A Theory of Life in the Round

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This study addresses ways in which inmates at the only maximum-security prison for women in Neuse City (in the northeastern United States) redefine their social world in order to survive incarceration. An aim of the project is to engage in theory building in order to examine the experiences of a world that is "lived in the round." A life in the round is a public form of life. It is a lifestyle with an enormous degree of imprecision. Yet, it is this inexactitude that provides an acceptable level of certainty. This way of life sets standards by which one constructs everyday meaning from reality. It is a "taken-for-granted," "business-as-usual" style of being. Relying on ethnographic research and interviews with 80 women at the prison, the findings revealed that a life in the round was sustaining a "normative" existence.

Introduction

Early in my research career, I chose to apply conceptual frameworks or theories to studies of information poverty. The decision to apply theories to the everyday needs of people became a standard process. As a result, I have examined several theories in my research. But in light of the work I wanted to explore, these borrowed theories began to show signs of serious weakness. Particularly noticeable to me, if not to my audiences, were the limited advances they made regarding the information needs of people who live precariously within the brutal, marginalized world I was observing.

The evidence was clear and compelling that theories borrowed from other disciplines were insufficient to examine the information needs of people who had yet to find a voice in the literature.

Subsequently, my first attempt at new theory building resulted from my study of aging women at a retirement community I called Garden Towers (Chatman, 1992). The touching candor of the women regarding a world empty of meaningful advice or help led to the creation of my *theory of information poverty.*[1]

Within the boundaries of this seemingly insulated world of mutual support and aid was a small society in which the aging women were driven by self-protective behaviors. Efforts to deal with the sudden breakdown of their lives while struggling to appear normal led to expressions of secrecy and deception.

The findings of that research were so troubling that I went back to my previous studies to find other signs of these concepts that I might have overlooked. Indeed, *secrecy* and *deception* were present in other studies I had conducted. I concluded that the lived experience of poor people is the *ne plus ultra* of the shielding of needed information from outsiders. Something that was so elusive before became clearer. My *theory of information poverty* could explain the diminishing reality of a world as lived by the residents at a retirement community that was eerie in its fastidious withdrawal of information.

Leaving the haunting atmosphere of Garden Towers, I started a study at a maximum-security prison for women. My purpose was to explore aspects of the women's lives that might add another level to my understanding of information poverty. But what I found was an information world that was functioning quite well.

A factor that seems to make this the case is the grounding of a shared reality. The inmates have standard ways of presenting themselves to each other. Initially, they might hold individual perspectives about ways to survive in prison, but over time, private views assimilate to the communal view of the *thatness* of their lives.

In its small worldness a prison, for many, is not an uncomfortable place to be. The routine of prison life gives a certain degree of security and even protection. Prisoners will reshape their own private views in order to embody the norms of prison precisely for the security that this process brings.

[1] For a comprehensive development of this theory, see "The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders." *JASIS* (Chatman, 1996).

Women in Prison

As indicated in the literature, there is minimal attention devoted to the prison life of women. For example, Giallombaro (1966) notes that "a neglected area . . . of the adult prison setting concerns female forms of deprivation" (p. 268). A finding that does emerge pertains to the effects of role distance between women in prison and the women who are their keepers and the limited attempts to protect the legal rights of women prisoners (Pollock-Byrne, 1990). Barlow (1988) supports the idea that minimal attention is paid to the rights of female inmates. She contends that "Women are far more likely to receive custodial sentences for minor offenses like shoplifting, even for their first offense, than men, who are often fined" (p. 28).

Sobel (1982) reported that women prisoners experience a number of emotional and physical problems. She attributes these problems to the stress they undergo as a result of deprivation from family and the need to learn survival skills among hostile, often dangerous, strangers.

Quoting a prisoner, Barlow (1988, p. 28) provides insight about life in prison as experienced by a female inmate:

> Life with the conditions at Holloway, I knew it would be no picnic, but I just didn't think they would treat human beings like that, anywhere.

Being unprepared for the realities of prison life leads to a number of problems: overdependence on long terms or women who are repeat offenders for emotional support, anxiety and stress over having to redefine oneself in a strange environment, and worry about family and loved ones.

Who are the women who make up the prison population? Harm (1992) identifies them as women of color and poor women. She also indicates that they are often mothers. This finding is also central to Hairston's research. In a thought-provoking article entitled "Mothers in Jail" she notes that a neglected area of knowledge is the story of what happens to their children while they are incarcerated and the effect of incarceration on their relationship with their children (1991).

Beckerman (1994) provides more detail regarding women prisoners who are also mothers. She observes that they range in age from younger than 20 to older than 32. Most are African-American, single or divorced, in jail for drug-related offenses or crimes involving violence, and serving sentences ranging from 1 year to more than 3 years. At the time of their mother's arrest, most of the children were living with a relative or in foster care (p. 10). In summary, as I indicated in a previous paragraph, there is a general lack of conceptual issues that might be applicable to prison environments.

It is critical to note the role that information plays for these women. For example, a characteristic of information in a prison is that it carries a very specific purpose; to systematically change behavior to fit the environment. Even when new prisoners try to shield themselves from this information, the pressure to conform is too great.

Another characteristic of the information is that it seeks to facilitate the change from outsider to one whose values lie inside the prison. This is accomplished through specific language, customers, and so forth. Merton's[2] study of worldviews identifies two types of individuals and the networks they chose for support and advice: "cosmopolitan" and "locals." According to Merton, being cosmopolitan means having an orientation outside one's social world to the "Great Society" with its emphasis on national and international interests. In Merton's conceptual scheme, it also means holding a belief that one is an integral part of that larger world (1968, p. 447). When Merton's definition of cosmopolitan is modified to fit the needs of the prison study, being more cosmopolitan refers to an orientation and social behavior that is directed outside of prison life, and a knowledge that in order to stay in touch with that other life, one's interests and values must be those of an "outsider."

On the other hand, the "locals" are "insiders" whose interests are focused on the everyday reality of prison life. The prison is their world. Consequently, knowledge of the larger society has minimal interest. Unlike the cosmopolitans, who maintain few relationships within the prison, primarily because other inmates are not regarded as central to their sense of self, locals devote most of their time and energy to sustaining prison relationships. An example of a localized perspective is provided by a 35-year-old African-American mother of five children. In her opinion, the system is partially responsible for the small worldview held by many prisoners. Her narrative is given below:

> The sad part is, you don't get nothing for good behavior. There's no incentive for people to gain good behavior. There are women here who are career prisoners. They live their lives in prison being fed and clothed and having little pseudo-home relationships with other women. Instead of girls making memories outside or doing things that can assist them once they get outside, the prison becomes their own world.

In trying to explain how information aids in forming a worldview, a conclusion I've reached is that information is really a *performance.* It carries a specific *narrative* that is easily adaptable to the expectations and needs of members of a small world. It also has a certain *form.* In this situation, the form is interpersonal, and for the most part is being used by insiders to illustrate ways of assimilating one's personal world to the world of prison life.

What makes such information potentially noteworthy is that it is produced within a specific context for use within that context. Consequently, it easily fits into the everyday reality of life. Even though doubts might remain regarding

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[2] For a detailed, brilliant essay on the insider/outsider debate, see Merton's *Social Theory and Social Structure,* 1968.

the true nature of the information, its ability to shape a collective worldview is rarely questioned.

Another way to examine information production for a particular social context is to investigate it as a *system* of informing events. These events lead to the creation of a worldview. Furthermore, it would seem that the purpose of the events is to change the personal lens of inhabitants in order that they might redefine themselves—in this instance, to make sense out of the situations they are currently experiencing. For example, for one prisoner this meant finding ways to cope with the "noise" that so many people can make in a small space:

> It's really bad around mealtime. So many people walking in line. Since the floor is made out of cement, it has an echo. Sometimes the noise in the quads (dorms) is like a tornado going through.

Prisoners who are not used to small-scale living do search for strategies to deal with this situation. Through observing others and talking to prisoners who have dealt with this problem, they become informed about how to respond to their surroundings.

From this perspective, information has little to do with data. It means nothing at all if it is not part of a *system* of related ideas, expectations, standards, and values. For example, a consistent source of conversation among the inmates concerns the status of their probation. A typical case is provided below:

> I have accepted my living here. Time doesn't stop at incarceration. I like to hear about things like birth and death. But I want to know what's happin' in the prison today. Not stuff that is happenin' out there. I know nothing will be the same when I leave here. And I accept that. I have a number of friends I've met here. Some of them I knew before I came here. We were friends at the Hill Top City Jail. We talk a lot about needing to do eighty percent of our Federal time. I hear lots of news about a prison cap [amount of time a prisoner can be sentenced], but some of us is doing 85% of our sentence. We have a lot of talk about that. We talk about how our society needs to have a good parole system. We need to have a decent parole commission to filter out harmless or nonviolent criminals. To let them back into society. A lot of people here be discussing that, we talk about in dorms, after dinner. It's routine conversation among the inmates.

As evident by this example, probation is a topic that carries interest of the highest degree. What makes discussions about probation such a "live" item is that for most inmates returning to society is a significant achievement. It is not surprising, therefore, those talks center around who is close to leaving, how one manages living in prison to reduce one's time, and who has been refused probation. It is this system of common ideas about a shared experience that allows *meaning* to occur.

Meaning can also result because new members understand how to interpret the prison system to survive in it. This awareness can assist their adjustment to the various social roles that are assigned to them. Insight regarding what it means to be typecast by others is crucial to their understanding how well they will fit within this particular social system. Social scientists have referred to this classification as *social types.* In fact, if the typecasting is fundamental to the definition of a role, that role becomes the *ideal* representation of public expression behavior. The value of social types in understanding behavior is that the concept conveys shared expectations about *the other.* In other words, social types provide clues as to ways in which to approach *the other,* influence one's ability to seek information, and are an essential condition in the mutual sharing of ideas.

In prison the type may be the "gay bird," the "lifer," "sister from the hood," "snitch," and so on. I can't explain how types are assigned, but it seems that we should spend some time trying to explore what factors are essential to the creation of social types, why some people are willing to suspend a reality about themselves to be accepted in another reality.

Living into a Small World

I think a clue lies in a "small world" conceptualization[3] in which things are viewed on a small scale. Luckmann (1970) suggests that it is a world defined by beliefs shared by its members: acting in accordance with the generally recognized norms and expectations that emanated from the common world view . . . [members] knew about the "right order of things" and it "made sense" (pp. 581–582).

Life in a small world is one in which activities are routine, and predictable. An element that binds this world together is social control.[4] It is my profound sense that the horizons of this world are determined by *social norms.* Moreover, the source of these norms is social control *par excellence.* For example, Berger (1963) notes that a primary function of social norms is to tell "an individual just what he may do and what he can expect of life" (p. 67).

A significant contribution that a discussion of norms brings to the fabric of social life is that they set initial (and for some, lasting) boundaries within which to play out one's life. Social norms can also explain how an individual's actions can be redefined by popular opinion. They indicate areas of relevance or things of value and suggest a classi-

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[3] The reason for this is quite simple. I have been curious and intrigued about a worldview in which people play out public lives within a social landscape of limited possibilities. I wanted to explore ways in which a person is predisposed to approach items of interest, voice concerns, and anticipate the future. I've suspected all along that these activities are shaped by the norms that govern one's world.

[4] For an interesting discussion regarding the role of social control in everyday life, see Berger's discussion (pp. 68–74) in *Invitation to Sociology.*

fication of social types.[5] Another value in exploring populations within a context of a social world is that it conveys the notion of a "worldview."[6]

Cressey (1932) introduced the notion of worldview by referring to an experience played out in its "total round." The author used the taxi-dance hall as the context in which to examine a world that began as one entered the hall and ended at the conclusion of the evening.[7]

He states:

> For those who attend the taxi-dance hall, even irregularly, it is a distinct social world, with its own way of acting, talking, and thinking. It has its own vocabulary, its own activities and interests, its own conception of what is significant in life, and—to a certain extent—its own scheme of life (p. 32).

Another way to define a small world is to explore the idea of *location.* Shils (1957) considers it a key element. He states that "man is more concerned with what is near at hand, with what is present and concrete than what is remote and abstract. He is more responsive on the whole to persons, to the status of those who surround him . . . " Wilson (1983, p. 149) reflects that "like the clothes one wears, the food one eats, the accent and vocabulary of one's speech, so also the things one is informed about and the questions on which one has views are all influenced by social location." In short, for members of a particular world, *location* determines which everyday things require significant concentration and which require no concentration at all.

For example, a frequent topic of conversation among the inmates concerns their health. They become particularly concerned when they become ill during holidays or weekends:

> We talk a lot about this, how folks not in our situations don't be understanding how we still be sick. Even if it don't meet with other folks schedules. We share a lot of things about how doctors and things don't really be caring about us 'cause it's no skin off his nose.' I was in real pain over the weekend and got no help cause they told me 'too bad.' There ain't no doctor on duty on the weekends.

R. was treated for AIDS when she came to prison. Her tests were positive for HIV. She said she had been treated for it and documented that she [supposedly] "ain't contagious" now. But she is "still worried about the pain in her joints and things." She ended by saying that she "can't find no relief until after the doctor comes back."

In the situation described above, what seemed most relevant to the prisoners were things close at hand. In this example, a constant worry that they would be without medical care at a time when the health providers were "living their own lives" outside of prison. Their reactions demonstrate why it is important for researchers to be present even during those "off hours" when other professional personnel have ended their work day or work week. Rosalie Wax (1971) observes, "given the interconnectedness of so much of social life, the researcher usually tries to live with or near the people he is studying during the entire round of their living" (p. 15). The usefulness of this activity is the opportunity it provides for a variety of vantage points from which to understand the daily social interactions of people. In prison, this might mean the search for a reasonably accurate view of life.

For example, in a discussion I had with five inmates regarding their concerns about their future, a prisoner, in a heated tone, stated that she was highly skeptical that a prison library had no legal documents in it. She said that when she first came to the prison, they did have law books. She also indicated that these books were apparently taken out because the prisoners began to read the books and realize that their sentences were excessive.

When I said that I had been told that the books were taken because the legal service was available to them, this answer did not receive much support. I was quickly informed that they always had a legal defense system, but "these people" were never available. One of the women instructed me on how "stupid" the system was:

> First of all, you have to write administration to explain why you need to contact a legal defense lawyer. Then you've got to try to find out whom, what name you address the letter to, and then explain it to that person, and they never come down to the prison to assist you.

A small world is also defined by natural philosophy and everyday *knowledge.* This general perspective is crystallized by what others, particularly, "insiders" (a classic social type), deem to be areas of interest or things that are trivial or useless.[8] It is the naturalness of this world that allows for access to the roundness of life. The idea of living a life in the round is an intellectually intriguing notion. I am drawn to it because I am convinced that it holds a key to what kinds of information are conveyed, and what information is withheld.

Community Life on a Small Stage

In a seminal article dealing with this notion of life being played out on a small stage, Redfield (1943) indicates that it is like a folk society, a small society or a little world:

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[5] Social types are important to the ethnographer because they suggest a way in which to assign various roles to behavior.

[6] The idea of worldview can be thought of as insiders/outsiders, strangers, marginals, and tourists.

[7] A taxi-dance hall was a place where men bought tokens to dance with single, attractive women.

[8] One way to define insiders is to think of them as central players of a social world. As we know, within each world there are a number of social types with varying degrees of influence. Insiders are the influences par excellence. For illustrations of the role that insiders play in shaping worldview, see Becker, H., "Art Worlds and Social Types" (1976).

off by itself by which the recurrent problems of life are met by all its members in much the same way . . . in such a society the ways in which problems are met are conventionalized . . . In the trite phase the folk society has a "design for living" (p. 70).

Redfield's notion of a folk society then lends support to the idea of community life. This is a world in which ways of looking at things are in accordance with agreed-upon standards. Moreover, in the face of problems, ways of dealing with them have become so interrelated with this communal perspective that there is little need to consider them objectively or critically.

The importance of this discussion is that researchers who explore the world of folk society do not equate it with primitive society. Rather, it is a way to classify communities in which inhabitants' cultural, social, and conceptual frames form a way of life. Significantly, this way of life is different from the ways of life lived by members outside the community (Merton, 1972). In support of the idea of a community of insiders, Becker observes: "To vicinal and social- . . . must be added a third . . . namely, *mental.* The members of different folk societies think and feel differently" (1950, p. 364) from people who reside outside that world.

An inmate who chooses not to allow the world outside to enter her prison-life shares a poignant example of this outsider/insider perspective. The narrator is serving two consecutive life sentences (104 years). She shared that she had not lived in this state before coming to prison. She was a codefendant in a case of armed robbery and kidnapping of five people. Three of the kidnapped women were raped. She and her companion were just traveling through the state. She said she didn't even have a real gun.

> Regarding the world outside, she observes that second hand information from Grandma is not good. I don't hear that much anyway that is very helpful from the outside. I have to even hear from folks back home, my school friend is here in prison with me for drugs. Most of the stuff out there, I hear from her. I tell her you get those details on the phone and you don't even know if they be true or not. I can't waste my time thinking about stuff like that. So I call home very seldom. And I tell her not to be telling me stuff about our "use-to-be homelife." It's just troubling. And in here in order to survive, I just got to concentrate on doing my time. I don't even want no letters or contact with relatives or my kids. In the quad, when inmates be writing letters if they come to me and ask me what I think about such-and-such to write home about, I get up and leave.

In addition to the insider's perspective, another way to define small community life is by "the inseparability of the individual from the group . . . to the extent that for most individuals their position and role, their satisfaction, and their welfare constitute the first case of experience and motivation" (Odum, 1953, p. 200).

Understanding the workings of a community holds many benefits. For example, it can be used to explain the roles that others play in shaping an individual's world. In a community, one's sense of self becomes clearer because others reflect the shared values of that world. Community in its most intrinsic sense is the most existential definition of who one is. Ultimately this means that the "stuff" of one's world is made from such things as social heritage, language, and the myriad of social norms that govern collective behavior.[9]

Community, then, explains the totality of my world, it also explains your world, and it explains the world of prisoners. The essential characteristic of all these worlds is their smallness. Within the confines of our small worlds our personal existences are played out. In my world, my self is shaped by a worldview, which accepts certain ways in which to speak, behave, and accept or reject information.

Linked to a worldview is the notion of *code.* It is the *code* imbedded in social norms that holds a world together. For example, Hall (1992, p. 53) indicates that "it is the ongoing creation of the everyday activities of its members . . . shared, diverse, harmonious expressions of lived experiences" that supports a life shared in common. A code defines the everyday routine activities of those who share it. *Code* connects us to other members of our world, while at the same time separating us from the world of outsiders. The code of a social and information system is what conveys a coherent account of that community in time and space. Not surprising, the code of a shared life experience is what makes our small worlds work most of the time for most of us.

Life in the Round

What do I mean by living life in the round? Simply put, it's a life with an enormous degree of imprecision and, surprisingly, accepted levels of uncertainty. It's a world of approximation. For example, one rarely objects if someone says, "I will meet you *around* noon." Or "Let's meet for dinner in an *hour or so.*" Or when I ask my mother how she feels, she often responds, "Oh, I have a *touch* of arthritis" or "a *bit* of sugar, but otherwise I'm all right." We have a toleration for inexactitude. Life, indeed, for most of us is business as usual. It's not methodical, but it is close enough.

E. provides an example of how life seems to go along in a routine manner even in prison. She told me she had made a lot of money in the past as a cocaine dealer. In fact, she boasted of having a thriving business in her hometown. She was a dealer for doctors, lawyers, and many professional and business people. "They all wanted a little "something-something." She "got busted" when she sold a small amount to a "son-a-bitch" detective who "hauled her in."

E. has been in prison now for 5 years. She says it's not too bad if you know what you're doing. The best way to survive is "not to keep up with the outside." Learn to have

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[9] They shape and define that which defines their world, not only for themselves, but for other inhabitants. For a sense of this, see Anderson, E. *Life on the Corner* in which he discusses the role of insiders in Jelly's Bar. In a compelling essay on the social self, see Mead, *Mind, Self and Society,* 1972, and Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order,* 1964.

other 'homies' than the ones you used to hang with. You got to know what you're doing in here and then it's no problem." She continues:

> I got into a support system. See, drugs are a problem here just like on the street. And there be loan sharking here too. To help you get your stuff. Most of them are the honor guards. Everybody knows that the loan sharks get the attention and the respect from the other prisoners. If you leave them alone, and don't mess in their business, they'll leave you alone. You just got to know these things. Once you know how things work around here, you don't have problems. You go about your work, get in with a spiritual crowd, go to Bible classes, and make your time. Before you look around you can wear one of those green uniforms, (i.e., becomes an honor prisoner, which leads to minimal security and employment outside of prison).

A life in the round requires a public form of life in which general knowledge aids in small learning. It is a life in which certain things are implicitly understood. Played out in a small world, it is composed of *normal language, worldview,* and *codes.* Life lived in the round is the *process* that permits social meaning to happen. It is the integration of a world in which most things are easy to understand, and in which news comes to a small stage.

This is not to say that trivial things have no place on this stage. As Patrick Wilson notes, the world is a great show; watching it is an endless source of entertainment.[10] But in order for there to be a roundness of life, there must be some degree of intelligibility. Members of a small world would like to think that it is in working order.

This is the basis of all sensible living—to extract from the world that I inhabit those things that I can readily understand. The more I can grasp "the obvious," the more I am willing to allow new information to influence my world.

Universal knowledge can alter previously held notions about ways to cope with daily life if the knowledge providers can increase my understanding of the social fabric that defines my life. In Solomon's view, "the concern here moves beyond information seeking to include the whole range of information behavior that supports people as they move through life; how people define their small worlds and their movement through them" (1996, p. 4).

Understanding life in the round results when information is clear enough to give sensible meaning to things. Imbedded in this process are those residents of my world who define it according to their values.

Insiders

I am referring to "insiders," often called "regulars," that is, people who use their greater understanding of the social norms to enhance their own social roles. By doing so, they establish standards for everyone else. A major task then of "insiders" is the construction of "self" in a community of others. Insiders have grasped the totality of their world. This means that they—more than other members of their world—have a comprehensive command of its norms, secrets, and ways of judging what is important against that which is trivial or even useless. They are the quintessential frame of reference for observing and controlling not only behavior, but also the information flow into a social world.

For example, M.K. is an insider because of her greater knowledge of the prison system (she has been in several times during her 38 years) and because of her status as a "long-termer." She is in this time for murder. When she was 21, she had a 5-year-old girl and a 3-year-old boy. She was also homeless. She comments:

> A woman and her husband took me and my little family in to live in their basement. At that time, I was grateful 'cause I was trying to get back on my feet. So I accepted whatever help they were willing to offer me. At the time, I was taking advantage of social services by receiving welfare checks even though I had a little part-time job. So these so-called "friends" (her landlords) turned me in to the authorities. At that time, I had to serve a three-month prison term for cheating the government. The couple told me that they would take care of my kids while I was serving my time.

M.K. found out that as soon as she was sentenced, the couple went to Social Services and requested legal guardianship of the children. This was granted. When she was released from prison, she found that she "had no rights as a parent because the courts had appointed those bastards to be the legal guardians." Her anger built up and she planned their murders. M.K. was especially revengeful against the wife, which drove her to purchase a gun and plot the killing. However, it was the husband that she accidentally killed. Her son is now in foster care and her daughter is with relatives. She said, "I don't know why I did such a stupid thing. I ended up in the end not having my kids."

Several factors make M.K. an insider. Her crime, murder, is viewed by other prisoners as having some measure of status. Murder in defense of one's children is viewed as especially noteworthy. Because she has "nothing to lose" because she is in for life, she is seen as a person who can share information that is not primarily given for personal gain. Of course, her experiences in surviving prison life give her a certain authority, as does her familiarity with many of the guards and prison officials. She is pointed out as a "lifer" to newer inmates, who value what she knows about ways in which to beat or survive the system.

Insiders are competent others, the specialists in their world most concerned with keeping that world in all its roundness. In fact, they operate best when their world has a reasonable "general" sense of things. With this in mind, I turn now to the development of my theory, Life in the Round.

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[10] For an interesting account of world watching, see Wilson's "The World as Spectacle," pp. 141–144.

Theory of Life in the Round

Thesis Statement

A life in the round is one lived within an acceptable degree of approximation and imprecision. It is a life lived with a high tolerance for ambiguity. But it is also lived in a world in which most phenomena are taken for granted. Occurrences are viewed as reasonable and somewhat predictable. It is a world in which most events fit within the natural order of things.

The concepts I used as foundations to the propositional statements are the *small world, social norms, worldview,* and *social types.* A *small world* is a society in which mutual opinions and concerns are reflected by its members, a world in which language and customs bind its participants to a worldview. Resources (both intellectual and material) are known and easily accessible. It is a world in which there is a collective awareness about who is important and who is not; which ideas are relevant and which are trivial; whom to trust and whom to avoid. In its truest form, a *small world* is a community of like-minded individuals who share coownership of social reality.

Social norms are the customary patterns that take place within a small world. Their purpose is to give this world a sense of balance. They are codes of behavior that include ways to gauge normalcy. Social norms provide a collective sense of direction and order. For instance, T. has recently made a change in her attitude about herself and other inmates. When she came to prison at age 17, she was pregnant. She felt that she was too good for the other inmates and didn't want anything to do with them. She was very rebellious and angry. She did not want to change from what she had been during her life on the streets. Because she did not see that she needed to change, she got into fights and had trouble with the guards.

Recently she shared the following:

But now I see how much my best friend has improved her chances for getting out and maybe getting a job after getting her GED. I feel like I have grown up and matured some while I been in here. Here people can be doing good for themselves. They can chose to live a clean life, if they want to. And stay off of those drugs. When I came in here, I didn't feel like I wanted to change, but now I see that I can. In some ways, I'm glad I'm in here. It made me take a new look at my life. It made me slow down.

When I came, I was the only white girl in here not having an interracial child. There are nine whites and eleven blacks, all pregnant. The white girls used to look down on me and call me names cause I wouldn't talk to the blacks. But now I talk to anybody. I guess I did use to be a little prejudice. But I see we all is trying for the same thing, to get out of here and maybe get into intense probation [living in a halfway house until I be on my own].

Worldview is a collective set of beliefs held by members who live within a small world. It is a mental picture or cognitive map that interprets the world. What is important about a worldview is that it allows for things to be interpreted in light of its connectives or interrelations.

The notion of *worldview* can be seen in the cases of women who come into prison with a drug or alcohol problem. Initially, many try to sustain their habits even in prison. By their mannerisms, language, and disdain of "straight" prisoners, they reinforce their links to a drug culture. However, prisoners who become successfully assimilated into the norms of prison life begin to lose their dependence on this mode of deviant behavior. What seems to make this change possible is the perception or worldview that there is another value system, which works better for them. That system is the modification of norms that will allow for reduced sentencing, minimal security, and awareness that life can be lived drug free. Perhaps this dream of a drug-free lifestyle helps inmates to envision a better life for themselves and their children when they are released from prison.

For example, C. has lived a very rough life. She was pregnant at age 14. Her second child was born was she was 16, and her third child at age 18. She has used heroin for 11 years before coming to prison. She was picked up for passing bad checks. She said she was "stoned" when her third baby was born. She comments that when she first arrived, she hung around the same people she knew on the streets. She was staying just as high in prison as she was out there. One time she got some "bad stuff" and spent 2 months in the hospital. Another time, she was sharing a needle and got really bad infections. But what really made her change, she said was the hardship she experienced at the hands of a loan shark. She went to the loan shark to borrow money to buy heroin. When her loan came due, she didn't have the money to repay her loan. She stated:

So that made it really hard on me. I had to bow down to her. I had to put up with her shit. I got into a lot of trouble trying to get from under her and kept getting locked up. It got so bad I told a guard I thought I could trust. I told her that this bitch took a raz out at me. When I told the guard, she said, 'Did anybody see her pull a blade on you?' So I even got written up for communicating a threat. Like I was making it harder for another prisoner. The guard said, "A threat isn't cutting you, is it?"

C.'s perceptions about drug use changed as a result of her experiences. She found that to survive within this small world, she needed to change her behavior. This attitude was reinforced by the bad experiences she had, her awareness that support groups were there to help her, and her realization that if she continued, her chances of making parole would dwindle. When I interviewed C., she was enrolled in Drug and Rehabilitation Training (DART). She had plans to move to Georgia where her parents are taking care of her children. She is looking forward to returning to the outside. She got very emotional when talking about her children and "the hell she put them through because of her habit." Like

others I have heard, she believes that she will be better prepared to take care of them when she is paroled.

The final concept is that of the *social types.* They are persons who exhibit traits or characteristics that distinguish them from other members of their world. These features are so profound that they embody an ideal image and define that ideal in unmistakable form.

It should be noted that social types are never neutral. Whether defining one as a "regular," a positive connotation, or an "outsider," the purpose is to assign individuals to a social role. The intent of this classification scheme is to create a standard by which to judge public behavior. Moreover, we identify persons by types to assist us in anticipating how they will behave toward us and how we can expect to act toward them. Most of us tend to reveal and exchange information among peers of "our own type." Conversely, the further removed persons are from our own typology, the less likely are they to become sharers of mutual interest or information.

A very simple illustration of this phenomenon is the type "homies." As one prisoner shared:

> I don't like a crowd. But if someone wants me or asks me something and those ones are "homies," I'll give out the information. Otherwise, I tell them "If you don't know me, you'd better ask somebody." This is what everybody says as to others. Meaning, you better get out of my face 'cause you don't know me. I try to stay out of trouble by staying with my own. I only talk to ladies that be from my neighborhood. Even when other "homies" come in here, we know about each other. That's how I keep up about peoples and who is getting busted. Sticking with your own is how you can get out of here.

Propositional Statements

Proposition 1

A small world conceptualization is essential to a life in the round because it establishes legitimized others (primarily "insiders") within that world who set boundaries on behavior.

Proposition 2

Social norms force private behavior to undergo public scrutiny. It is this public arena that deems behavior—including information-seeking behavior—appropriate or not.

Proposition 3

The result of establishing appropriate behavior is the creation of a worldview. This worldview includes language, values, meaning, symbols, and a context that holds the worldview within temporal boundaries.

Proposition 4

For most of us, a worldview is played out as life in the round. Fundamentally, this is a life taken for granted. It works most of the time with enough predictability that, unless a critical problem arises, there is no point in seeking information.

Proposition 5

Members who live in the round will not cross the boundaries of their world to seek information.

Proposition 6

Individuals will cross information boundaries only to the extent that the following conditions are met: (1) the information is perceived as critical, (2) there is a collective expectation that the information is relevant, and (3) a perception exists that the life lived in the round is no longer functioning.

How do I envision the application of this theory? To me, it is to provide a strategy for examining that raw material called social life.

Before leaving my *Theory of Life in the Round,* I think it is appropriate to look a bit closer at the claims I have made regarding information behavior. My argument is that life in the round will, for everyday purposes, have a negative effect on information seeking. As I have indicated throughout this paper, there is a simple reason for this. People will not search for information if there is no need to do so. If members of a social world choose to ignore information, it is because their world is working without it. I should also say, however, that I am speaking of a particular type of information, one that is intended to respond to the needs of individuals within a specific social context. That is, the information sought to respond to problematic needs is a different type of information from that which is intended for everyday causal use. With this said, I have also created conditions in which this assumption will not hold. Thus, the need for the final proposition that allows for information-seeking strategies.

In developing the conditional proposition, I allow for members of a social world to acknowledge a stage in their information world *before* the information-seeking process begins. Often researchers enter the information world of persons while they are actively engaged in searching for solution to concerns. This proposition, however, explains reasons why individuals are motivated to start the search for information.

Application of Life in the Round to Prison Life

How does the theory play out in the world of prisons? And generally in the world at large? The world outside prison has secondary importance to inmates. They take in information gathered from the mass media and telephone calls to family and friends, and from caretakers who convey various news events. But what appears on the surface to be active information gathering to help them cope in prison is, in reality, directed toward staying in touch with the greater

society. And this gathering of information is not insignificant.

But prisoners will have the most imperfect view of a larger world. Why? Because this world is being altered by time. They are not part of the world; they are not sharing its everyday reality. And the larger world is being defined by outsiders.

Because they are incapable of changing things that might be relevant to their world, precise, accurate information about the larger world leads to endless hours of worries and concerns. In fact, not only do they desire a life in the round in order to survive in prison, they absolutely require it to stay in touch with the small world of prison life. "I still want my life to go on. I want to stay in touch with my close family, but it won't be good for me. My concern here is what do I need to do to survive this place. I know getting out soon isn't a possibility for me. So my progress is not out there, but how I make it every day in here."

For example, often the women received negative news when calling home. This led to enormous sadness and depression. As one inmate exclaimed, "Don't give me no bad news! My granddaddy is sick. I don't want to know about it but they tell me anyway." Hearing that their children are not doing well or not coping successfully with separation from them brought grave misery and yearning.

Based on the inmate's observations then, we have a view of the outside world that, for some, is critically important. However, even as they strive to stay in touch with the problems and concerns facing family members and friends, they know that they are incapable of assisting them. In fact, a number of the inmates experience both emotional and physical problems because of their sense of helplessness. In these cases, they know that it will be better for them to focus instead on the daily living patterns, relationships, and issues that come within the prison environment. At least in this situation, they have a feeling that they are capable of influencing some of the situations that face them. In this controlled, predictable world of prison, the inmates are isolated from the pain of separation from loved ones who reside outside. Moreover, they are also insulated from the undesirable aspects of their former lives. As one respondent remarked, "Here you are protected, you don't have the drug culture to bother you, you get your three 'squares' a day, you get your sleep, and you get even a little free time to yourself."

Conclusion and Discussion

A resonant image that emerges from my prison research pertains to ways in which inmates view their world. What absorbs their concentration is a localized worldview, centered on everyday concerns. In this world a paramount role of immediate others is to shape standards of behavior.

However, the notion that specialized others have significant influence on defining prison life is not unique to this environment. Looking at the larger picture, Goffman (1959 p. 13) observes that:

> Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in a corresponding way.

In other words, an individual's reality is a socially constructed reality. Following Goffman's theme, "When the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society . . . " (p. 35).

This socialization process defines one's central experience that seems to be associated with informal light-world watching, talking with neighbors and friends, and what Gordon and Anderson (1964, p. 414) call the "engagement of events that are distinctly home-centered."

In a paper I wrote titled *Life in a Small World* (1991), I defined this extremely local lifestyle as a first-order information world. A characteristic of this world is that it relies for information either on personal experiences or on hearsay from someone who is accepted as having knowledge of things being discussed. I concluded by noting that when people seek information only from others much like themselves or are skeptical of claims not personally experienced, their world has a limited range of possibilities.

The role that a small world plays in formulation of first-level information is quite simple. Primary conditions are trust and believability. For information to take on legitimacy, it must be compatible with what members of a social world perceive to be plausible. There must be an easy fit between new information and common-sense reality. Thus, first-level information will be the most believable because it conforms best to common sense. Similarly, the information is credible because the provider is trusted. Viewed from a small-world perspective, information is accepted because the source's claims can be easily researched and verified. Moreover, the sense-making activities that accompany the information occur within a context that is shaped by cultural norms and mores.

To the many characteristics of a small world, one must add that it is an environment in which representation of reality is closely monitored. Lives are played out within a narrow and confined landscape. "Normal" behavior conveys an awareness that advice or information from outside that world must be received according to established standards. One is limited by what others deem important because the meaning of the self is largely constructed from a commonly shared reality. As noted by Goffman, "to engage in a particular kind of activity in the prescribed spirit is to accept being a particular kind of person who dwells in a particular kind of world" (1961, p. 186). Thus, the fundamental purpose of a small-world conceptualization is that it provides clues about what should be meaningful.

The idea that highest importance is given to those things that occupy our most immediate attention is also suggested by Patrick Wilson's notion of *closeness:* " . . . the closer we are to some feature of social life . . . " the bigger "the sense

of . . . significance, and the more it occupies a larger share of attention" (1983, p. 4). Finally, this part of our discussion is summed up by Unruh's observation that social worlds are "organizationally focused around, and for the most part restricted to home territory, bars, neighborhoods, retirement communities and other locales" (1980 p. 288).

Another way to address small worldness is through the notion of "categoric knowing," a term developed by Lynn Lofland. In essence, Lofland contends that this way of knowing is based on information about a person's role. "That is, one knows who the other is only in the sense that one knows he can be placed into some category or categories."

What Lofland describes is the desire we all have to make our familiar world correspond to some aspect inherent in a new world. We often accomplish this by putting people and events into frames of reference. Geertz observes that this phenomenon is a common-sense reality on which cultural systems are built:

> If we look at the views of people who draw conclusions different from our own by the mere living of their lives, learn different lessons in the school of hard knocks, we will rather quickly become aware that common sense is both a more problematical and a more profound affair than it seems from the perspective of a Parisian Café or an Oxford Common Room (1975 pp. 9–10).

The need to identify people within certain boundaries relates to the notion of social control.

An idea that I have enjoyed is "fashion" as developed by Georg Simmel (1957). Simmel states that fashion is the imitation of an example. The purpose is to signify union among members of a social class and to exclude all others, namely, anyone who doesn't understand the categories used to define that which is fashionable. But, for the insiders, fashion has the ability to raise "even the unimportant individual by making him the representative of a class, the embodiment of a joint spirit" (p. 548).

An illustration of social control as a primer for small worldness can be found in Finestone's (1957) description of young heroin users in Chicago. What the author discovered about this world has applicability to our discussion. He found that the labels the addicts used helped to define a social type: "cat," "cool cat," "hustler," "square," etc. The "cool cat" exhibited behavior admired by members of this social set; i.e., the ability to survive and staying addicted without needing to work. Finestone reports that "he demonstrates his ability to play it cool in his unruffled manner of dealing with outsiders such as the police, and in the assurance with which he confronts emergencies in the society of 'cats' " (p. 5).

To recapitulate: This paper examined factors that constitute a small world being lived in the round. What I chose to emphasize is the influence that others, specifically insiders, have on holding this world together. A critical factor in this process is *social control.* That is, one is socialized into a world that liberates and restricts. It liberates because it verifies one's condition. Life in the round is a taken-for-granted life. It acknowledges everyday reality at its most routine. On the other hand, it is constraining because behavior is judged by appropriate standards determined by other players in this game of life.

Acknowledgment

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