only around inmates, but also around each other.

Last, withdrawn, literalistic and paranoid emotional constructions make sense when we consider the potential implications of continually facing contradictions in one’s work. As detailed in table one, officers face the contradictory tensions of Respect ⇔ Suspect, Nurture ⇔ Discipline, and Consistency ⇔ Flexibility, and Solidarity ⇔ Autonomy. Past research tells us that recipients faced with contradictions usually respond with some combination of

confusion, displeasure and anxiety (Putnam, 1986). Furthermore, family systems theory suggests that people who hear contradictions as double binds are susceptible to particularly debilitating emotional reactions. Specifically, people faced with double binds are hypothesized to respond by becoming over-analytic and paranoid, literalistic and/or withdrawn (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967), feeling states that I also found to be evident among a number of correctional officers. In light of the norms and contradictions facing correctional officers, the puzzling emotional demeanors evidenced by correctional officers are not so puzzling after all.

### Conclusion

In the preceding overview, my goal has been to illustrate key claims and arguments central to my research with correctional officers. In closing, I highlight several different ways in which participant observation was central for constructing the study.

First, it was through observation of and interaction with officers that I was struck with the puzzling performances of literalism, withdrawal, paranoia, and the us-them mentality. As one might imagine, these are not popular self-descriptors. I only became aware of them through hanging out in the field. My fieldnotes recorded not only participant behaviors and performances, but also the absence of particular behaviors and performances. This was of particular relevance for documenting officers' withdrawn demeanor. Indeed, participant-observation is as much about what is unsaid as it is about what is said (Denzin, 1997).

Participation also enriched interviews. I oftentimes prompted interviewees with certain organizational performances I had observed in the field. I would ask officers what they thought they were feeling at the time, or how they made sense of the situation. Furthermore, I used earlier participant-observation data to construct preliminary analyses that I then shared with



interviewees. Our dialogue about my preliminary analyses provided additional data and took me out of the role of detached expert (Denzin, 1997; Martin, 1992).

Participation was also essential for understanding the ongoing social construction of emotion among correctional officers. By spending time in the field, I felt the construction of certain emotions in myself. For instance, as mentioned, I began to feel both more paranoid and tougher through my experience in the correctional setting. Throughout the research process, I included self-reflective memos in fieldnotes about my involvement and feelings in the scene (Lindlof, 1995). My feelings, and my consistent notations about them, allowed me to better understand and analyze the discursive construction of feelings among my research subjects.

Participant observation and interaction with officers was also key for understanding how particular emotional constructions made sense in light of the norms and contradictions of the job. In summary, correctional officers' work is structured through organizational norms including: respect inmates, nurture inmates, suspect inmates, be tough and maintain detachment, follow the rules, be flexible, rely on others and don't be needy. Together, these norms form contradictory tensions, including: Respect ⇔ Suspect, Nurture ⇔ Discipline, Consistency ⇔ Flexibility, Solidarity ⇔ Autonomy. I never found these norms or contradictions laid out neatly in a training manual or rattled off by an administrator. Rather, they emerged from bits and pieces of field data—from dialogues, stories, interviews, “bitch sessions,” personal musings (of doubts, reflections, identity constructions) and eye-witness testimony. Through an awareness and understanding of the ongoing contradictions that construct the correctional organizational structure, researchers can make sense of seemingly strange or otherwise nonsensical emotional performances and officers may see possibilities for myriad responses to work expectations.

### Appendix: Gaining access to ethnography behind bars

In this appendix, I address one of the most difficult logistical challenges to doing participant-observation: gaining access to begin with. Gaining access to organizations is always challenging. Examining touchy issues like emotion and burnout and trying to do so in an organizational environment that is literally locked off from the public, complicate the issue even further. Indeed, past researchers note the scarcity of “real-time” emotion studies of organizational life (Fineman, 2000) and the intrinsic difficulty of gaining access to do research in correctional institutions (Conover, 2000; DiIulio, 1987). Whether it be luck, happenstance, skill or a combination thereof, the following process secured me access to doing participant observation research behind bars. I share it here in the hope that it might provide a starting point of assistance for others attempting to do ethnographic research in difficult-to-access organizations.

#### Step One – Preliminary Research

Through a preliminary literature review, I found several researchers at nearby universities who had conducted research in prisons in jails. I called, emailed and, and/or met with them, explained my research interests, and they generously offered tips and advice about their contacts at various facilities.<sup>3</sup> I also contacted several prison ministry groups, and attended a ministry orientation session. These interactions not only provided me with an interesting viewpoint on prison work, but in addition, group members gave me the names and phone numbers of their contacts at various prisons and jails in the area. Through these activities I constructed a database of names, phone numbers, how I came to have the contact, and its relevance to my research. This database served as an invaluable resource during the gaining-access stage and throughout the research process.

### Step Two – Contacting the scene

I eventually contacted by telephone the volunteer coordinators at five facilities. From my earlier interactions and background literature research, I was able to indicate within these telephone conversations that I knew several key personnel in their facilities and had a general knowledge of correctional work. I explained my background and desire to “hang out” with correctional officers. I also offered any volunteer services that may be of need as well as offered to provide feedback based upon my research. Through a series of discussions, I narrowed down my choices to two different facilities, Nouveau Jail and Women’s Minimum Prison. I then sent the volunteer coordinators at each of these facilities a packet of information that included a vita, a copy of an article that illustrated my experience in conducting emotion research in organizations (Tracy & Tracy, 1998), and a cover letter that provided a general description of my research interests.<sup>4</sup>

### Step Three – Presenting the proposal

I called the volunteer coordinators a week after sending my introduction packet and set up a face-to-face meeting with the volunteer coordinator and the key gatekeeper(s) who would make the eventual decision of whether I was allowed access (in this case, the Nouveau Jail Captain and the Women Minimum’s Warden). During the meeting I distributed and discussed a one-page proposal that overviewed the study’s rationale, the proposed method to carry out the study, my past experience, and a statement about confidentiality and organizational protection. This proposal is replicated below. At the end of the meeting, the gatekeepers agreed to my research and I immediately set up a schedule for my ongoing participant-observation.

***EMOTION, CULTURE AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION***  
**SUBMITTED BY SARAH J. TRACY TO NOUVEAU JAIL**

**Study Rationale**

I am a doctoral student in organizational communication at University of Colorado-Boulder studying organizational culture, emotion and communication issues in “non-traditional” organizations. This document serves as a proposal to conduct an in-depth study of these issues with the Nouveau Jail. This study will serve a dual service: it will provide information that will add to our academic understanding of emotion and culture issues within organizations, as well as will provide the jail with volunteer expertise from someone versed in many organizational communication issues. Throughout my research, I would be able to provide feedback to jail lieutenants, and if desired, make suggestions regarding improvement or modifications to the organization’s communication efforts.

**Proposal**

I am flexible in the manner by which I go about this study, and I assume that it will change throughout discussions with administration at the jail. My initial idea is to focus upon jail staff through participant observation and interviews – especially correctional officers and other personnel who are in contact with inmates. My aim is to be as unobtrusive and helpful to the organization as possible. As a participant-observer, I would observe staff in their daily activities and occasionally take notes. Through this depth of involvement, I am better able to garner the trust of the staff, and am better poised to understand how employees are experiencing their work positions at the jail.

My hope is to do in-depth research / volunteering for up to 20 hours per week beginning in June. I have a very flexible schedule and will work with the Jail Captain or another contact person in developing a schedule. I hope to spend a considerable amount of my summer with the jail – and would continue into the fall as needed. Upon completion of the study, I would be happy to share results of my analysis with employees.

**Experience**

I have personally studied organizational culture issues in the context of a metropolitan city’s 911 emergency communications center, a commercial cruise ship and in multiple Rocky Mountain area public relations firms. I have presented my research reports at national and international conferences, have published articles in major journals and am currently co-authoring a book on organizational culture change. In short, I am trained in conducting organizational research, have expert knowledge in the area I propose studying, and the work I have done in the past has been valuable and well-accepted.

**Confidentiality and Organizational Protection**

The organization name and identifying details will remain completely confidential. Further, the identities of people who grant interviews are kept confidential and the data will be collapsed in a way so that the identities of employees and inmates will be hidden. Before giving interviews or making observations, subjects will be informed as to the general purpose and nature of the study. Employees will be asked to sign “informed consent” forms that detail their rights, including their right to not participate in the study. All data is kept in a secure location and information that could identify the organization or individual employees is destroyed. Written reports resulting from the data gathered are used for academic, scholarly purposes only.

I look forward to working with the jail. For additional information about my experience or expertise, feel free to contact my doctoral dissertation advisor, [name] at [phone number].

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[my address]  
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NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I logged a total of 171 research hours yielding 722 single-spaced, typewritten pages of raw data. Readers can refer to Tracy, 2001 for more detail on data sources and analysis procedures.

<sup>2</sup> I found these fantasies to be quite surprising and unlikely. I have never been in a physical or verbally-threatening fight and am quite sure that I would not fare well if I were to actually get into one.

<sup>3</sup> For this, I thank Dr. Paul Katsampes, Dr. Mark Pogrebin and Dr. Eric Poole.

<sup>4</sup> I have learned from past experience that I have a better chance of gaining access to a site when I am physically present when organizational gatekeepers must make the final decision about my doing research. Therefore, I make letters of introduction fairly general and create my proposal meeting so that it encourages gatekeepers to make a decision when I am with them face-to-face.