

Mature Coping Among Life-Sentenced Inmates: An Exploratory Study of Adjustment Dynamics

By Robert Johnson and Ania Dobrzanska

Life in prison is a punishing, painful experience (Sykes, 1958). Every prison inmate serves hard time, but hard time can be constructive time if the pains of imprisonment are met with mature coping (Johnson, 2002). Mature coping entails “dealing with life’s problems like a responsive and responsible adult, one who seeks autonomy without violating the rights of others, security without resort to deception or violence, and relatedness to others as the finest and fullest expression of human identity” (Johnson, 2002).¹ In general, long-term inmates, and especially lifers, appear to cope maturely with confinement by establishing daily routines that allow them to find meaning and purpose in their prison lives — lives that might otherwise seem empty and pointless (Toch, 1992).

Life-sentenced inmates typically come to a realistic assessment of their grim situation. After a period of unsettled adjustment, which may last for weeks, months or even years, and during which they may be depressed and even suicidal (Wichmann, Serin and Motiuk, 2000) or disturbed and disruptive (Toch and Adams, 2002), lifers come grudgingly to accept the prison as their involuntary home for life and fellow lifers as something akin to an adopted family (Toch and Adams, 2002; Paluch, 2004). As one inmate facing life without parole put it: “As lifers, we share a common bond unlike other prisoners ... this institution is literally home” (Paluch, 2004). Prison is not a home that life-sentenced inmates would want, and prison does not provide a life they would desire, but prison is all lifers have. To survive, they must adapt. For lifers, prison is as good or as bad as it gets.

Research suggests that the vast majority of lifers opt to avoid trouble and to make the most of the opportunities for work, education and rehabilitative programs in prison (see Johnson, 2002). Recent ethnographic books by lifers reinforce this body of work (see Paluch, 2004; Santos, 2004; Carceral, 2004). The notion that one must make the most of the opportunities provided by prison was a pervasive theme in the interviews reported in this study, several of which are quoted for illustrative purposes and to suggest ways to interpret the existing literature.

Method

Fifteen interviews were conducted by Robert Johnson in his work as a mitigation expert in capital cases in Maryland and Pennsylvania during the period of 2001 through 2004. All interviewees were males convicted of murder who had been sentenced to life with or without the possibility of parole. Nine of the interviewees were black and six were white. Age at interview ranged from 18 to 55, with a mean age of 33. The interviewees had served from three to 20-plus years of confinement at the time of the interview. With one exception, these were well-adjusted inmates as measured by rule infractions, a common and accepted measure of prison adjustment (Toch and Adams, 2002). In this study, rates of prison infractions were low — approximately one infraction per year per

offender. The interviews were open-ended explorations of the nature of daily adjustment; the aim was to examine how each offender dealt with daily problems in prison living without resorting to rule violations (infractions).

Findings from an opportunity or convenience sample are necessarily suggestive rather than definitive. Nevertheless, it was apparent that the lifers in this interview sample, consistent with prior research, attempted to make the most of the prison world by identifying the resources legitimately available to them and by using those resources to fashion a decent existence behind bars, one that featured autonomy, security and relatedness to others, the hallmarks of mature coping. Each dimension of mature coping as it applies to lifers is explored in turn.

Achieving Autonomy

The ability to make choices, even choices that offer only the illusion of control, is a fundamental human need that counters institutional dependency and fosters autonomous thinking (Toch, 1998). Research suggests that inmates with a sense of control over their lives adjust better to prison and to life on the outside (Johnson, 2002). Though the evidence is limited, it would appear that such inmates are reincarcerated at lower levels than other inmates (Zamble, 1990).

A key choice inmates can make is to accept and hence give their consent to those aspects of prison life that are out of their control. In other words, they can consciously choose to submit to the prison rather than fight battles they cannot win. For men sentenced to life under the close custody of a high-security penal institution, this stoical wisdom is easily the greater part of valor. Lifers regularly make this crucial accommodation to the rigors of confinement, emphasizing that they are not pawns of the prison routine or of their own round of daily life but rather are active agents in their daily adjustment. “I’m not a creature of habit,” one lifer observed emphatically in his interview. “I give mental consent to the routine; I’m not drifting, I’m choosing.” Such choices are made, in the words of another interviewee, “each day, every day, day by day.” The idea, noted this man, is to “use each day wisely, for yourself and for your development.”

Effective adaptation would seem to mean, first and foremost, the acceptance of one’s limited situation. Inmates have nothing coming to them; lifers must contend with a life of continuing deprivation. Virtually anything and everything can be taken from inmates. “You can’t have it,” said one interviewee, “so you let it go.” Inmates, and especially lifers, must face the fact that they have little or no control over how they are treated in prison. “You can lose anything at any time,” said another interviewee, “that’s my life here.” The point, in this man’s view, is not to cope by devaluing things, getting through each day in a kind of low-grade depression. Instead, people must try to live in the moment — to enjoy things while they have them but, in the words of this interviewee, “to

let go when things are taken away.” As another interviewee put it, “prison humbles you [but] it don’t have to humiliate you.” These humbled men cope well under the difficult circumstances of their lives, and this can be a source of pride. “I do very well in this type of environment,” said an interviewee. “I accept that I have no control over anything. I go with the schedule, the structure.” This man, like all but one of the 15 men interviewed for this study, gets along (sometimes with considerable effort) but is chronically unhappy. “I hate it, but I can adapt and accept and get along.”

A longitudinal study of long-term inmates (including lifers) in Canadian prisons found that these inmates were well adjusted to the limited lives available to them in confinement (Zamble, 1992). These long-termers not only consented to the overarching authority of the prison but, much like the interviewees for this study, found and exploited opportunities to fashion a life at least partly on their own terms, giving them a sense of control and hence personal autonomy. For example, they chose the cell over the yard as the main arena for their daily life because the cell allowed them to maintain control over their daily routine. In the cell, they could study, do hobby craft work or watch television. In the yard, they had to be on guard for danger, always ready to react to others rather than act on their own terms. In their cells, they could relax and, within the limited range of options open to them, spend their time as they saw fit.

Personal routines that afforded a sense of autonomy were a central feature of the interviews with lifers reported in this study. For example, one interviewee reported that he read extensively, devouring religious books for the first two hours of each day, followed by the sports pages, which were reviewed assiduously for up to an hour. He then wrote letters for another three hours (records confirmed his prodigious correspondence), worked out for an hour or more in the gym, the yard or in his cell, then played board games (like Scrabble and chess) with a group of other lifers, and finally ended each day with Bible study, sometimes in a formal class, and always at night in his cell before he went to sleep. Another man’s routine, much like the Canadian inmates studied by Zamble, unfolded almost entirely within the constricted world of his cell. He watched several hours of television each day and spent several more hours playing video fantasy games.² He only ventured out of his cell onto the tier or dayroom during the rare intervals when these areas were deserted and he could be alone.

To an outsider, the often-rigid daily personal routines of lifers might look suffocating and dull, but to the men themselves, the opposite was true; they viewed their routines as a means of liberation from a life that would otherwise be unbearable. “Writing relaxes my mind,” said one man, it “takes me out of here” (see Johnson and Chernoff, 2001). Video games do the same, allowing the inmate to enter and live for a time in a fantasy world, solving problems, rescuing maidens and vanquishing enemies. Television, too, provides a powerful outlet for escapist fantasy. “A good soap takes you away,” said one interviewee. This man observed, not without a sense of irony, that someone could visit his cellblock and see “hardcore felons arguing about the soaps — who’s good, who’s bad, what will happen next.” Television is also seen as offering a window on the real world that they can share with loved ones when they visit. When conversation lags, inmate and visitor have television shows in

common to fall back on. For several interviewees, the television provided company and companionship, almost like a cellmate. “I often leave it on just for the company,”³ said one man.

Achieving Security

Inmates with mature coping skills address problems “without resorting to deception or violence, except when necessary for self-defense” (Johnson, 2002). This observation appears to apply to lifers for several reasons. For one, the highly organized personal routines developed by lifers may provide a shelter from stress — a safe haven in which they feel reasonably secure. Inmates with a routine feel they know what to expect from prison life; forewarned, they feel they are forearmed. Personal routines also may provide safe outlets for the release of tension, tension that might otherwise build up and spill over into relations with other inmates, causing trouble and inviting danger (see Toch, 1977). The routines of lifers also keep them away from the world of the more predatory inmates, who are a source of trouble and whose impulsive behavior would undermine their carefully wrought adjustments (see Johnson, 2002).

Lifers have very low rates of infractions and are generally very well-behaved inmates (Flanagan, 1981; Sorenson and Wrinkle, 1998). Some lifers, in the authors’ experiences, go years without a single infraction. Lifers stay out of trouble because trouble, and especially trouble featuring violence, jeopardizes the narrow but nominally rewarding lives they have built for themselves, often with great effort. As one interviewee observed, when asked if there were “hot spots” in prison that he consciously avoided: “The cell is a hot spot. Everywhere is a hot spot. You’ve got to stay alert all the time.”

Violence comes at too high a cost for lifers, because violence brings with it punishments that disrupt the routines lifers value. Any serious rule violation jeopardizes the way of life these inmates have built for themselves; a violent infraction, even one associated with self-defense, unravels the lifers’ way of life, landing them in segregation, back to square one, making them start all over again, in a new area, with new neighbors and new staff, with little to go on and a lot to prove. By organizing their routines around avoiding trouble, lifers have taken charge of their lives in the objectively precarious world of the prison and made those lives more secure.

Lifers, more than most inmates, live by the prison adage, “Do your own time,” but they give added meaning to this time-honored expression. As we have noted, lifers try to make prison time their own by choosing their personal routines and by choosing to consent to those activities they cannot change or avoid. Lifers maintain added control over their prison lives by spending much of their time in solitary pursuits. Interactions with others, particularly strangers and especially strangers who are not fellow lifers, invite trouble and increase the risk of violence. Outside the “family” of lifers that often emerges (Paluch, 2004), solitude keeps things simple. One interviewee put it this way: “I stay to myself as much as I can. I go out on the pod when it’s empty. I just sit there and think. It’s quiet. When the others come out, I go back into my cell.” Another interviewee said: “I keep to myself. I’m not into kiddy games.” This common sentiment echoes Sykes’ (1958) classic description of the social

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world of the prison as “a gigantic playground” filled with children in adult bodies playing dangerous games at one another’s expense.

Lifers age and, hence, mature in prison, often developing better self-control in the process. They see other inmates, and especially short-term inmates, as impulsive, disruptive and even dangerous, as rowdy “tourists” who make prison life hard for the long-term residents who care about the conditions and quality of daily prison life (Flanagan, 1981; DeRosia, 1998). As one lifer observed in his book about prison adjustment, touching on a theme developed in the study’s interviews: “Lifers are the stabilizing force for prison management and for creating a more livable atmosphere ... [W]e are the ones who want to make certain that the conditions of our confinement are less stressful and more pleasant for inmates and staff alike” (Paluch, 2004). The authors’ interviews confirm the finding from prior research that lifers tend to stay to themselves and among themselves, and tend to find security in the structured world in which they live (Zamble, 1992). Lifers report little or no fear of other inmates.

Caring for Self and Others

With the passage of time, lifers appear to become better and better acclimated to the prison world, the involuntary home they have, under duress, made their own. Lifers may also become more thoughtful as they age. Several interviewees noted a growing tolerance within themselves; some spoke openly of developing empathy for others. “I don’t judge,” said one interviewee. “We’re all from different cultures.” He went on to acknowledge that “the young here do judge, but their youth makes them ignorant.” Wisdom, he felt, demanded empathy. “You gotta put yourself in their shoes if you’re going to understand them, get along with them. If someone is a fool, just stay clear of him. If a fool upsets you, who’s the real fool?” Another interviewee seconded these views: “I’ve outgrown that [kid] stuff. With time comes wisdom.” Whereas this man reported that he used to react to any provocation, he contends that now, after years in prison, “I’m bigger than that now.” He has a tactical sense of adjustment to prison. Adjusting to prison, he said, “is like driving a car; you’ve got to watch out for the other guy.”

Some of the older lifers try to mentor younger inmates, to help them avoid the mistakes they made when they were younger. “By helping the younger residents to gain a new perspective,” said one interviewee, “I have discovered that their maturity levels increase.” The appreciation these mentors receive gives them a sense of personal worth. “It’s nice to help,” said one interviewee, “It’s nice to be appreciated, respected for your words of wisdom.” Lifers also want to feel useful. In the words of one interviewee, “You can be an interpreter or guide to the young guys, like a coach.” For one interviewee, the mentor role featured peacemaking. “I step in to keep violence down and keep things [running] smooth.” Some of the lifers who mentor younger inmates may be looking for the respect and perhaps even affection that an individual gives to a concerned parent. It’s “like a parental thing,” said another inmate, almost wistfully.

As lifers age and perhaps cultivate empathy, it would appear they come to value their connections to others.

These valued connections include ties to family they work to sustain and ties to others in prison, typically lifers, they work to create. At a minimum, the lifers feel they are more likely to take the needs and concerns of others into account, ideally building social capital that provides resources to make their own prison lives more rewarding. Lifers are inclined to see others in the prison, at least other lifers, as fellow sufferers and potential resources for the amelioration of that suffering. Several of the lifers interviewed had developed a deep religious faith during their years in prison, which gave added meaning and resonance to their suffering and to the sense of brotherhood they felt with other lifers who shared their faith (see Santos, 2004; Carceral 2004). Some of the interviewees described themselves as having a religious mission that guided their prison lives. “I needed help and God gave it to me,” said one interviewee, tapping a common theme in the interviews. “I don’t preach, but I feel touched by God, and I spread The Word.”

Relationships reduce loneliness, offer a source of support, and open up avenues of activity that make the prison more accommodating. Lifer groups, which are increasingly common in American prisons since the 1960s, offer companionship as well as a vehicle for productive activities, including those that feature mentoring and “giving something back” to the next generation, to quote one interviewee. Among the family of lifers, inmates are valued and supported, a point stressed by Paluch (2004) and raised in many of the interviews. Lifers may choose to be alone much of the time, and particularly to be away from regular inmates, but they need not be lonely.

Implications

Not long ago, a widely believed myth had it that lifers deteriorated, living out their prison terms in a state of utter passivity. This may be called the “lifer as zombie” scenario, since in its original form, lifers were thought to become passive, sluggish and almost inert, like figures cast in stone (Cohen and Taylor, 1972). However, it seems, nothing could be further from the truth.⁴ Lifers are not passive entities, worn down by the relentless pressure of prison life. Most can and do adapt to incarceration in active and reasonably effective ways, although adjustment typically remains an ongoing and often arduous affair. Lifers are shaped by the prison’s routine, to be sure, but they typically develop their own routines, which in turn shape (though perhaps only in small ways) the larger prison world of which they are a part.

Adjustment is always a dynamic transaction of person and environment (Toch, 1975). Prison adjustment is no exception. It is only in extreme cases — very fragile inmates, very brutal prisons — that the monolithically destructive impact once presumed to be the normal course of events for life-sentence inmates is found. Imprisonment may well be an ordeal for most people, but people are surprisingly resilient. Indeed, most people appear to survive prison with little or no lasting psychological damage (Bonta and Gendreau, 1990), and many are likely to experience an increase in pro-social attitudes as well as improved psychological profiles (Wormith, 1984; Zamble and Porporino, 1984; Zamble, 1992). Just as inmates prove resilient and adaptive, so too do prisons prove to be surprisingly accommodating institutions. This is the key insight embodied in the literature on prison ecology, pioneered by Toch (1977).

A transactional view of prisons and inmates highlights the possibilities for change. Many people believe that they can change their own lives, personalities or environments; they do not necessarily extend this belief in the possibility of change to inmates and their lives, personalities or environments (Maruna, 2003). Of course, some people do not change, and some inmates, even lifers, continue their destructive course of conduct wherever they find themselves. There are those instances of individual lifers who spend years in close confinement under strict surveillance because of their violent and disruptive behavior. (Jack Abbott, notorious author of *In the Belly of the Beast* and one-time protégé of the novelist, Normal Mailer, comes readily to mind. Abbott found cause for resentment in almost all his encounters with prison staff and, by his own account, resorted to violence against officers on a regular basis. Accordingly, he was punished frequently and sometimes severely.)

The key point is that men like Abbott chose this adjustment in a misguided effort to cope with their bleak lives and change or control their environments. For such men, autonomy is distilled down to defiance; violence is seen as the only credible weapon of self-defense in their arsenal and hostility the only reliable coin of interpersonal relations. But this is a brutal and demeaning (and immature) way of life, and one that wears thin over time. Few lifers can wage war on the prison indefinitely; few lifers are able to live in prison as if they have nothing to lose. (Abbott, the poster child for maladaptation in prison, eventually took his own life in a New York State prison.) Rebellious inmates like Abbott are memorable and dangerous figures, and they make for good war stories, but it would be unwise to lose sight of the forest of good adjustment for the occasional tree of discontent.

Inmates are confined in a structured setting that constrains their behavior. This is why prisons, even prisons full of murderers, have lower homicide rates than those found in the free world.⁵ Many inmates, and virtually all lifers, learn to live within the behavioral boundaries of confinement; they settle into the daily prison routine, they develop a routine of their own, and they grow accustomed to the discomforts and pains of imprisonment. With a structured daily routine, inmates learn what to expect and how to get what they want without breaking rules or hurting other people — negative and even criminal behaviors they deployed regularly in the more chaotic free world.

Lifers, in particular, are a bit like the Bill Murray character in the movie *Groundhog Day*. Murray's character gets up each day to the very same day he lived the day before, but which he can live differently, can make his own, if he so chooses. With enough repetition — enough days like the one before — lifers come to see how the world works and learn to live more effectively with others to satisfy at least some of their needs. Successful adjustment feeds on itself, producing more success, more confidence and more skills. Note that the research on lifers directly supports this proposition: Over time, lifers gain emotional maturity, show significant increases in verbal intelligence and demonstrate significant reductions in hostility during the course of their prison lives (Flanagan, 1980a; Flanagan, 1980b; Wormith, 1984).

Some lifers are eventually released from prison, these days after serving about 30 years behind bars (Mauer, King and Young, 2004). Recidivism rates for these offenders are quite low (Sorenson and Marquart, 2003).⁶ Low recidivism rates are almost certainly a byproduct of aging

in prison as well as lessons in mature coping learned in prison over time. On release, lifers are both older and wiser for having spent many years learning better adjustment habits. They appear to have much in common with the offenders in Maruna's (2003) seminal study of men who "made good" and desisted from crime upon release from prison. Like Maruna's subjects, lifers have survived the considerable adversity of confinement through an "optimistic sense of personal efficacy" — a belief in their autonomy — that should serve them well during the often rocky transition from confinement to freedom.

The trouble-free and often productive records of adjustment that lifers so regularly compile are the fruits of hope, another key ingredient in Maruna's notion of "making good" on the outside. For inmates sentenced to life, and increasingly life without parole,⁷ hope is crucial to their psychological survival, but hope does not come easy in these trying circumstances. The ability to avoid trouble year after year, and sometimes decade after decade, shows among these offenders a remarkably deep, persistent and hard-won faith that their prison behavior might one day matter, helping them earn release. When some of these inmates are in fact released, it can only be supposed that their faith in themselves and their hope for the future are rewarded and renewed, adding to their resolve to lead decent, productive lives in the free community.

Finally, lifers often find purpose in their prison lives. A sense of purpose is perhaps the key ingredient in "making good," and it is an ingredient that can be readily carried over to the free world. Several lifers discussed their mentoring activities and their general desire to make a difference (and perhaps redeem themselves) by helping others avoid the mistakes they made when they were free. Inmate organizations for lifers often feature some type of "scared straight" program, during which the inmates use their experiences to warn wayward children about the dangers of a life of crime. Whether such programs work or not in deterring others, these activities are viable outlets for the sense of purpose, even mission, cultivated by many lifers. More than most inmates, lifers can say with some pride that they survived adversity and that, as survivors, they have unique and valuable lessons in living to share with others. Whether society is willing to listen to these lifers may be less important than that these men, when reborn to the free world, feel certain they have a message to deliver and a mission to guide their lives.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mature coping is a heuristic concept first enunciated by Robert Johnson in a research paper, "Mature Coping and Personal Reform," delivered at the 1983 annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology. The concept was published in the first edition of *Hard Time* (Johnson, 1987) and refined in subsequent editions of that book. Mature coping, in turn, is an outgrowth of the notion of "coping competence" as developed by Hans Toch (1975) in the first edition of *Men in Crisis*.

² At a recent conference on prison adjustment held in Cambridge, England, it was reported by one of the speakers that Irish corrections officials successfully used access to PlayStation games to calm restive Irish Republican Army inmates, who up to that point had been a major management problem.

³ For the seminal work on television and prison adjustment, though not focused on lifers, see Jewkes, 2002.

⁴ Until the 1980s, most studies claimed to support a belief that long-term incarceration inevitably leads to a systematic physical, emotional and

mental deterioration. However, more recent factual studies applied a more stringent methodology, demonstrating that the previous studies provided few empirical facts. Theories about the effects of imprisonment as deterioration, deprivation and prisonization have been challenged and found unreliable and inconclusive (see Flanagan, 1988).

⁵ The homicide rate in prison is 4.2 per 100,000 population; the rate for the free world is 5.5 per 100,000. By comparing prisons, which house mostly poor, young, minority men, with comparable communities in the free world, the disparity would be much greater. It is worth noting that not a single correctional officer was killed in 2000, whereas 51 police officers were killed in the line of duty (see Sorensen and Marquart, 2003).

⁶ Mauer et al. (2004) report that: "Four out of every five (79.4 percent) lifers released in 1994 had no arrests for a new crime in the three years after their release. This compares to an arrest-free rate of just one-third (32.5 percent) for all offenders released from prison."

⁷ Lifers comprise roughly 10 percent of all inmates; life without parole sentences, in turn, make up 25 percent of all lifers (Mauer et al., 2004).

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Data from 487 male and female retirees identify four poor adjustment styles--poor health, negativism, change adaptation and retirement reluctance. While the latter two responses to retirement tend to be problems only in the short term, the former two may have far reaching consequences. Health related retirement and negativism about retiring were linked with low activity and involvement, poor physical and mental health, inadequate income and low life satisfaction in the years following retirement. Suggested Citation. Braithwaite, V. A. & Gibson, D. M. & Bosly-Craft, Richard, 1986. " Mature Coping among Life Sentenced Inmates: An Exploratory Study of Adjustment Dynamics. Corrections Compendium. [43].

Identifying the Risk of Deliberate Self-Harm among Young Prisoners by Means of Coping Typology. Suicide and Life-threatening Behavior, 38(4). [52]. Kohfeld, C.W., and Spraguue,J. (1988). In Margaret Leigey's study of older male inmates serving life without parole, almost all of those convicted of murder expressed guilt, shame, and contrition for taking another's life and sympathy for the victim's loved ones.²² Thus, a conviction for the crime of murder, in and of itself, is not a valid marker of moral depravity as the Court in.

50 Robert Johnson & Ania Dobrzanska, Mature Coping Among Life-Sentence Prisoners: An Exploratory Study of Adjustment Dynamics, 30 CORRECTIONS COMPENDIUM, 8-9, 36-38 (2005); see generally ROBERT JOHNSON ET AL., HARD TIME: A FRESH LOOK AT UNDERSTANDING AND REFORMING THE PRISON (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 4th ed.