Short-timing: The carceral experience of soon-to-be-released prisoners

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Abstract
Roughly 700,000 people are released from American prisons every year, yet we know little about their ground-level experiences at or near the moment of exit. This ethnographic study fills part of the gap by examining the aspirations and corresponding actions of soon-to-be-released prisoners, “short-timers.” While previous research suggests this population wants a “successful reentry,” few have detailed such a desire beyond its obvious mismatch with life chances. I show that in addition to verbalizing lucid hopes and plans for the “straight life,” short-timers act in reference to these aspirations while incarcerated by drawing on two meager resources: family and penitentiary. Such aspirations and actions are not markers of ignorance. Instead, I argue that they signal a practical orientation in a world where staff dominate inmates. In friction with the durable forces of inmate objectification, short-timers can use future-oriented perceptions and practices to realize some degree of selfhood. Meanwhile, their custodians, who are never committed to despotic control or total mortification, impose complementary lessons in personal responsibility through the discourse of prisoner reentry. Besides spotlighting a rarely studied moment in prison, I offer a model for how prisoner subjectivity emerges as both a rejection and product of penal power.

Keywords
aspiration and action, domination, imprisonment, reentry programming, short-timers

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Introduction

Scholars interested in so-called prisoner reentry typically emphasize the structural impediments to ex-cons’ employment, housing, sobriety, and desistance (Mears and Cochran, 2014; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005). Other researchers couple this leading “objective approach” with a “subjective approach” that highlights the intentions and perceptions of people exiting prison (Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Cobbina and Bender, 2012; Dhami et al., 2006; LeBel et al., 2008; Lloyd and Serin, 2012). The latter converge on at least one insight: with few exceptions, soon-to-be-released prisoners (here called “short-timers”) articulate a strong desire for the “straight life,” that being a life of material security and social honor relative to their current positions as destitute and dishonorable people.

Beyond assuming a stark mismatch between aspirations and life chances, the subjective approach suffers from two major shortcomings. First, although these scholars detail what people want, they typically ignore what people do. The most basic accounts of aspiration—be it models of rational choice, value motivation, vocabulary justification, or some mixture of these—always seal thought and conduct in a causal relationship (Goldthorpe, 1998; Mills, 1940; Parsons, 1937; Swidler, 1986; Vaisey, 2010). Yet, in many ways, the subjective approach reduces short-timers to just perceiving beings (and misperceiving ones at that). Second, scholars emphasizing the subjective features of prisoner release ignore domination behind bars, the lynchpin feature of any prison and a probable force of aspiration and action. Indeed, prison ethnographers and the like have long connected prisoner subjectivity to arrangements of power behind bars (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001; Clemmer, 1940; Crewe, 2011; Goffman, 1961; Kramer et al., 2013; Sykes, 1958). However, the subjective approach to prisoner reentry, which relies heavily on questionnaire-measured optimism, disregards penal domination as a likely source of short-timer hope.

Drawing on ethnographic data collected in a minimum-security prison in Oregon, I address these limitations by explicating what short-timers say and do in light of their upcoming discharge. I offer two arguments. First, short-timers are future-oriented actors. While justifications vary, almost all the men in this study aspire the well-documented straight life. Short-timers see the straight life as a prize won through individual effort and merit. These men share a standard script: the heroic ex-con “beats the odds” and hurdles the gigantic obstacles separating dishonorable prisoners from the respectable working class. I show that such ambitions are not daydreams, but are instead springs for tactical conduct behind bars. In a general attempt to increase their straight life “chances,” short-timers often volunteer in life skills programs, collect recommendation letters from prison labor supervisors, and network with family and friends outside prison for employment and shelter. Second, by contextualizing the perceptions and practices of short-timers amidst arrangements of domination, I show how these men and their custodians synchronize visions of the outside: the prisoners by forecasting a straight life from below against the pains of imprisonment, the staff by imposing lessons of personal responsibility from above to promote self-regulating and risk-accepting felons.
I start by summarizing previous research on the short-timer experience. A criticism of this literature, inspired by scholarship on aspiration and action on the one hand and on penal power on the other, motivates an ethnographic study of short-timing. After detailing my methodological approach, I focus on three themes: (a) the content of short-timers’ aspirations; (b) short-timers’ corresponding conduct behind bars; and (c) the prison-centric context of short-timers’ perceptions and practices generally. I close with a discussion of this article’s failures and achievements.

Looking outside

Social scientists often suggest that many poor people have stunted or crooked orientations to time (Lewis, 1971: 22; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008: 20–22; Wilson, 1987: 60). If this is true, then the prison—a space occupied almost entirely by poor men—may be an exceptional site. Convicts understand their carefully measured time behind bars as a “break” from their “fast-paced existence” on the streets and a time and place to “contemplate future goals and possibilities” (Comfort, 2012: 315).

Perhaps Irwin’s The Felon (1970: 86–106) best makes this point in the chapter entitled “Looking Outside.” There, Irwin suggests that soon-to-be-released prisoners tend to “shift toward conventional styles.” Less so during other moments of the carceral spell, those who are “short” spend much of their time thinking and talking about their street plans. Post-Irwinian scholarship has generally concluded with the godfather of convict criminology on one simple point: the short-timer’s desires and expectations are fantastical when referenced to his or her actual life chances. For example, Dhami et al. (2006) conclude that both US and UK convicts are “unrealistically optimistic” when it comes to their personal forecasts for obtaining shelter, securing gainful employment, and avoiding reimprisonment (Cobbina and Bender, 2012; Lloyd and Serin, 2012). Nevertheless, short-timer visions and verbalizations of the straight life may still be significant for understanding post-prison experiences. Harris (2011: 75) draws on interviews with former prisoners to suggest that “penitentiary talk,” which she summarizes as “optimistic discussions with peers in prison or jail about a new legal outlook on life,” informs ex-cons’ early attempts to realize “clean selves” over and against structural hardships on the streets. Moreover, there is evidence that questionnaire-measured pre-release orientations like “hope” and post-release outcomes like nonreconviction are mildly correlated (LeBel et al., 2008).

The general conclusion that convicts, and short-timers in particular, aspire the straight life is problematic for at least two reasons. First, this literature is missing a targeted account of current conduct. This is somewhat surprising given a plethora of theories, not the least being various models of rational choice, value motivation, vocabulary justification, and new syntheses of these approaches, causally link what people want with what people do (Goldthorpe, 1998; Mills, 1940; Parsons, 1937; Swidler, 1986; Vaisey, 2010). Likewise, the common concepts used to capture
aspiration—such as “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1990), “possible self” (Markus and Nurius, 1986), and “narrative” (Ochs and Capps, 1996)—are assembled as causes and effects of action. Yet, existing accounts of prisoner desires, hopes, and goals not only detach aspiration and action, they largely ignore the latter. And while some scholars link pre-release subjectivities to post-release action, they rarely, if ever, link the desirable straight life to conduct inside prison.

Second, the primary literature on the short-timer experience fails to consider the context of prisoner aspiration and action. This is unfortunate given a long sociological (and largely ethnographic) tradition of situating the subjectivities of prisoners within a relatively ridged structure of domination behind bars. Classic studies of the prison reveal a world where custodians dominate inmates by: (a) atomizing them into a “world of individuals” to prevent collective resistance (Clemmer, 1940: 297–299); (b) assaulting their moral worth via the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 1958: 63–83); and (c) reshaping their selves into bureaucratic objects that can be easily “fed into the administrative machinery” (Goffman, 1961: 16). In turn, inmates respond to domination, and objectification specifically, by engaging in mostly covert tactics to reclaim personhood (e.g., reclassifying the seemingly obedient prisoner as a “cool” man and stealthily traversing forbidden means through the contraband market) (Goffman, 1961; Sykes, 1958). Newer research extends this formulation by denying the purely reactive origins of prisoner subjectivity. For example, in his notable break from Sykes, Crewe (2011: 524) concludes, “Instead of brutalizing, destroying and denying the self, (the carceral experience) grips, harnesses, and appropriate it for its own project.” From this point of view, the prison fosters responsible subjects—self-regulating and risk-accepting inmates (Bosworth, 2007; see also Hannah-Moffat, 2005; O’Malley, 1996; Werth, 2011). As such, short-timer optimism (delusional or not) may be linked to penal domination.

Method

The article at hand is based on ethnographic data collected in a minimum-security prison (fictitious names used for facility, programs, staff, and inmates).1 Pacific Correctional Institution (PCI) is a two-story and 600-bed dormitory-style penitentiary embedded in the Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC). Like all American correctional departments, ODOC disproportionately holds the destitute and dishonored.2 My decision to collect data among prisoners being released from an ODOC facility was convenient, but my decision to collect data among prisoners releasing from PCI was strategic. About 40 percent of inmates at PCI are six months or less to release. For the most part, PCI is reserved for prisoners who will be released to the Portland metropolitan area. Many convicts “come down” from other minimum, medium, and maximum-security facilities in Oregon to serve their final years or months at PCI.

After six months of negotiations, ODOC administrators permitted me to enter PCI as an interviewer. Equipped with an audio recorder and a stack of consent

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forms, I privately interviewed 35 short-timers (i.e., inmates six months or less to release). I recruited these men from two separate pre-release activities, a popular voluntary state-run life skills course and a mandatory group assessment meeting for prisoners six months to discharge. Before each of these activities, I introduced myself as a graduate student and my study as a general inquiry into the experiences of short-timing prisoners. I then distributed a sign up sheet for one-on-one interviews. I did this twice for the life skills program and once for the mandatory group assessment and in all three events about half of the 20 or so attendees signed up. My interviewees, who collectively span a variety of ages and criminal histories, are much whiter than the national prison population (83 percent and 31 percent, respectively), but not much whiter than the population of Oregonian prisoners (73 percent) (Guerino et al., 2012; ODOC, 2010). Interviews, which were about 45 minutes each and always held in an audibly private room, focused on two primary themes: (a) what short-timers want and expect after discharge and (b) what short-timers do inside prison relative to their post-prison hopes and anticipations.

During the first few days of interviewing, I made an ally in the prison’s reentry services department—Kristen. She runs Beyond the Gate, the life skills program I recruited most of my interviewees from. Two-thirds of short-timers at PCI participate in this program. Sympathetic to my research interests, Kristen invited me to observe and participate as a student in Beyond the Gate and its five pre-release courses: employment (six two-hour classes), housing (two six-hour classes), parole (one two-hour class), family and community reunification (one two-hour class), and budget and finance (one five-hour class). I participated in course activities, completed homework, and passed examinations. I eventually earned a certificate for completing the program. Later in my fieldwork, I helped Kristen by running 50 or so mock job interviews and I substitute taught an employment course. Additionally, I observed “open office hours” in the reentry services office, where short-timers can, among other things, search for post-prison employment and housing on a computer, develop résumés and cover letters, and call various services outside prison. Less often, I observed the following spaces: a dormitory unit reserved for short-timers, the intake/discharge room, the cafeteria, and the recreation yard. Across these settings, I jotted notes on what inmates said about their upcoming release and what they did that seemed informative for an analysis of future-oriented conduct (e.g., phone conversations with transitional housing facilities). I then typed extended notes on a laptop immediately after exiting the facility each day, usually in my car in PCI’s parking lot. Coupled with my interviews, these observations gave me a rare chance to see, albeit usually from the special standpoint of a state reentry program, what short-timers do in preparation for their discharge.

Prison administrators awarded me a security badge which allowed me to walk the prison sans escort. Both prisoners and staff in this small facility came to know me as the “college guy.” But my delicate position as a relatively autonomous researcher eventually crumbled to the ground. I pushed myself too far, at
least from the vantage point of correctional personnel, into the convict camp. I gave a recently discharged man a ride from PCI’s parking lot to his uncle’s residence a few miles away from the prison. Unbeknownst to me at the time, an off-duty correctional officer on his way to work was watching us. Prison officials pulled my security clearance and I am not allowed to reenter PCI.

I analyze my data using both inductive and deductive coding strategies of interview transcripts and field notes and through the extensive writing of analytical memos. Coding occurred in two general stages. First, I conducted line-by-line coding of interview transcripts and field notes to locate so-called inductive themes (Lofland et al., 2006). Second, I collapsed these codes based on my theoretical commitments (e.g., to advance our understanding of domination behind bars). Such collapsing was accomplished primarily through extensive memo writing where I constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed an analytical narrative in reference to data and theory (Emerson et al., 2011).

**Envisioning the straight life**

Consistent with Irwin (1970), I find that short-timers verbalize lucid goals and plans for accomplishing a specific lifestyle on the streets, the *straight life*. Lucas, a 31-year-old convict six days from release, describes the straight life and his plan thusly,

> The straight life—getting a 9 to 5 job, being a family man, doing an honest living, staying out of trouble, doing something productive with your life and your spare time. For me, I’ve got my artwork. I’m going to try and do something with my artwork. I got one more test left for my GED (General Educational Development, high school equivalency). I’m going to try and continue that, get a college grant, maybe do something with my artwork. I got a release plan worked out.

Lucas plans to live with his mother temporarily in a small town about an hour outside of Portland. He is intentionally avoiding the city because of prior gang connections. He expects this immediate lodging arrangement, already approved by his future post-prison supervision office, to last about a year. During this time, he plans to get a job and begin his schooling. Once he can secure an honest income and save money, he will pursue permanent housing, likely with his girlfriend. Consistent with the other men I spent time with at PCI, Lucas’ verbalizations of the straight life unfold in narrative form, with the felon positioned as a subjective hero and the curves and edges of social structure situated as objects to courageously triumph.

The straight life includes two universally desired material markers, an honest income and permanent housing. The notion of an honest income encompasses any stable and legal source of money, but it most often refers to a “real job” (i.e., full-time, long-term, and above minimum-wage). Short-timers station the category of
“real job” in opposition to the category of “shit job” (i.e., part time, temporary, minimum wage). Permanent housing refers to one’s “own spot” (i.e., a house or apartment that is theirs even if shared with a romantic partner or roommate), as opposed to temporary shelter offered by kin or by transitional and supportive housing services. While short-timers almost always expect to work a shit job and dwell in temporary shelter immediately after discharge, they see such occurrences as merely ways to “get on their feet” before entering the yolk of the labor and housing markets.

When describing an elevation from prisoner to straight lifer, these men verbalize a number of anticipated strategies for traversing what academics and bureaucrats call “reentry barriers.” They plan to challenge low marketability with education at a community college or through hard work in a shit job. “Asshole parole officers” will be “killed with kindness” and icy landlords will be thawed by family references. However, the most commonly anticipated strategy for penetrating the labor and housing markets is rapport building with gatekeepers. Many short-timers tell me the “secret” to neutralizing their criminal record in the rental and labor markets is to target “mom and pop” employers and landlords because they are more likely to “hear somebody out” than those “corporate” or “large” organizations that swiftly deny felons without giving them a chance to explain their situation. Each anticipated post-prison obstacle is matched with a strategic plan for hurdling it.

Thus, short-timers envision and plan the straight life. This finding extends Irwin’s (1970) conclusion that short-timers are “looking outside,” carefully constructing and verbalizing prospective narratives for a desirable life beyond bars. Hailing from the crises-ridden streets, which these men articulate with memories of substance abuse, eviction, precarious labor, running from the police, and other catastrophes, short-timers experience the prison as a slow space to contemplate the future before they are pumped back into the gutters of Oregon’s largest metropolis. However, we must break from the image of an idle ex-con who simply thinks and talks about better conditions outside. These men may very well be fantasizing material security and relative social honor, as scholars like Dhami et al. (2006) suggest. But, as I indicate next, such fantasies are linked to real conduct behind bars.

**Drawing on family and penitentiary**

Short-timers at PCI are not just daydreaming. In addition to strategizing future actions they will take after their discharge, they are presently tactical. Short-timers orient many of their actions behind bars to increase their chances of achieving the straight life after discharge. Because they face limitations in acting alone, they typically turn to family outside and to penitentiary resources inside to aid both the development and execution of their post-prison plans.

Those in regular contact with family and friends outside of prison tend to see their extra-prison network as a conduit for executing their street plans before discharge. Jordan, a first-time prisoner, meets with his mother frequently as he
approaches his release. He instructs her to collect job applications and network with family to get him a job (aggressively with a large hardware store, where his cousin works), and she attempts to negotiate an apartment unit in her complex for Jordan and his sister. Short-timers like Jordan often rely on the women in their lives—usually their mothers, wives, or girlfriends, but sometimes their sisters or daughters—to advocate on their behalf in marginal labor and shelter markets before discharge. They see family not only as a reason to straighten out but also as a resource from which to draw.

However, this resource is finite and fragile. Maintaining family ties beyond prison walls can be tricky for several reasons. Phone calls are expensive and visitations are inconvenient and degrading for women (Comfort, 2003; Hairston, 2002). Additionally, men in prison find it nearly impossible to reciprocate favors. Prisoners, who make about $30 a month while working at PCI, cannot counterbalance the financial burden their incarceration puts on women. Therefore, most of these men approach extra-prison relationships cautiously, being careful not to “ask too much.” Further complicating matters, many short-timers fear “empty promises” from women outside.

Prisoners at PCI also rely heavily on what limited resources they can legitimately access behind bars. This includes their use of state-employed “correctional counselors” (sometimes called “release counselors”) who, among other things, can reserve beds for deserving short-timers in transitional housing facilities. Additionally, short-timers often turn to prison programs, several of which are offered by various community-based organizations (e.g., protestant churches and substance abuse support groups), as a strategy to increase their chances of realizing the straight life after prison. Popular programs include a GED (General Educational Development, high school equivalency) prep course, a computer lab, and cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Beyond the Gate is the largest program at PCI focusing on “reentry issues.” Inmates in this voluntary program offer three common reasons for participating. First, they see participation as an effort to combat disreputability. Many plan to use the certificates from the program (one for each of the five life skills courses and one for completing the overall curriculum) on the streets. They intend to treat such documents as “proof” they “took initiative behind bars” and plan to show them to parole officers, landlords, and employers. Similarly, several plan to collect recommendation letters from program staff. Second, many participate because the Beyond the Gate program offers resources that are unique from other programs, such as Internet access for employment and shelter searches. Third, but less commonly, Beyond the Gate students tell me they participate to acquire “skill” or “knowledge.”

The strongest indicator of short-timers linking their post-release aspirations to pre-release tactical conduct is their participation in reentry services’ “open office.” Held in a square room roughly 20-by-20 feet, short-timers come to open office to consult with Kristen, make phone calls to organizations outside, construct résumés, browse online job and shelter postings, collect brochures for local employment
centers, request credit reports, apply for food stamps, petition for birth certificates, and complete a number of other tasks. This space is regulated in part by two prisoners employed as Kristen’s aides. These men assist inmates on the computers, maintain a mental queue of waiting inmates, and help organize the flow of bodies entering and exiting the office. Only the yard and the chow hall are louder during the dozen or so hours this office is open each week. Consider the following extract from my field notes,

I sit in a corner between the phone desk and the waiting chairs. There’s a lot to take in. When I’m not bullshitting with inmates on the waiting wall about prison, release, police, politics, movies, television, music, food, family, tattoos, and the city, I jot notes as I eavesdrop on staff-inmate conversations, listen to convicts talk on the phone, and watch computer screens across the room.

In the middle of the room one inmate fills out a food stamp application so that it is ready for submission by the time he is discharged in a couple weeks. He tells one of the inmate aides that he doesn’t know what to list for an address and phone number yet. “Leave it blank for now,” the aide suggests. Another inmate quietly fills out a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid).

Following Kristen’s dialing, one inmate calls the DMV to check the status of his driver’s license. He rattles off a docket number and writes notes in a small notepad. After him, Kristen dials for another inmate to inquire about a program that converts minor offense fines into community service. He too records his phone conversation in a notepad. Next, a prisoner calls (again after Kristen dials) a community college he plans to enroll in. He holds a letter from the college. The letter requests tax records for the previous year—he was incarcerated the entire time and doesn’t know what to submit. Shortly thereafter an inmate phones (again after Kristen dials) a transitional housing facility. He tells the person on the other line, “The first thing I’m going to do is go to the parole office, get some real food for lunch, (and) then I’ll be there.”

Kristen does more than dial the phone for inmates. A man sits across her desk and stresses his suspicion that a family member stole his identity and ruined his credit. Kristen suggests that he secure a credit report to verify this. She does not explain how or if a credit report can function as evidence of fraud. Next, an inmate approaches Kristin about banking. She hands him a brochure for U.S. Bank. “U.S. Bank’s good,” he says, “I don’t think I burned them.” Kristen responds quickly and bluntly, “They know who you’ve burned.” Once he leaves another inmate sits down and asks about a “blue slip” he received from Oregon’s health insurance lottery program. “That’s good,” says Kristin, “Hold on to it. You don’t qualify from in here. Send it back when you get out.”

Across the room an inmate browses apartment listings on a computer, writing down phone numbers and monthly rates. Next to him, an inmate types and prints a letter to a judge. He leaves and an older inmate takes his spot. After staring at an empty word
processing screen for about 30 seconds this old man turns and asks one of the inmate aides how to open up a résumé template.

Given the tremendous amount of evidence that ex-cons face precarious labor, marginal shelter, and probable re-admission into prison or jail, it is somewhat understandable that scholars ignore the types of conduct captured in the above excerpt. Just as the aspirations of short-timers likely stretch well beyond their actual life chances, their corresponding actions may very well be impractical in the long run. The point made here is simple: short-timers do not just sit idle and talk. When offered channels to act toward the future (e.g., visitation, voluntary programming, open office hours), they do so in direct reference to their verbalized aspirations and this phenomenon is largely unaccounted for in previous research on the short-timer experience (Cobbina and Bender, 2012; Dhami et al., 2006; Lloyd and Serin, 2012).

Subjectivity and domination

What explains these seemingly impractical aspirations and actions? Clemmer’s (1940: 297) description of the penitentiary as a world where the “ruggedness of individualism” prevails helps contextualize my data. While friendships, gangs, cliques, and romantic-sexual partnerships certainly exist at PCI, inmates primarily articulate their existence in terms of personal independence, efficacy, and merit. Individualism may be general mythology in a universe where the dominated are uniformed and stripped of many basic autonomies, but people in this mass nevertheless interpret their existence in ways that sensationalize their individuality. Consider a few interview excerpts,

I’m 22-years-old, with no job history except for a résumé (listing prison labor) and a reference from prison (referring to a letter of reference from his prison-job supervisor) and I’m a 10-time felon. Everybody keeps talking about how bad the economy is, this, that, and the other. I’m confident. I know I’m going to get a job, because I’m relentless. I’m not going to stop until I do get a job. (Jack, 22 y/o)

A lot of these guys come in here (and) blame everybody but themselves. That’s stupid. If you go out there (into the streets) and you say ‘Ok I was out of the gate for four or five days and my probation or parole officer violated me (revoked supervision) because I was drinking alcohol,’ who’s fault is that? It says right there (in the conditions of parole). That’s one of your conditions. Or (other inmates say) ‘I got into a fight.’ Your conditions are right there. You are not set up to fail. They (other inmates) say ‘Oh the whole system is set up to fail, they (parole officers) just want to throw us back in here so they can get their federal money for the State of Oregon.’ That’s bullshit, man… It’s just a cop out… They (other inmates) say, ‘Hey, I don’t have no money’ all the time. There’s no excuses. It’s all in how you apply yourself. That’s it. (Stan, 44 y/o)
It’s real simple… You don’t pick up (drugs). You don’t use (drugs). If you don’t pick up and you don’t use, you won’t make the wrong next choice. If you don’t make the next wrong choice, then no matter what everything will be alright. (Alex, 46 y/o)

These men’s post-prison aspirations, to which a series in-prison actions correspond, are embedded in a narrative of the agentic, exceptional, and focused ex-con. So-called reentry barriers are framed as tests and trials of individual strength and intelligence. If a convict really wants to adopt the straight life after prison, he simply needs to put in the hard work (e.g., through a shit job and into a real job) and deploy the “right tricks” (e.g., rapport building with potential landlords). Additionally, in framing the straight life and assembling plans for accomplishing that life, these men note how they are an “exception to the rule.” They are hard-working while other short-timers are lazy. They are authentic while others are inauthentic. They are virtuous while others are wicked. Moreover, short-timers understand the archetypical straight lifer to be focused, which above all else requires a sober mind capable of rational decision-making.

If the perceptions and practices of short-timers can be contextualized by Clemmer’s (1940: 297) “world of individuals,” what contextualizes this world of “I,” “me,” and “mine”? The quick answer is domination. For good reason, recent scholarship emphasizes the fluidity, hegemony, and negotiability of penal power (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001; Crewe, 2011; Werth, 2011). However, a basic hierarchy remains pivotal to the prison experience: staff dominate inmates. As Weber (1978: 212) reminds us, domination does not necessarily mean absolute power, but rather the probability a person or collection of people can summon obedience from a specific group. And while relations of authority and obedience can be momentarily inverted, the odds are generally and overwhelmingly in the staff’s favor. It is this generic and enduring structure—staff dominating inmates—that best contextualizes individualism among inmates generally and short-timers specifically.

From below, short-timers, like all inmates, struggle to realize dignity in an undignified space. Carceral misery shapes inmate practice by orienting it toward the amelioration of the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 1958: 63–83; also see Goffman, 1961: 54). From this point of view, future-oriented narratives and actions function as vehicles of realized selfhood that relieve the torment of penal objectification. Aspiring and acting upon what one could be after prison—the extraordinary ex-con who defeats the odds and enters the straight life—converge into one of the few channels these men can take to realize subjectivity in a world that, at least to some extent, objectifies them.

From above, custodians reinforce a narrative of individualism by drawing on a new correctional logic, what we might call the rationale of reentry. This rationale, rooted in a larger project of prisoner responsibilization, is evident across thousands of mission statements for “reentry programs” in and out of prison: self-motivated, pro-social, and resourceful people exiting prison can (and should) hurdle post-prison barriers to accomplish a successful reentry. If there is one motto to
summarize the Beyond the Gate program it is “apply yourself.” Visions of structural hardships are cleansed with lessons in personal responsibility. Consider the following passage from my field notes,

Kristen starts the first employment class by saying, “The bottom line: employers don’t care about your criminal record if you make them money.” After a few inmates nod their heads, she asks the class to name some barriers to employment for ex-cons. One prisoner says, “First impressions.” Another answers, “Because we lie” (probably referring to lying about employment history and criminal record). As if offering something incredibly wise and enlightening, Kristin responds, “The number one barrier to employment is motivation.”

A similar theme is emphasized by the texts assigned to prisoners. One worksheet offers a number of behavioral and attitudinal tips for a “successful re-entry,” each followed by an open-ended question to be answered by inmate participants. The first tip reads, “Realize that a successful re-entry is a series of daily decisions to ‘do the next right thing.’ What is one ‘right thing’ you need to remind yourself to do?” The document continues with the tip, “Accept your situation without blaming others: work, family, supervision, recovery, etc. What is one thing you need to accept?” Similar to the messages verbalized by instructors, the worksheet frames the ex-con as somebody with opportunities and resources to succeed. The final tip and question reads, “Practice gratitude: You committed a crime in your community. That same community is financially supporting your successful re-entry back into society through treatment, housing and jobs programs. What can you tell yourself that demonstrates gratitude?”

Another handout shows a 16-piece jigsaw puzzle. Within each piece is a single component of a “successful re-entry,” all of which focus on personal decisions, attitudes, and behaviors: “Develop a positive attitude about supervision,” “Get a mentor,” “Develop a positive relationship with your PO,” “Tell the truth,” “Be with pro-social friends and family,” “Plan and manage finances,” “Avoid anti-social peers,” “Weigh consequences of choices,” “Work a relapse prevention plan,” “Manage stress,” “Be willing to work your way up,” “Avoid drugs and alcohol,” “Find and keep a job,” “Use problem-solving skills,” “Ask for help,” and finally “Avoid an attitude of entitlement.”

When asked his thoughts on the Beyond the Gate program, Rick, an 11-time prisoner, summarizes the lessons learned by articulating a narrative of personal responsibility and condemnation,

Get down from the clouds. Be honest with yourself and who you are. Take responsibility. When (Kristen) ran my credit report she was like ‘I can’t believe that you’re 41-years-old and you’ve never paid for your own home or purchased a car!’ She goes, ‘It’s ridiculous for a 41 year old man to be like that.’ It hit home. I think about it and it still irks me that she said that, but she’s right.
Certainly, several inmates reject the scripts offered by the Beyond the Gate program. Such rejections are not dismissals of the rationale of reentry, but rather refusals of the “stupid” lessons offered by correctional staff. For example, Adam, a 44-year-old convict four months to discharge, chuckles when I ask him why he is not participating in the program. He says, “I know what I got to do when I get out. First of all, you don’t break the fucking law... (Beyond the Gate) is for people that don’t have very high IQs.” Even inmates in the class offer this sentiment, as many roll their eyes when Kristen describes parole officers as “wanting to help parolees,” and many break into laughter when she gives them a worksheet listing hygiene and household cleaning supplies to purchase on the streets. That said, the vast majority of men concur with the narrative of personal responsibility pressed upon them by the state.

A double contextualization is used to make sense of short-timers’ straight life aspirations and actions. First, a language of individualism structures the articulations of these men. The common framings short-timers use to verbalize their future and justify their current actions glorify an archetypical ex-con who is agentic, exceptional, and focused. Second, this individualism, which may seem just indicative of a mainstream cultural importation or a general extension of cognitive “system-justification” (Jost et al., 2003), can be linked to the proximate and powerful forces of penal domination. From below, inmates struggle to regain subjectivity against the processes of objectification labored by their custodians and this is an enduring phenomenon behind bars. Narratives that emphasize individualism in the present and future are but one of the few channels short-timers have to protect or regain personhood. From above, custodians affirm this individualism by imposing a complementary narrative of personal responsibility. Indeed, domination behind bars does not rely solely on processes of objectification. Appealing to the convict’s desire to achieve markers of personhood, the Beyond the Gate program teaches that post-prison success rests firstly, if not fully, on individual will. Short-timer subjectivity is as much forged from above as it is rooted from below.

**Conclusion**

While researchers studying the subjective orientations of soon-to-be-released prisoners suggest this population authentically desires a “successful reentry,” few link this orientation to conduct and context (Cobbina and Bender, 2012; Dhami et al., 2006; Lloyd and Serin, 2012). With respect to conduct, extant research simply ignores what short-timers do in reference to their looming departure. Soon-to-be-released prisoners are assumed to be idle. With respect to context, extant research largely ignores the penitentiary as a primary force of aspiration and action. The surprising or unsurprising “optimism” of short-timers is probably shaped in part by a classic condition of imprisonment: staff dominating inmates. This small ethnographic study responds to these shortcomings. My contribution is twofold.

First, I argue that short-timers, at least at this particular time and place, are future-oriented actors. They articulate aspirations for the straight life, a life of
material security and social honor. They also articulate a step-by-step plan for climbing from the destitute and dishonorable position of felon to the secure and honorable position of straight lifer. However, we cannot dismiss such articulations as just fantasies when they correspond with actions inside prison. From behind bars, these men agentically draw on two measly resources—family and penitentiary—to increase their chances of surviving the streets and entering the straight life. I locate a tight correspondence between short-timer aspiration and action where many researchers have simply ended with the conclusion that short-timers have “illusions” (Dhami et al. 2006).

Second, I further challenge the assumption that short-timers are delusional and ignorant by contextualizing their future-oriented perceptions and practices. Clemmer’s (1940) “world of individuals” is evidenced across many short-timers’ verbalizations of future hopes, expectations, and plans. Inmate individualism, a paradoxical orientation in a world where individuality is under a systematic assault, is doubly rooted in the structure and exercise of domination behind bars. From below, inmates combat their objectification by struggling to regain subjectivity (Goffman, 1961; Sykes, 1958; also see Rubin, 2014). This manifests when short-timers narrate a future self (probable or not) that is liberated, autonomous, and secure (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Ochs and Capps, 1996). Such narrations seem to be one of a few channels to combat the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). But, as more recent research on inmate responsibilization has suggested, prisoner subjectivity is not solely situated against forces of objectification (Bosworth, 2007; Crewe, 2011; Hannah-Moffat, 2005; Kramer et al., 2013). From above, custodians, in this case life skills programmers, impose lessons in personal responsibility using the rationale of reentry. Likely in an effort to maintain a “softer” and more efficient power behind and beyond bars, custodians attempt to forge self-regulating and risk-accepting subjects (Crewe, 2011). The imposition of personal responsibility reinforces the individualism sought by inmates in their overall attempt to alleviate penal misery. Thus, the very aspirations and actions that are likely impractical on the streets are surely practical in the immediate context of the prison.

In addition to informing existing scholarship on the carceral experiences of short-timing, this study cautions against some increasingly popular opinions and policies. On the one hand, this article should spark some wariness toward “reentry programs” and the social scientists and bureaucrats that sing the praises of a “prisoner reentry movement” (Travis, 2007). The moralizing language of good, or “successful,” reentry and bad, or “unsuccessful,” reentry molds a new penal imagination that can be misleading if not dangerous. This study shows how easily such a discourse of reentry can be absorbed into preexisting structures of penal domination.

Of course, this article is not without limitations. My sample is small, my site is unique, and my conclusion is uniform. Readers, whether interested in short-timers in or out of the United States, should carefully consider how a study in a minimum-security prison in a relatively left-leaning and a predominantly white state might inform their broader understandings of penal processes. Skeptics would be right to
ask about variations in age, criminal history, and race. They would also be right to ask about the less instrumental and more expressive concerns of short-timers. My focus on a baseline account of future-oriented aspiration and action at PCI simply emerges from a lack of observed variation, but that is not to say variation does not exist at PCI or elsewhere.

My empirical failures aside, this article offers two general implications. First, my description helps dispel scholarly and folk myths of the daydreaming and idle convict—an easy construct to build when the prison is often analogized to a warehouse. The short-timers I spent time with are undoubtedly future-oriented actors. Second, my explanation recalls the prison as a relatively autonomous space of domination where inmate subjectivity is established from above and below. As such, this article translates the seeming irrational orientations of short-timers into practical responses to the carceral experience.

Acknowledgments

I owe thanks to the prisoners and staff at PCI as well as to several administrators at ODOC. I am grateful to the following people for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article: Sandra Smith, David Harding, Melissa Thompson, Randy Blazak, Peter Collier, Jody Sundt, Heather Haveman, Loïc Wacquant, Claude Fischer, Daniel Klutz, Benjamin Shestakofsky, Manuel Rosaldo, Chris Herring, David Showalter, Michaela Simmons, Brenna Seim, and the anonymous reviewers with Punishment & Society.

Notes

1. This study, including both its interview and observational components, was approved by a university human subjects review board and a state correctional research and evaluation board.
2. According to ODOC intake data shared with me by record-keepers during the midpoint of my fieldwork, most prisoners did not hold employment before their last arrest, and those who did made what we might reasonably title “low wages” (a third of the employed made $10.00 or less an hour and over half made $15.00 or less). And, although African Americans make up two percent of Oregon’s residents, they account for nearly 10 percent of all ODOC prisoners.

References


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