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**'Doing' coercion in male custodial settings**

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(Article begins on next page)

## ‘Doing’ Coercion in Male Custodial Settings

This book offers a sustained study of one feature of the prison officer’s job: the threat and use of force, which the author calls ‘doing’ coercion. Adopting an interactionist, micro-sociological perspective, the author presents new research based on one and a half years of participant observation within an Italian custodial complex hosting both a prison and a forensic psychiatric hospital.

Based on observation of emergency squad interventions during so-called ‘critical events’, together with visual methods and interviews with staff, *‘Doing’ Coercion in Male Custodial Settings* constitutes an ethnographic exploration of both the organisation and the implicit or explicit practices of threatening and/or ‘doing’ coercion. With a focus on the lawful yet problematic and discretionary threatening and ‘doing’ of coercion performed daily on the landing, the author contributes to the growing scholarly debate on power in a prison setting, and the developing field of the micro-sociology of violence and of radical interactionism.

As such, it will appeal to scholars of sociology, anthropology and criminology with interests in prisons, power and violence in institutions, and visual methods.

**Luigi Gariglio**, PhD in Sociology at the University of Milan, is an independent researcher. He was academic visitor at the University of Oxford, Centre for Criminology. He has been teaching and researching in Sociology, Sociology of Communication, Visual Studies and Visual Research Methods at the University of Turin.

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**Luigi Gariglio**

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*This book is dedicated with love and thankfulness to Sascha van der Plas and to our lovely children: Sofia and Gregorio*

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## Foreword

Mary Bosworth

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## Acknowledgements

First of all, I want to thank you who are reading this book. I will appreciate any personal enquiry, critique, comments and opinion about what you are reading now.

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I

## Introduction

There is a lot to say over prison officers' stress, risk of assaults and suicides (see [Liebling et al. 2011: 63–72](#)) as these themes emerged time and again in my conversations with the staff. There is also a lot to say about absenteeism, lack of enthusiasm, and even on officer-prisoner relationships and officers' accountability ([Buffa 2013a, 2013b](#)). The challenging complexity, the occasional rewarding experience, the difficulties and contradictory tasks embedded in the prison officers' job experience, as well as their own understanding of it, have been investigated in some liminal international publications ([Fassin 2015](#)), particularly in the UK, in more or less depth and from different standpoints ([Kauffman 1988](#); [Crawley and Crawley 2008](#); [Liebling et al. 2011](#); [Tait 2011](#); [Drake 2012](#); [Bosworth 2014](#)).

‘The role of the prison officer is a difficult one to explain accurately. Most of the work is “low visibility” and staff work to overall goals that may be in conflict with each other’ (Liebling *et al.* 2011: 45). I am aware of this complexity as I experienced it first-hand staying alongside officers going about their jobs, both in this ethnography and in some other occasions (Visser and Vroege 2007), yet in this book I will not frame the big picture about the Italian prison officer as Liebling *et al.* (2011) did in their liminal contribution about the UK. Rather, this book focuses on one particular ‘low visibility’, or rather almost ‘invisible’ feature of custodial officers’ jobs that contradistinguishes it to other prison staff. Here, I intend to offer *my* ‘authentic description’<sup>1</sup> (see Liebling 2015) of one crucial defining feature of a prison officer’s duty that I call ‘doing’ coercion. By ‘doing’ coercion, I refer specifically to officers’ practices of: (1) constructing ‘critical events’ (see Chapter 6); (2) threatening force (see Chapter 6); and (3) using force as a last resort (see Chapter 7).<sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘lawful’ not only because those are the kinds of practices that I have observed and analysed, but also because there is a consistent gap in the international literature about it.

By doing so, neither do I intend to deny the complexity of the prison officer’s job, nor to overemphasise the use of force for its own sake. Instead, I simply intend to address this typical lawful – yet challenging and contested – prison officers’ duty head-on, in some detail, ethnographically in an unprecedented way.

This book is the output of micro-sociological research grounded in interactionism integrated by phenomenology I conducted ethnographically (Gobo 2008) in one Italian custodial institution, including both a prison and a forensic psychiatric hospital, staying side by side with the prison officers managing the detention wings and also the emergency squad intervening in different locations, mainly on the wing or at the yards.

Italian officer-prisoner relationships are complex and vary greatly within the carceral geography (Buffa 2013b). Nonetheless, those relationships are grounded de facto on frequent and reiterated interactions, negotiations and disputes with one another. A constitutive part of officers’ activity has been defined as ‘peacekeeping’ (Toch 1976) or, better still, as ‘peacemaking’ (Liebling *et al.* 2011: 146). Based on my fieldwork and on previous experiences of mine in other custodial institutions, I endorse the rhetorical figure the ‘peacemaker’ as a heuristic device not only because it describes

metaphorically quite well what wing officers are supposed to do (yet not always all do) on a daily basis, but also because it explicitly refers to the prison field as a conflictive site, as a place in which there is a constant effort from all sides, on one hand, to try to reach the 'peace', and, on the other, to challenge or resist it. By doing their job, prison officers are required by law to adopt different tools in an attempt to achieve, maintain or regain order and enforce control and security (Chapter 3). By doing so, they are allowed, and at the same time compelled, to use force as a last resort if required by the situation (but not to overuse or abuse it). At the same time, officers are also required by law to adopt an approach oriented towards rehabilitation, which from now on I will interpret as also including re-education, as the Italian Constitution states. It expresses clearly in its first part (fundamental principles) that a prison tariff must be oriented towards the re-education of the prisoners (art. 27). The Italian penitentiary law (law n. 354/1975: Legge sull'Ordinamento Penitenziario) has provided a legal framework to start structuring in a new way the prison regimes and organisation. The duties of 'order and security' and rehabilitation often conflict with one another. This is a well-known prison officers' conflict role. Moreover, in practice, the new penal execution's regulation has long been constrained by both the structural material condition of the Italian custodial institutions, and by the prison officers' professional cultures, which seem to be more oriented towards 'order and security' rather than rehabilitation in the majority of cases, yet it is noteworthy that there are many exceptions to it, and the situation varies greatly in the Italian prison geography.<sup>3</sup> Within the alleged 'punitive' institution under study, 'order and security' was a particularly significant component of the officers' cultures. Other institutions more oriented towards rehabilitation show a significantly different picture, as I have experienced in previous occasions, both in a drug rehabilitation wing and in the 'university wing' where I have been lecturing Sociology and Sociology of Communication for the University of Turin for some years (prison of Turin, Italy), and in other 'best practice' custodial institutions (such as the prison of Milano-Bollate).

Before continuing, I want to state clearly that prison officers working in Italian custodial institutions, and particularly those I have known throughout my ethnography, *do much more than managing critical events, threatening and using force* with the persons in custody. Most of the time, their main goal is to maintain a tolerable status quo against all odds through dialogue, cooperation and negotiation, and to have a 'normal working day without too many issues with prisoners and colleagues', as one

officer put it (see Chapter 3). I also found that prison officers more often underuse formal power, rather than overuse it (see also [Liebling et al. 2011: 146](#)). This is not to deny that prisoners' and officers' accounts of officers' alleged abuses of power have emerged every now and then during fieldwork. It is simply to focus on what I experienced in the field, and to frame the topic I independently decided to study.

This book does neither intend to propose any 'grand theory' of the use of force (let alone of violence more generally), nor address in depth the tension existing between the officers' duty of using force 'on behalf of the citizens', on the one hand, and the need to protect the prisoners from unwarranted officers' power, on the other, which has long been a relevant topic of critical scholars ([Scott 2008](#); [Sim 2008](#)), human rights activists and NGOs, and deserves a research agenda by itself. I will only refer to human rights intermittently, being aware that they would deserve a specific research agenda. In Italy, in fact, safe and healthy environments are guaranteed neither to the prisoners, nor to those working with or without uniform within the walls, despite some public managers' efforts and attempted reforms to humanise prisons ([Buffa 2015](#)). That is in part due to severe structural constraints – also linked to corruption<sup>4</sup> – economic constraints, professional cultures, officers' de facto scarce accountability, and day-to-day officers' and prisoners' habits.

This work is based on two years of ethnography and about 1,400 hours of observation, which is the core method adopted here, integrated by semi-structured interviews and visual methods, in particular photo-elicitation (a way of interviewing participants by asking them to comment on a set of images previously produced ethnographically inside the walls) (see [Gariglio 2010, 2015, 2016](#)).

In my research experience (see also [Liebling 2011](#)), Italian prison officers cannot be all reduced to 'turnkeys', nor necessarily depicted as violent and inhuman. Nowadays, officers work differently (better) than in the past, most of the time. Officers still performing violence, abuse or torture (which is a crime not included in the penal code in Italy so far) should simply be called criminals, as well as those doing cover-ups to protect unaccountability. In my experience and interpretation, neither do those alleged criminals represent the prison officers category as a whole, nor do I support the idea of institutional violence as a category to describe the prison system. Like it or not, officers committing crime are *bad apples* indeed (to read an opposite opinion, refer to [Scott 2008](#); [Sim 2008](#)), yet using force as a last resort is their challenging duty.

Prison officers' threat and actual use of force are timely issues for at least three reasons: first, they often have a traumatic impact on prisoners' (inmates, patients or migrants) – and sometimes on officers' (and staff's) – body integrity, health and mental health.

Second, the use of force, and its abuses, are recurring issues in the media and public international discourses, not only in relation to prison, but also immigration detention centres and forensic psychiatric hospitals.<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, within the academic agenda, studying the threat and the use of force can show some dimensions, routines and sequences of interaction as to how power is exerted in practice by law enforcement officers on duty on the landing.

This book investigates wing officers' daily negotiations and the emergency squad's interventions after so-called critical events, focusing on the duty to enforce and guarantee 'order and security' both in the psychiatric hospital and in the nearby prison. It focuses specifically on *male*<sup>6</sup> prison officers threatening the use of force on male adult inmates performed by the emergency squad in an attempt to control and guarantee 'order and security'. These kinds of emergency interventions were performed in very similar ways both in the forensic psychiatric hospital and in the prison.<sup>7</sup> Both institutions were hosted in identical, adjacent facilities within the same building. The ethnography was mainly conducted in one closed-cell regime wing of the forensic psychiatric hospital where some 'very violent convicts' (I do not intend to disclose their crimes) were locked up for a minimum of 20 hours a day. That psychiatric hospital was, and still is today (as of 26 May 2016), under the prison officers' authority.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it works like the nearby prison (for remand defendants) concerning the practice of 'doing' coercion, as officers state in their dialogues time and again. In both custodial institutions, officers are in charge of patrolling the wing to guarantee 'order and security' independently of other staff members that might also occasionally be present on the wing performing their duties. On the wing, 25 cells hosted a number of prisoners that varied in number from 31 to 44. An approximately equal number of inmates and psychiatric patients were hosted one next to the other in 25 cells in a row. About four in five were Italian; foreign prisoners during my fieldwork would mainly come from Nigeria, Morocco, Albania and Romania. Five to seven cells would host only one

prisoner, individuals that were too violent to be left unescorted with others in the same cell. All other cells would host two prisoners (but a few years ago they would even host three prisoners in cells designed for one inmate only). Disputes and fights within the cells and in the yards would occur frequently, yet they would *not* necessarily lead to any officers' intervention, and much less so to the intervention of the emergency squad (officially called either *squadra emergenza* or *squadra disponibili*; inmates and patients would call it *la squadretta*).

Gaining access was not easy; following [Bosworth \(2014\)](#), I will partially disclose the relationship with the gatekeepers that granted me access to the field in Chapter 9. This research was neither designed to be a critical research, nor an appreciative one. Its goal is simply to start exploring a new path and, by doing so, to shed light on one fundamental practice in prison work often hidden, if not denied to public scrutiny both in Italy and abroad. The ethnography was conducted in a country in which the use of force is often clearly in the picture on the wing, at least symbolically, and prison ethnography is still in its infancy and has mainly been conducted undercover. This is the first independent academic ethnographic research on the topic conducted ethnographically with formal authorisation.

Despite the researcher's interest in a more global approach to prison ethnography, this book also takes into account [Ryan \(2013\)](#), calling for ethnographies dealing with particular facilities in particular context 'focus[ing] more on national *particularities* rather than across the broad *commonalities*' ([Ryan 2013: 5, emphasis in original](#)). Yet, I think that looking closely to the practice of 'doing' coercion in one particular facility can offer some raw data and interpretations to help other researchers interrogate the nature of both prison officers' practices as well as custodial institutions in the global context. In fact, the exceptional lawful power differential embedded in the dynamic relationship between officers and prisoners is reinforced by officers' possibility to use force to compel prisoners to follow the rules, and this is apparently true in (almost) all jurisdictions. Of course, the practice of the use of force (and the researchers' possibility to have access to those practices) varies greatly from one jurisdiction to another, as well as the prisoners' safeguards and the prison officers' actual accountability. The possibility of using force (as a last resort) to compel obedience is a crucial prison characteristic that cannot be forgotten if we are interested in studying those institutions focusing on the millions of flesh-and-blood human beings working and living within the walls in the Global North and beyond.

This manuscript will contribute new knowledge in two areas (see the ‘Concluding thoughts’ section). First, to the micro-sociology of violence. Despite adopting interactionism, however, this monograph intends to slightly differentiate itself from a micro-sociology of violence by putting a far greater emphasis on the prisoners’ status, which appeared to influence the relationships between the keepers and the kept (such as an affiliation with organised crime, or being part of the travelling community, and so on).

Second, *‘Doing’ Coercion* will contribute to the growing scholarly debate on power in prison sociology. Very little is known from Southern European countries, where power relations in prisons have hardly ever been studied so far ethnographically. By doing so, it aims to fill a gap in the knowledge as to how the use of force is exerted *in practice* by exploring: (1) how any critical event is discretionally constructed; (2) how the threat of the use of force is performed; and (3) how physical force (violence) is used lawfully as a last resort.

This work does *not* address the issue of prison officers using force during large revolts or in exceptional circumstances. On one hand, these are completely different sociological phenomena; on the other, I have not witnessed any such occurrence so far.

This book draws from observation. It clearly distinguishes itself from the research on power mainly grounded on discourses and narration (Atkinson 1990) emerging during interviews or circulating in media reports or official accounts (Carrabine 2004). Yet, by adopting observation as a main tool, this work does not pretend to offer a better ontological truth. It simply intends to introduce new interpretations to integrate the extant ones addressing what the methodologist Silverman (2011) calls ‘naturally occurring data’, an expression some extant ethnographers might contest. I mainly focus on the interactions I observed in front of me, while being concurrently observed by the participants, rather than only discussing what they say they would do, or they had already done before, in an artificial situation called an interview (see Chapter 9). Moreover, this book shows that doing ethnographic research, and particularly observation, can help to better understand crucial issues, such as the use of force, without necessarily being prejudicial on anybody’s side, yet, of course, from a particular standpoint. It also stresses, once again, the necessity of doing research

reflexively (Cardano 2009) and imaginatively, and to be open to serendipity (Jacobsson et al. 2013), as Robert Merton (1968) taught a long time ago.

The use of force is a crucial legal feature of a prison officer's job. Starting to grasp how 'doing' coercion is exerted in practice can help to both better understand the traumatic and complex world in which so many people live throughout the world, and also better address the issue of alleged officers' wrongdoings, abuses and crimes. This book (re)introduces both a partially new interactionist approach, and a new focus on the debates about power, coercion and violent interactions, and by doing so it will also offer some thick representations and problematic issues to policymakers and governors who have the duty to deal with those issues on a daily basis, trying, by doing so, to make prison more humane.

## The Italian alleged 'institutional violence' and the scandalous custodial institutions

*Il Carcere in Italia* (Ricci and Salierno 1971) is possibly the first Italian critical large-scale research on the keepers and the kept. The Italian publisher Einaudi<sup>9</sup> published it in 1971. It was written by a young sociologist and an ex-prisoner – and 'fascist thug', as he called himself in his autobiography (Salierno 1976). *Il Carcere in Italia* started by arguing: '[t]his book is the result of a research on the Italian institutional violence within the walls' (Ricci and Salierno 1971: 11, emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> It included a chapter titled 'The prison officer' (pp. 307–58) that investigated Italian prison staff.<sup>11</sup> Back then, the Italian '[fascist] Prison rules' had not yet been replaced by the extant '[republican] Prison rules' introduced in 1975.<sup>12</sup> The publication of *Il Carcere in Italia* had quite an impact on the extant Italian public opinion. On one hand, it was a very strongly politically biased account of the Italian situation inside, in the aftermath of the 1960s and its political and civil rights movements; on the other, it represented for the first time an extensive first-hand account of the situation within the walls. Over the last 20 years or so, academic articles published in major sociological works rarely addressed the use of force. In Italy, hardly any can be found in mainstream academic journals (contra, see the Italian journal *Antigone*).



Notwithstanding this ‘academic gap’, over the last 10 years, one episode of prison officers’ abuses, among others, had particularly significant media coverage in Italy.<sup>13</sup> In December 2004, as a direct consequence of a previous prison officer’s assault in the prison of the city of Asti, in north-west Italy, two persons in custody were victims of a double jeopardy, violence and humiliation (Buffa 2013a). The officers wanted to ‘teach a lesson’ to the two prisoners, something not uncommon at that time, as some officers told me in this ethnography. That episode, the following trial and the sentence had a strong echo in the national media and reopened a latent scar in part of the public opinion, which is still very critical about the police and prison officers’ behaviour. What emerged during the trial even became the subject of a theatre piece (Sarzotti 2012).

Regret and critiques have not only been publicly upheld against the perpetrators, but also against the prison officers as a professional group and against the Italian prison system as a whole. Prisons in Italy have often been understood by the public opinion ‘as a dull place where whatsoever [cruel] can happen’ (Buffa 2013a: 126). Other similar episodes allegedly occurred in Reggio Emilia custodial complex between 2012 and 2013, obtaining significant local media attention. Eventually, that case was dismissed on a technicality.<sup>14</sup>

My field notes and interviews support Buffa’s opinion – he is a General Manager of the Department of the Prison Administration, with previous experience as Area Manager of the North East of Italy Prisons, and previously as Governor of the large Turin prison – quoted above on the public critical perception of the Italian prison system. In particular, I can witness the local prison staff’s critical interpretation of what they thought the public opinion would think about the prison system. I have discussed it time and again with many of them during my ethnography. In fact, officers would often show their critical stance on both the media coverage and the public discourses on the prisons and the prisoners. I have heard different versions of those critical stances time and again. Below, I will quote one senior officer who spontaneously introduced the point brilliantly during an interview. His position has often been shared with his subordinates in front of me, talking about it whenever something appeared in the news related to the issue in one way or another. His quote below resonates with the *officers’ interpretations and opinions* as to what the ‘Italians’ would think about both the criminal justice system and the prisoners’ victimisation:

[w]hen they [prisoners] are out there, they are all [described as] very dangerous criminals that must be caught, arrested, put in a cage and {.} throw away the keys! The people and the media usually treat even persons that are nothing more than petty criminals like dangerous ones. Eventually, they end up in custody and enter the prison. By entering the prison, those very violent and dangerous criminals, I do not know how {.} and why {.} they become the victims. It's enough for them to arrive here and they are [suddenly] the victims, and we become the 'aguzzini' [perpetrators of violence]. I sincerely do not understand it at all.

(video-recorded interview with a senior officer)

Another crucial point about the contemporary public discourses that circulate on the media about the Italian prison system and prison officers specifically regards the scandal of the forensic psychiatric hospitals, which also directly involved the custodial institutions where most of my observation took place. A 'Parliamentary Inquiry on the National Health Service'<sup>15</sup> opened a large public debate that was quickly afterwards publicly defined as a *scandal*.<sup>16</sup>

The former President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano – then in duty – made an official speech to the nation at the end of 2012 in which he defined those forensic psychiatric hospitals (OPG) as a 'real horror unacceptable in any civilised country'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, a popular news-week magazine, *L'Espresso*, defined those institutions as *lager*.<sup>18</sup>

The video footage produced and distributed by the parliamentary inquiry of the conditions of detention, which have been shared widely on mainstream media and on social networks, urged a parliamentary discussion that eventually led to new legislation built to shut down those institutions.<sup>19</sup> As a direct consequence of the inquiry, in fact, over a very short period of time a new law was written, discussed and voted. It formally ordered the almost instantaneous and definitive formal end of those scandalous institutions and the rethinking of the entire forensic psychiatric hospital

system, which until then was part of the penitentiary system under the Department of the Penitentiary Administration.<sup>20</sup>

## This is *not* a critical study on institutional violence

What has just shortly been introduced in the previous section is only one side of the topic at stake, yet I want to put it clearly: this book is *not* a ‘critical criminology’ kind of study. It is a different one grounded on micro-sociology, in which ‘*doing coercion*’ will be unpacked by studying the lawful officers’ use of a set of ‘tools of negotiation’ (*infra*, Chapter 3), as well as the use of force from a micro-sociological perspective. At the centre of the study are the interactions I observed between the keepers and the kept in particular situations, and not anybody’s moral judgement about them.

## Some clarifications on the terminology used

To conclude this introductory chapter, before the last section about ‘the shape of this book’, I will clarify the meaning I attach to some expressions I shall use.

First, my expressions and book title ‘doing’ coercion relate to the prison officers’ lawful practice of threatening and using force as a last resort in particular situations considered to be ‘critical events’, yet in the expression ‘*doing coercion*’, I refer to a cycle of interaction in which officers: (1) might construct any difficult violent situation into a critical event (Chapter 6); (2) might continue to perform the cycle of ‘doing’ coercion by threatening the use of force (both symbolically and credibly) (Chapter 6); and (3) might eventually decide to use physical force as a last resort (Chapter 7).<sup>21</sup>

Then, the expressions coercive institutions and custodial institutions will also be used interchangeably to refer to all kinds of prisons, forensic psychiatric hospitals and even migration detention centres. Following Goffman (1961a), the word *asylum* is also occasionally used here as a synonym of forensic psychiatric hospital (now also called a special hospital in the UK) without any intention to be disrespectful to either psychiatric staff or patients.

Next, although *penitentiary police* would be a better translation of the Italian expression *polizia penitenziaria*, here the expression *prison officers* will be more frequently adopted instead following the Anglo-Saxon tradition. The word staff will usually refer to prison officers if not otherwise qualified.

Fourth, a few meaning-laden expressions, such as inmates, convicts, prisoners, kept, persons in custody, and so on, are all used interchangeably, resisting any particular connotation despite the particular political or academic traditions in which any of those expressions might come from and the implicit political or semantic connotation embedded in each of these expressions. Here, the keepers and kept are simply described in different ways for writing style purposes. With the expression patients, we will refer specifically only to those prisoners who are categorised as such by participants, notwithstanding their psychiatric condition, or the facility in which they are kept in custody.

Fifth, I use the ethnographic present as a literary device, particularly so in the vignettes. The vignettes included in this book are literary constructions deeply grounded on observation, whose aim is to contribute to providing an ‘authentic description’, and should not be interpreted mainly as literature (contra, Kaufman 2015). Although the ethnographic present has its detractors, I think that in the extant post late-modern era, any literary device is adequate if it pursues the goal to represent the reflexive experience shared by the ethnographers and the other participants, and to make it ‘alive’ for the reader, who has no other access to the experience unpacked by the ethnography. For this same reason, I will also publish a visual account grounded on ethnographic photos I shot during the last phase of the ethnography (Chapter 8).

Sixth, unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

Lastly, and equally important, all people’s names in this book are pseudonyms.

## Shape of this book

Chapter 1 introduces the book. First, it presents the topic of ‘doing’ coercion in general terms. Then, it justifies the reason for studying the lawful officers’ practice of threatening and using force during so-called critical events. Next, it introduces the

complexity of the prison officers' world and defines the boundary of this book. Finally, it introduces the critical perspective on institutional violence.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework, the research questions and introduces the researcher's approach grounded in critical realism. It introduces interactionism, briefly touching on its origin. Then, it presents in some detail a few particular heuristic tools adopted, or adapted, from Goffman, Hochschild and Collins. Finally, it also introduces the phenomenological interpretation of threads proposed by Popitz in his *Phenomenology of Power* actualising the crucial and often forgotten interaction and interconnection of interactionism and phenomenology.

Chapter 3 illustrates the day-to-day tools of negotiation prison officers use on the wing to routinely administer and *control* the people in custody while performing their duties. It introduces both the issue of prison officers' discretion and their authority deficit. Then, it presents a map of tools of negotiation officers use regularly: persuasion, inducement, manipulation and the use of force, among others. The chapter ends by presenting some illegitimate coercive tools and addressing the issue critical criminologists call 'institutional violence'.

Chapter 4 reconstructs ethnographically the characteristics of the bureaucratic organisation. Then, it focuses on the officers' chain of command enforcing the institutional response to a so-called 'critical event'. Finally, it sheds light on three fractures characterising prison officers working in the complex: (1) the divide between officers working in prison or in the psychiatric ward; (2) the divide between 'rank and file' officers working on the wing and those doing paperwork; and (3) referring to officers working on the psychiatric hospital ward, the divide between the officer patrolling the wing and the other simply busy with rehabilitation.

Chapter 5 explores the implicit coercive nature of the custodial setting. Then, it addresses the contested idea of the existence in Italy of punitive institutions, which frequently emerges in the officers' accounts. Then, it presents a vignette that shows the daily ethnographer's route from the outside to the wing, thereby unmasking the coercive nature of the institution as perceived by the ethnographer doing ethnography. In conclusion, a few officers' routinary coercive duties are described, such as checking inmates' incompatibility with one another, escorting 'difficult prisoners' to the yard, and checking locks, bolts and bars.

Chapter 6 focuses on the interactive practice of ‘doing’ coercion. It shows, first, how any ‘critical event’ is discretionarily constructed and justified, both formally or informally. Then, it deconstructs the threatening phase of the squad’s intervention by describing how it operates in practice most of the time. By doing so, it first describes the symbolic threat of the use of force, consisting in the arrival of the squad on the wing and the following negotiations. Then, it moves on to describing the credible threat of the use of force, which is eventually followed either by de-escalation or by the prison officers’ use of force.

Chapter 7 is about the lawful use of force. It describes what occurs when the emergency squad’s arrival and threats have not produced any de-escalation. It shows how often some officers in the squad try to avoid using force until the end, while a few others, less prone to negotiations, might resist by taking distance from the situation. The chapter then describes the different ways in which the emergency squad uses force in two different scenarios, depending on whether or not they are going to use force with prisoners locked in a different physical space separating them from the others, or not.

Chapter 8 is a visual chapter in which I present an edited selection of 28 images. It is a unique photoessay on the use of force produced ethnographically. It is a visual account telling this ethnography differently, in a way that cannot be told with words. It is an emotional trip taking the reader-spectator inside the walls. It is grounded in the multifaceted traditions and extant practices of visual ethnography, photo-documentary and contemporary photography in the realm of the art world.

Chapter 9 focuses on only a few particular issues impacting on doing ethnography within the walls. It starts unpacking the challenging ethnographer’s relationships with the participants. Then, it discusses the performative nature of doing ethnography. Next, it interrogates issues of access and relationships with gatekeepers. Fourth, it unmasks a few basic facts of this fieldwork and addresses the issue of reflexivity. In conclusion, reflecting on the ethnographer standpoint, it advocates for bearing witness to knowledge producing ‘authentic descriptions’ in the realm of the social sciences, and not only literature.

Chapter 10 concludes the book by discussing both prison officers and (good) violence. Regarding prison officers’ duty of doing coercion, it shows that, first, prison officers cannot only be interpreted as turnkeys. Then, prison officers ‘doing’ coercion are also affected by it. Next, there are a multiplicity of officers’ cultures that

cannot be reduced to the normative hyper-masculinity framework. Regarding violence in relation to Collins' (2008) work, a few points are noteworthy. First, to comprehend prison officers doing coercion from a micro-sociological perspective, it is nonetheless necessary to take into account prisoners' and officers' positionality and status. The lens of emotion at the micro level does not suffice to unpack the complexity of the actual interaction observed. Second, physical prison violence is frequent inside, and this is likely to occur in many other jurisdictions in which research inside is difficult and the level of accountability very low. This is likely to affect millions of prisoners and prison officers around the world. Lastly, prison officers use force (or 'good' violence) as little as possible, and this supports Collins' grand theory of violence, which states that physical violence rarely occurs, yet focusing only on physical violence is heuristically and academically wise, but does not help to understand the multilayered ways in which violence, both physical and symbolic, embed all prison interactions, at least implicitly (Chapter 5).

## Notes

- {ensp}1 This expression was used by Alison Liebling during the workshop 'Critical Prison Studies, Carceral Ethnography, and Human Rights: From Loved Experience to Global Action', coordinated by Debra Parkes (University of Manitoba), Gillian Balfour (Trent University), Joane Martel (Université Laval), Kelly Hannah-Moffat (University of Toronto), Dawn Moore (Carleton University) and Sarah Turnbull at the International Institute for the Sociology of Law (IISL), Onati, Spain (see also Liebling 2015).
- {ensp}2 I am aware that there is not any consensus about the boundaries of coercion as such, of what coercion actually means in practice (Terrill 2014). In fact, some scholars include the simple symbolic presence of an officer in a particular environment. Others, instead, restrict coercion only to hard physical interactions. Some do not distinguish between coercion and force, thereby implicitly considering coercion as something also regarding physical force. Others, on the contrary, try to single out each term more or less precisely (Kauffman 1988; Crewe 2009).
- {ensp}3 It is noteworthy that in Italy, prison officers are rarely put on disciplinary rapport due to their behaviour style with prisoners. This can be interpreted in two ways: first, officer-prisoner relationships are unproblematic (which is not very plausible), or prison officers' practices, even the wrong ones, are tolerated and a blind eye is turned instead (Buffa 2013b: 104).
- {ensp}4 On the broad issue of corruption in custodial settings, see Goldsmith *et al.* (2016). Here, I simply refer to the way in which the prison construction corruption scandal started in

the 1980s (the golden prison, or in Italian ‘Le carceri d’oro’) resulted in very badly constructed facilities with lots of problems of humidity, efficiency, and so on.

- {ensp}5 See, for example, about Australia: P. Farrell and N. Evershed, ‘Use of force on detainees in onshore immigration detention soars’. *The Guardian*, October 30, 2015. [www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/oct/30/use-of-force-on-asylum-seekers-in-onshore-immigration-detention-soars](http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/oct/30/use-of-force-on-asylum-seekers-in-onshore-immigration-detention-soars)); about the US: A. Holpuch, ‘Human Rights Watch decries US prison system’s use of force against mentally ill’. *The Guardian*, May 12, 2015. [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/12/mentally-ill-us-prison-system-human-rights-watch-use-of-force](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/12/mentally-ill-us-prison-system-human-rights-watch-use-of-force)); and about the UK: C. Grayling, ‘Grayling gives green light for staff to use force against inmates in new jail’. *The Guardian*, October 16, 2014. [www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/oct/16/chris-grayling-force-super-child-jail-teenage-inmates](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/oct/16/chris-grayling-force-super-child-jail-teenage-inmates).
- {ensp}6 In Italy, prison officers working on a wing must be of the same sex as the prisoners. This ethnography was only conducted in a male wing; therefore, all prison officers on duty were male.
- {ensp}7 In the forensic psychiatric hospital, however, prison officers would also use force, following a psychiatrist’s request, to compel patients to accept a necessary medication.
- {ensp}8 Some wings of that institution were governed differently, mainly by medical staff.
- {ensp}9 Einaudi is the publisher of Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere* (1947), as well as the *Quaderni dal Carcere* (six volumes, the first one published in 1948). Einaudi has been one of the most authoritative Italian publishers since its foundation in 1933.
- 10 Ricci and Salerno’s (1971) interpretation of violence clearly embedded a negative moral judgement that today might resonate with the interpretations of violence of both Wieviorka (2011) and Sim (2008). Here, we adopt a more neutral interpretation of that word.
- 11 Then, prison officers were still a military police under the authority of the Ministry of Defence. In that book, the authors dealt with the prison officer organisation and the relationships among colleagues, as well as the relationships between officers and inmates.
- 12 The previous statute dated back to 1931.
- 13 Also see the so-called ‘sentenza Torreggiani’. Torreggiani *et al.* vs Italy, [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{"documentcollectionid2":\["GRANDCHAMBER","CHAMBER"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{)
- 14 However, the case of alleged double jeopardy against 14 police officers was dismissed on a technicality. All prison officers are free and will not be brought before a court. ‘Violenza in carcere: scagionati 14 agenti. L’accusa di lesioni partì dai quattro fratelli tunisini Rhimi rinchiusi alla Pulce: il caso è stato archiviato’. *La Gazzetta di Reggio*, November 30, 2015. [http://gazzettadireggio.gelocal.it/reggio/cronaca/2015/11/30/news/violenza-in-carcere-scagionati-14-agenti-1.12541579?refresh\\_ce](http://gazzettadireggio.gelocal.it/reggio/cronaca/2015/11/30/news/violenza-in-carcere-scagionati-14-agenti-1.12541579?refresh_ce).



- 15 The 'Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sull'efficacia e l'efficienza del servizio sanitario nazionale', the so-called 'Commissione Marino', was instituted by the Italian Senato on July 30, 2008.  
[www.senato.it/documenti/repository/commissioni/servizio\\_sanitario16/Relazione\\_OOP\\_PGG\\_doc\\_XXII-bis\\_4.pdf](http://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/commissioni/servizio_sanitario16/Relazione_OOP_PGG_doc_XXII-bis_4.pdf).
- 16 Previously, other institutional inquiries, and even a few directors of those six institutions, had repeatedly lamented the precarious situations in which they had to manage those institutions with no effects at all. On the contrary, the last parliamentary inquiry had a huge impact in determining the order to close those institutions (which only formally occurred). This was due not only to the public opinion being probably more aware and organised on the issue than before, but also because scandalous images officially recorded for the parliamentary commission had been broadly broadcasted and diffused on TV and on the Web. The footage was recorded by the video-maker Corio, who also produced a prize-winning documentary.
- 17 *La Stampa*, April 1, 2014. <http://www.lastampa.it/2014/04/01/italia/politica/opg-da-napolitano-s-alla-proroga-ho-firmato-con-estremo-rammarico-g9e3HKCfUez8rMzVUVUGYN/pagina.html>.
- 18 *L'Espresso*, October 1, 2015. <http://video.espresso.repubblica.it/tutti-i-video/opg-ecco-i-manicomi-lager/258/260>.
- 19 See the following article and video interview in the national newspaper *il Fatto*: 'Ospedali psichiatrici, gli internati vengono dimenticati dietro le sbarre. Le strutture fuorilegge sono tutte operative'. *il Fatto*, November 24, 2015.  
[www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/11/24/ospedali-psichiatrici-gli-internati-vengono-dimenticati-dietro-le-sbarre-le-strutture-fuorilegge-sono-tutte-operative/2247826/#disqus\\_thread](http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/11/24/ospedali-psichiatrici-gli-internati-vengono-dimenticati-dietro-le-sbarre-le-strutture-fuorilegge-sono-tutte-operative/2247826/#disqus_thread).
- 20 That scandal has been the most serious recent one regarding the Italian prison system and the institutional violence in Italy, yet not the only one (Chiarelli 2011).
- 21 Using the expression 'doing' coercion, I do not intend to propose an equivalence between coercion and the use of force. Coercion can be exerted without using force and force can be used for other purpose than coercion (i.e. to save a life). See Terrill (2014) for a discussion on the issue. Here, I refer to the practice of threatening and using force, and I call it 'doing' coercion.

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2

## Studying 'doing' coercion

### A micro-sociology bricolage<sup>1</sup>

There is a growing body of work focusing both theoretically and empirically on the crucial issue of power in custodial settings. The majority of these works, according to Rhodes (2001), do not engage with the coercive and disciplinary power that characterises coercive institutions (*contra*, Carrabine 2004; Crewe 2009; Drake 2012, 2015; Kaufman 2015), nor do those works (and this aspect is crucial here) explore

coercive institutions as a site imbued, to a lesser or greater extent, in the practice of the use of force.

In particular, there isn't any recent micro-sociological work focusing on the practice of what I call 'doing' coercion. A few critical scholars – especially among critical criminologists – have righteously and loudly addressed and criticised officers' abuses and misconducts instead (Ricci and Salierno 1971; Cohen and Taylor 1972, 1976; Sim 1990, 2008, 2009; Tombs and Whyte 2003; Rhodes 2004; Scott 2008, 2015; Gonnella 2013b, 2014; Ruggero and Ryan 2013).

However, all those authors have not paid enough attention, if any at all, to the observation and description of the course of actions and interactions that unfolds at the micro level in the ordinary episodes in which the force is threatened and/or used in a particular time, space and geography. They have mainly raised concerns and fought *against* officer misconduct, 'institutional violence' (Scott 2008; Sim 2008) and 'public violence' (Gonnella 2013b), either being political activists and/or abolitionists (see Scott 2015; Sim 2009).

## 'Doing' coercion: what do prison officers using force do in practice?

In this ethnography, I adopt a micro-sociological approach. The research is compelled to start unpacking what '*doing*' coercion is, by a way of studying the day-to-day officer-prisoner interactions within one particular Italian custodial institution. In order to do so, it will investigate empirically a few dimensions of those sets of practices at stake when officers are 'doing' coercion, or put differently: (1) construct a critical event; (2) threaten the use of force; or (3) actually use force with prisoners lawfully.

The *main questions* would be: What is a critical event in practice? How is it constructed? What actually happens in practice when any prison officer (or only a few of them) either threatens or uses force with flesh-and-blood persons kept in custody? What do spectators do? In other words, what routines, if any, do officers use to 'do' coercion in day-to-day activities? Moreover, what are the phases through which the use of force (either the threat or the actual use of it) unfolds in practice? Are there any relevant stages that can be outlined? Are there any turning points in those interactions?

What about the role of discretion when prison officers ‘do’ coercion? And what about the ways in which prisoners’ positionality, both within and beyond the walls, might influence officers’ decisions to use force in one way or another, if at all? Lastly, what about the emotional context (Crawley 2011) of those situations and interactions, a dimension crucial to the extant interactionist agenda (Hochschild 1983; Collins 2008)?

By addressing these questions with different degrees of depth, this work attempts to shed light on the officers’ use of force. This topic is too often polarised, on the one hand, by the commonly polished discourses on ‘critical events’ frequently reduced to the quantitative discussion of official statistical data (inter alia Griffin 2001), and, on the other, by the critical approach focusing on officers’ misconducts, wrongdoings and alleged crimes, as already shown in the previous chapter. In particular, the focus is on the dynamic interactions occurring between prison officers and inmates during emergency interventions at the light of a theoretical framework mainly grounded on interactionism.

Here, I want to stress with Terrill (2014) that officers’ misconducts or alleged crimes should not be considered as a synonymous nor a normal outcome of ‘doing’ coercion, which refers to the lawful practice of threatening and using force. On the contrary, officers’ misconducts or alleged crimes are an aberration of those challenging duties that constrain officers to threaten and use force with prisoners as a last resort if required by the situation. Yet, those aberrant prison officers’ practices develop within the culture of control, which appears to be particularly strong within some officers in this field. This might be partly due to their compulsory readiness for using force at any time on duty. Therefore, studying the lawful practice of ‘doing’ coercion can shed light on the challenging conflictive contexts and unbalanced power relations, which characterise the *humus* in which officers’ misconducts, wrongdoings, abuses and alleged crimes might develop. Denying or hiding those legitimate practices, as well as denying officers’ wrongdoings or abuses, does not help to comprehend how custodial officers manage the situation whenever disputes or ‘critical events’ are in the picture. In other words, shedding light on how the work should be done and, more importantly, on how it is done in practice most of the time, which is the aim of this ethnography, might also help to better comprehend some particular officers’ deviant behaviours and, more generally, the emergence of any officers’ deviant cultures.

## Watching the interactions closely: a micro-sociological theoretical bricolage

Any particular theoretical framework influences the comprehension of the particular phenomenon under study. My theoretical framework is informed by the extant sociological and criminological literatures on violence and prisons. However, it is mainly grounded in the body of work published by, on the one hand, a few contemporary classic sociologists that have put micro-interactions under scrutiny (Goffman 1959, 1961a, 1961b, 1967; Hochschild 1983; Collins 2004, 2008, 2009) and, on the other, on the *Phenomenology of Power* (Popitz 1990). Each of these approaches has its own complex genealogy, epistemology, theoretical agenda, standpoint and focus – fitting in different strands of the interactionist and phenomenology traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Developing my own approach in the light of my findings, subjective standpoint and epistemological position grounded in critical realism, I had to extract ideas and tools out from their authors' discourses, references and research topics, times and geographies, thereby making my personal theoretical bricolage out of their theories.

## A critical realist approach to the field

Doing ethnography in custodial institutions does not presuppose any privileged epistemological approach. In recent years, different ones have already been adopted (see Bosworth 1999, 2014; Jewkes 2002; Rhodes 2004; Crewe 2009; Phillips 2012; Hasselberg 2016; Turnbull 2016). Before continuing, however, I intend to make explicit that both my research practice and my theoretical approach are grounded in what has been called 'critical realism'. My interpretation of critical realism is based on the assumption of ontological realism (a real world exists independently of our knowledge and perceptions) and the concurrent adoption of an epistemology based on constructivism (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Both the role and the presence of the researcher on the scene are a crucial part of the research and should be visible. Furthermore, ethnographic comprehension neither can be considered to be fixed, nor can it be considered to be totally subjective, pure literature (contra, Kaufman 2015). On the contrary, different simultaneous versions

of understanding are plausible (and needed) to try to comprehend the complexity of any social world from many different standpoints in very different time geographies and cultural contexts. I will contribute aiming to build my ‘authentic description’.

## Different interactionisms: a very short note

I call *interactionisms* the families of approaches grounded on symbolic interactionism, which have developed since the 1930s at the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago, where Herbert Blumer was a student of Mead. Although other well-known Chicagoans such as Park and Burgess had a stake in its development (Athens 2009), until the Second World War, ‘[f]or many, Herbert Blumer *was* symbolic interactionism’<sup>3</sup> (Fine 1993: 63, emphasis in original). He was at least its ‘charismatic leader’ (p. 81).

Herbert Blumer coined the expression symbolic interaction in 1937 (Appelrouth and Edles 2012: 464), thereby laying the foundation for a new discipline. Afterwards, Blumer outlined three premises of symbolic interactionism:

[1] The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may include in his world – physical objects, such as trees or chairs; other human beings, such as a mother or a store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions, such as a school or a government; guiding ideals such as individual independence or honesty; activities of others, such as their commands and requests; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. [2] The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. [3] The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

(Blumer 1969: 2, cited in Appelrouth and Edles 2012: 465)

After the Second World War, and particularly since Blumer's death and under the influence of the *writing culture debate*, things also started to change rapidly within symbolic interactionism. Notwithstanding Blumer's prominent role had previously hardly ever been contested or challenged, over the years symbolic interactionism has developed differently, heading towards multiple (some might say incoherent or fuzzy) sets of approaches, something we shall call interactionisms here.

In the 1990s, Fine (1993) showed that symbolic interactionism – once considered a coherent school with its own academic training programmes at Chicago and Iowa universities, as well as elsewhere – had already integrated many different theoretical approaches drawing from very different perspectives originally not included in its theoretical framework, such as those of Simmel, Weber, Habermas, Schutz and others. Some interactionists had even incorporated postmodern theories, semiotics and feminisms, to cite but a few (Fine 1993). By doing so, according to Fine, symbolic interactionism had already lost its original specificity, both in terms of a coherent particular approach and of a particular set of topics, more than 20 years ago.

Concurrently, however, symbolic interactionism had been incorporated (Fine 1993: 66–8) into other mainstream theoretical sociological perspectives, in which the originally defined symbolic interactionism's concepts have also been widely accepted and reinterpreted in one way or another.<sup>4</sup>

*Interactionisms*, taken as a whole, have the merit to put 'the interaction' at the centre of the sociological enterprise (Goffman 1961a, 1961b, 1963, 1967; Collins 1981, 1986; Hochschild 1983), differentiating itself, on the one hand, from theories that emphasised mental state within the actors' 'black box' (within a psychological framework or evolution), and, on the other, from theories, such as functionalism, that emphasised the role of the structure that would strongly constrain the capacity of social actors and groups to express their own agency (Appelrouth and Edles 2012). In other words, symbolic interactionism had the merit – Fine enthusiastically called it its 'triumth' (Fine 1993: 91) – to put 'the interaction' into the mainstream sociological agenda (contra, Carlen and Collison 1980).<sup>5</sup>

After this note on the roots of interactionism, I now turn to three scholars whose ideas and heuristic tools guided me in constructing and fine-tuning my own lens to address *'Doing' Coercion* empirically. I will start from a few well-known specific



tools of Goffman. Then, I will move to address Hochschild's contribution. Next, I will consider the father of the *Interactional Ritual Chains* (Collins 2004). In conclusion, I will integrate my bricolage with a note on Popitz's phenomenology of the process of 'threatening and being threatened' (Popitz 1990: 65–84).

## From Goffman's toolbox

Goffman is a cornerstone for interactionism as well as for sociologists studying coercive institutions. Goffman's *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Goffman 1961a) is not only one of the classics of the sociological study of the total institution,<sup>6</sup> but Goffman is also a cornerstone to sociology as such, and in particular to the comprehension of face-to-face interactions and rituals (Goffman 1961b, 1967).

Goffman has been considered a functionalist<sup>7</sup> insofar as he was interested in the interaction ritual's role in maintaining 'the moral order of society', as clearly expressed in 'The interaction order: American Sociological Association, 1982 presidential address' (Goffman 1983). Goffman did not put enough emphasis on the vector of inequalities, as would occur in many extant prison ethnographies adopting different theoretical framework (inter alia, Bosworth 1999, 2014; Phillips 2012; Drake et al. 2015), including this one. In fact, Goffman's dramaturgical approach was primarily focused on social interactions and the ways in which those interactions might help the reproduction of social order in day-to-day encounters. In these stereotypical verbal exchanges and body alignment occurring in everyday life, Goffman has in turn emphasised the role of temporality, in particular of transition markers and bodily co-presence, time and again. In *Frame Analysis*, Goffman (1974) showed the way in which participants define and interpret (and therefore frame) experiences and encounters they live. In particular, Goffman develops the idea of 'primary frameworks' (Goffman 1974: 21–39), arguing that 'a primary framework is one that is seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful' (p. 21). Developing the idea, he suggested the existence of two 'broad classes' (p. 22) of such frameworks: natural and social ones. Natural frameworks:

identify occurrences seen as undirected, unoriented, unanimated, unguided, 'purely physical' [{}.] Social frameworks, on the

other hand, provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the human being.

(p. 22)

Primary frameworks influence day-to-day interactions at the local level in which actual individuals interact with one another day in, day out. At these local levels, a particular frame can refer to a particular encounter. By framing, each participant assigns a particular (ready-made) frame to a particular encounter, thereby interpreting that particular situation at the light of a broader set of situations already socially framed as such (i.e. a police arrest, a queue or a party). Different frames can be chosen to interpret the same scene by any of the participants. Furthermore (and this is more relevant here), one interaction, according to Goffman, can be 'bracketed' into different scenes or, to put it differently, divided into different frame(s) by time markers. Time markers are highly normative rule-governed interactional rituals that can be interpreted and performed only by those with inside knowledge. Any actor, or group thereof, can seek to shift the definition of a situation, which is already shared through a primary frame. By doing so, any actor, or group thereof, can seek to produce a new shared interpretation of the situation or adapt to the new frame proposed by other participants. Another useful contribution from Goffman's toolbox is what he called the process of keying. Keying is 'the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else' (Goffman 1974: 43).

In Chapter 6, what Goffman defined as keying activities will be used to make sense of the way in which prison officers threaten prisoners in an effort to de-escalate a critical event. In particular, two scripts will be analysed: in the first one, officers move their fingers nervously in front of the cell of a prisoner who is 'creating trouble'; in the other, officers put their gloves on at a similar occasion to express their intention to be ready to actually use force. On those occasions, each officer will be able to either maintain or change his 'footing' (Goffman 1981) within one particular interaction, thereby displaying his position towards the group's values and norms, as well as to the audience and the participants of the particular interaction at stake.

## On front stage, backstage and ‘the outside’

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) introduces the dramaturgic approach to society (on dramaturgy more generally, see Edgley 2013). Goffman interprets ‘reality’ as a social construction occurring through ritual in a model explicitly referring to Durkheim (Collins 1988), yet Goffman further developed his approach at a micro level. The particular effect of any of those ‘ephemeral’ rituals occurring *hic et nunc* in any day-to-day situation does not finish with the end of that particular situation. In fact, those interactions not only produce a social reality instantaneously, but also contribute to the production and reproduction – as well as contestation and resistance – of reality over time through shared social symbols. Goffman’s world is not idealistic, though. On the contrary, according to Collins (1988), Goffman’s interpretation of reality made of different layers is grounded in a very material world. Goffman, in fact, defined a ‘social situation as a *physical arena* anywhere within which an entering person finds himself exposed to the immediate presence of one or more others’ (Goffman 1977: 301, emphasis added). Ideas are built on material arrangements – including *the arrangements between the sexes* (Goffman 1977) – constituted of actual face-to-face bodily encounters within a physical space.

According to Collins (2004), Goffman had already implicitly introduced the notion of the interaction ritual chain by addressing ending rituals such as salutation. In fact, according to Collins, Goffman (1961b) had clarified that by using salutations when living one particular encounter, the same particular encounter is already ritually prepared for a possible future reconstitution into another one, thereby possibly forming a chain of encounters or, as Collins calls it, an *Interaction Ritual Chain* (Collins 2004). The idea of the interaction chain of encounters, then, is also implicitly there in *Asylums* (Goffman 1961a) time and again. In custodial settings, the time-space constraints and the transition markers are strong imperatives to officer-prisoner interactions, which necessarily frame their encounters day in, day out due to both the very configuration of the internal coercive architecture, the coercive routine, and particularly the organisation of ‘doing’ coercion.

Goffman’s dramaturgical approach also included the very useful notions of ‘region and region behaviour’ (Goffman 1959: 66–86), which he described as being made of three main arenas: front stage, backstage and ‘the outside’ (Collins will

develop the outside further, introducing the distinction between ‘supportive audience’ and bystanders; see below).

Notoriously, the front stage is a place where particular social actors in a particular situation can consciously both construct and display their face accordingly at a particular layer of the reality at stake. On the contrary, the backstage is a place that is normally not clearly visible from the front stage, where another particular presentation of self is at stake to another particular audience. ‘The outside’ is a third residual region including ‘all places other than the two already identified’ (Goffman 1959: 82). Outsiders are, according to Goffman, persons outside the particular performance at stake independent of their partisan or neutral attitude towards the situation at stake.

Life is, however, more complicated than theatre. Therefore, front stage and backstage are not fixed places, and are constituted and reconstituted in different ways by particular actors, interacting in particular ways, in particular times, spaces and geographies.

Usually, any social actor has a certain control over his or her own front stage and backstage, and can protect him or herself from others’ contamination (Goffman 1961a). This does not happen to prisoners inside total institutions:

In the normal course of affair in civil society, audience and role segregation keep one’s avowals and implicit claims regarding self-made in one physical scene of activity from being tested against conduct in other settings. In total institutions spheres of life are desegregated, so that an inmate’s conduct in one scene of activity is thrown up to him by staff as a comment and check upon his conduct in another context.

(Goffman 1961a: 36–7)

The situation described in the quote above is not only part of prisoners’ ‘degradations, humiliations and profanations of the self’ (Goffman 1961a: 14), but it also structures the relationships between the keepers and the kept day in, day out. According to Goffman (1961a: 24), ‘prisoners and mental patients cannot prevent their visitors from seeing them in humiliating circumstances’, let alone the extent to which they could try to construct, or save, their face in front of prison staff working within the walls.

Of course, prisoners would try to resist their invasion of privacy by trying to avoid being seen in embarrassing private circumstances, preserving, by so doing, their own areas of backstage in which to be (at least partially and momentary) out of sight. In order to so, they would even try to shield (either with or without the cooperation of fellow prisoners) any material at hand – including toilet paper – the Judas window of their own cell or those used by officers to control prisoners in any other area, such as the yard. These kinds of acts of resistance are occasionally and discretionarily tolerated by front-line officers, who are aware of the prisoners' need for privacy. Despite the context, prisoners would, in other words, try by all means to resist institutional constraints (Goffman 1961a) or, as someone put it, they would try, and to some extent would be able, to 'do' freedom (Ugelvik 2014).

## Goffman's impression management and the definition of the situation

Goffman (1959) considered the very act of commanding and being commanded as a ritual situation in which deference was at stake. Formal deference was continuously formally displayed in the asylum between one officer and another at a different level in the chain of command. Many keepers and kept knew how to play the interaction competently with one another. Here, once again, the situation could change significantly when one particular actor would exit from, or enter into, the situation at stake. Goffman interprets the interaction ritual between a superordinate and a subordinate in terms of the very capacity of the interaction ritual to reproduce the chain of command and the organisation at stake. The reproduction would occur due to the ritual, independent of the effectiveness of the particular command at stake, or the subordinate's obedience (see the below comments on the use of TV by officers on the wing's booth).

Closely linked to this concept is the crucial notion of the *definition of the situation*. The definition of the situation varies depending on the particular standpoint. Therefore, it usually varies significantly between staff and prisoners most of the time, yet it also varies also within each group:

When an Individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed {.}. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them

and what they may expect of him. Informed in this way, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him.

(Goffman 1959: 1)

Any particular situation was defined differently, from one standpoint or another, and would also change over time. Moreover, the extant definition of the situation had effects on, or would influence, the forthcoming situations, as Collins' *Interaction Ritual Chain* (Collins 2004) explains, also in relation to the available information on the other.

## From Hochschild's toolbox: interactionism, emotions and anger boundaries

Since the end of the 1970s, emotions entered into the interactionist agenda (Denzin 1980, 1985; Throit 1989; Stets and Turner 2006, 2014; Turner and Stets 2006; Warton 2009; Sassatelli 2014). Hochschild's *The Managed Heart* had a tremendous impact on the development of what later became the sociology of emotion. From this perspective, Hochschild (1979, 1983) played a crucial role in developing Goffman's dramaturgical interactionism to a new level.

In fact, although Goffman developed, among others, a few well-known ideas particularly relevant here, such as *impression management*, *deference* and *embarrassment*, he mainly dealt with the question of appearance, building an interpretative framework of interactions based on a theatrical dramaturgy of day-to-day life.

Instead, Hochschild indicated the constitutive role of emotions straightforwardly. That is particularly significant here, because emotions play a crucial role in custodial settings on many occasions, particularly violent ones (Collins 2008). In those settings, both staff and prisoners have in fact to perform cognitive, bodily and expressive works not only to 'save their face' in the underworld, but also to actually struggle through their day-to-day working duties, or human lives, behind bars.<sup>8</sup>

Hochschild's work is crucial for three main reasons here. First, because she stressed the influence on the relationships of the participants' status and ascribed social positions. This is not a completely new approach within interactionism, in which class and patriarchy has long been considered, although interactionism's detractors have hardly recognised it (see Fine 1993). Hochschild used 'sexes and social classes' (Hochschild 1983: 12) as a heuristic device from the very outset of her research in the early 1980s. She also coined the expression 'status shields', thereby showing the ways in which status, and not only gender, might shield one person or another from poorer treatment. Extending Hochschild's (1983) concept of status shield, and adapting her concept to my observation, I introduce the term '*status magnet versus status shield*', thereby underlining the influence of inmates' status on officers' discretionary performance. Status, in other words, not only shields prisoners from a particular treatment, but it can also call for it. That tool is crucial in the ethnography on 'doing' coercion. Status strongly influences not only the way in which 'doing' coercion is performed by officers, but, even more importantly, whether or not it will be performed at all against a particular inmate with a particular characteristic or another, quite independent of the situation (*infra*, Chapters 6 and 7).

Second, for her widely recognised conceptual contribution on emotion enriching the sociologist's toolbox with two new concepts: 'emotion work' and 'emotional labour'. Both concepts are useful for studying prison officers. By doing so, not only did she contribute to the sociological imagination, but she also gave birth to a totally new sociological field, which has reached international recognition (Stets and Turner 2006). Officers are constantly required to perform both 'emotion work' and 'emotional labour' simply to rule the wing in day-to-day situations. Emotions are then crucially at the intersection of the contrasting duties officers are required to perform by concurrently having the responsibility, on the one hand, to guarantee 'order and security' (by 'doing' coercion) and, on the other, to implement (or help others implement) rehabilitation. Officers must cope with their own working conditions and stress, and, concurrently, try to respond appropriately to the vast array of day-to-day human needs coming from those in custody living side-by-side with them. Being, more often than not, in a situation characterised by face-to-face interaction with one another, as Goffman (1961a) had already shown in *Asylums* (see above), and due also to the power gap between the keepers and the kept, makes the emotional management of the interactions on the wing particularly challenging.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, Hochschild's work is crucial because it introduces another useful concept: 'anger boundaries' (Hochschild 1983: 28). Hochschild's idea of anger boundaries addresses, yet not in depth, the ways in which staff members are supposed (and instructed) to react to a client talking rudely, or assaulting them verbally, avoiding in that way an escalation of violence (pp. 28–34). Hochschild writes about flight attendants, yet a lot of her writing can be applied to prison officers as well. Following Appelrouth and Edles (2012), writing about Hochschild:

[O]fficers engage in emotional labor in their dealing with the public. Trained to keep their own emotions in check under dangerous and threatening conditions [.] officers also are instructed in techniques designed to produce specified emotional states in suspects and witnesses.

(pp. 506–7)

This attention to the strategic use of practical knowledge and of recurrent scripts used by staff in a critical situation is particularly relevant when studying officers 'doing' peacemaking (Chapter 3), and will be implicitly in the picture in the following pages. Those symbolic or physically violent interactions staff had with clients, referred to in her book, strongly resemble the interactions repeatedly occurring on the landing between the keepers and the kept, yet those critical episodes would probably be more frequent and more severe in nature inside the walls than on the plane. Furthermore, Hochschild's interpretations of emotion resonate particularly well with Collins' ones, and it is to Collins' tools that I now turn.

## From Collins' toolbox: *Interaction Ritual Chain*, supportive audience, confrontational tension and fear

Introducing his theoretical perspective in *Interaction Ritual Chain*, Collins (2004) clearly expresses his legacy to Erving Goffman, defining him as 'the founder of interaction ritual analysis' (Collins 2004: 4). He then explicitly refers to *Asylums* (Goffman 1961a), *Interaction Rituals* (Goffman 1967) and *Strategic Interaction* (Goffman 1969) throughout his book time and again.



Collins states that:

Goffman operates on a level of micro-detail that was unprecedented at his time, he helps point the way toward seeing just how the pressure for ritual conformity is felt, and thus allows us to turn his micro-functionalism into a mechanism of the micro-production of solidarities and realities.

(Collins 2004: 16–17)<sup>10</sup>

Collins' approach incorporates and expands a few of Goffman's liminal ideas 'in order to bring out the vast extensions possible of his rather condensed theoretical remarks on the topic' (Collins 2004: 19). Collins, like Goffman before him, focuses on the interaction rather than the so-called perpetrators or the victim, and his interpretation has been debated, challenged and appreciated by other scholars (inter alia, Cooney 2009; Felson 2009; Kalyvas 2011; Wieviorka 2011).

Collins develops Goffman's concepts of interaction ritual and audience of the interaction to a new level, and addresses the issue of emotion straightforwardly. Dealing with *violence*, Collins (2008) further developed his theory of the *Interaction Ritual Chain* (Collins 2004), introducing some crucial concepts such as forward panics, weak victims, supportive audiences and rapid shifts in emotional balances, which have all been useful devices during my ethnographic observation. Adopting Collins' micro-sociology of violence, prison's violent interactions and prison officers' threat and use of force<sup>11</sup> can be read as performances developing in an 'interaction ritual chain' in which actors try to display and defend a positive face. Officers try to influence others as to how they ought to be seen and treated. Concurrently, they try to construct and display different types of audience, both their own alleged dominant position in the interaction and their principal antagonist, alleged subordination. Challenges, provocations and insults, as well as claims and counterclaims between the parties, increases, in Collins' theory, the tension between one another.

Collins, just like others in the interactionist tradition, has dealt with emotion throughout his career. In his micro-sociology of violence (Collins 2008, 2012), he has also focused on emotion straightforwardly. He has defined 'forward panic' and has explicitly argued that '[v]iolent interactions are difficult because they go against the grain of normal interaction rituals' (Collins 2008: 20) (however, this point will be

challenged in the conclusion of this book). Collins introduced new conceptual tools in his recent book to address conflictual-violent interactions (Collins 2008) within that same interactionist framework. ‘Confrontational tension’ would be ‘[t]he tendency to become entrained in each other’s rhythms and emotions [{}]. It] means that when the interaction is at cross purposes – an antagonistic interaction – people experience a pervasive feeling of tension’ (Collins 2008: 20).

He continued by saying that: ‘at higher level of intensity [confrontational tension] shades over into fear. For this reason, violence is difficult to carry out, not easy’ (Collins 2008: 20).

Collins also develops Goffman’s idea of audience to a new level. According to Collins (2008), the audience can either take sides or be neutral. In both cases, the audience impinges in the reputation formation of those involved in the situation, transforming the conflict into a stage context (Collins 2008) that influences not only the extant situation, but also those forthcoming ones developing along the interaction chain.

## Audience: supportive groups versus outsiders

Although Collins’ idea of supportive audience resonates, as already noted above, with Goffman’s idea of the outsider, each particular expression refers to a particular analytical dimension. According to Weenink (2014: 414), Collins’ idea of:

[s]upportive group consists of persons who are physically present at the violent situation and who are members of the same group to which one of the principals belongs. They do not engage in the physical violent action itself but they may take sides verbally, as partisans, or they may watch and yell, as a supportive audience that provides a stage.

Insofar as the supportive group is partisan, it is something different to Goffman’s ‘outsiders’, which are simply spectators, or bystanders, of the violence, and are neither necessarily partisan, nor necessarily engage in the interaction as agents.

Within the ethnographic observation collected inside, either the presence of a supportive group, such as officers from the squad or colleagues thereof, or a passive audience (i.e. the social researcher) displaying a more neutral attitude influenced, in different ways, the dynamic performance of the officers’ threats and their use of force.

## An interactionist approach based on observation

Some interactionist scholars would probably agree with Collins that ‘most existing explanations of violence fall into the category of background explanation: factors outside the situation that lead up to and cause the observed violence’ (Collins 2008: 20). Moreover, interactionist scholars would also possibly agree with what a radical interactionist stated: ‘the interaction [{}] is always a formative process in its own right’ (Athens 2005: 632–3), and a theory must ‘explain what actually takes place during the interaction not only [when violent interactions] are committed but also when they are *nearly* committed’ (p. 633, emphasis in the original).

Collins explains how he thinks interaction ought to be studied. He suggests that:

[to] move to a sociological theory, not of violent individuals, but of violent *situations*, we must emphasise a different way of collecting and analysing data. *We need direct observation of violent interaction* to capture the process of violence as it actually is performed.

(Collins 2008: 3–4, emphasis added)

Collins’ understanding of *Violence* (Collins 2008) is grounded on a new version of what he had previously elaborated under the rubric of ‘Emotional Energy and the Transient Emotions’ (Collins 2004: 102–4). Emotions, in other words, play a crucial role both in Collins’ interpretation of cooperative interaction and of conflictual ones.

## Interactionism and the body

To the best of my knowledge, Collins (but also see Wacquant 2004) is the sociologist who emphasised the role of the body in violence encounters most synthetically and eloquently by arguing that violence is a social process that occurs through the interaction between flesh-and-blood bodies (Collins 2008).<sup>12</sup>

In *Interactional Ritual Chain* (Collins 2004), the body played a crucial role as well: intersubjectivity was constituted and reconstituted during the physical and social interaction among persons in proximity to one another; intersubjectivity was both

embodied and performed bodily. This becomes particularly relevant in Collins' study of 'conflictual confrontation' and 'violence' (Collins 2008, 2012).

Collins states that:

[f]ighters get into a state of fear or at least high tension as soon as the confrontation comes to the point of violence. I will call this tension/fear; it is a collective interactional mood that characterises the violent encounters on all sides, and that shapes the behaviour of all its participants in several typical ways.

(Collins 2008: 41–2)

An interesting contrast shapes the emotional field of either cooperative or conflictual interactions. Collins in fact explains in a non-intuitive fashion that violence is difficult (and not easy as it seems in the media) to occur because it is difficult to move against those with whom we are in interaction. He states that:

Violence is so difficult because it goes against our propensity to attune our nervous systems to those with whom we establish intersubjectivity. Quite literally, persons in a conflictual situation, who are close enough to send and receive *signals from each other's face and body*, feel the tension of simultaneously becoming highly attuned to each other, while trying to force the other to submit to one's will.

(Collins 2012: 136, emphasis added)

Officers' use of force within the walls occurs between persons who often know each other. That practice is shaped by the memories of previous encounters, intersubjectivity and emotions. However, violence inside is not rare at all (contra, Collins 2008).

Collins (2008: 41–57, 2012) then goes into detail (mainly obtained by looking at images or working on the literature) describing the bodily reactions to conflictual violent interaction. He states that violence may influence, and occasionally provoke, sweating, trembling and having a red face. Collins even notices, writing about wars, that '[n]ot uncommon is loss of control of one's sphincters, urinating or shitting in

one's pants' (Collins 2008: 46). This research also strongly supports those bodily reactions in situations in which violence and the use of force occurs within the walls.

I now move to the last section of this chapter, in which a note on Popitz's phenomenology of the threatening process is presented.

## From Popitz's toolbox: a note on the phenomenology of threatening and being threatened

Popitz's *Phenomenology of Power* (1990) is useful in my theoretical bricolage because it directly engages with 'threatening and being threatened' (pp. 65–84), which is at the core of what I call 'doing' coercion. In my interpretation, he has showed the intersubjective and interactive relationships implied in each 'threatening structure' (p. 66) from a phenomenological point of view. According to him, during the interaction there is a shifting and ongoing power dynamic that depends on how any of the actors involved in the interaction participate in it. This aspect was particularly evident during the observation. Importantly, Popitz argues that the victim who is threatened depends not only on his perpetrator's acts or threats, but also on – and becomes constrained by – the following decisions and actions of his or her victim (p. 68). In other words, officers threatening inmates cannot do so without taking into account the possible reaction of those who are being threatened. Prisoners are not passive recipients of the officers' threats. They are agents actively involved in the situation.<sup>13</sup> Agency is available to both officers and prisoners interacting with one another, even in a threatening interaction in which the power balance at stake is particularly unequal, as seen in Vignettes 3.1a and 3.1b in Chapter 3, on persuasion and inducement.

The dynamic process of 'doing' coercion would not only depend on the officers' own discretionary decision whether or not to threaten prisoners, but also on the actions and reactions of those being threatened. The persons being threatened by officers would have a crucial stake in the process. The likelihood of one outcome rather than another in any particular occasion would depend not only on the officers' threats, but also on the ongoing chain of interactions between the keepers and the kept.

Put differently, officers' decisions would be constrained by the prisoners' decisions, and vice versa (but to a different degree). In other words, following Popitz, it

is plausible that, more often than not, all parties have a stake in influencing the outcome of any situation in which threats have been used. Therefore, threats are costly and their use can be seen as a last resort. Despite the threatening structure of the situation, officers performed their threats, and the following actions and interactions, displaying a hard grip on the situation. They displayed their authority as if their threats, and the possible outcome thereof, were only the autonomous consequence of their own actions, and this might also be interpreted in the light of Goffman's 'impression management'. Officers seemed to be aware of the limitation of their capacity to control the outcome of their own symbolic threats against prisoners. In fact, officers knew that the course of action following their threat would likely also be determined by the prisoner's reaction to it, rather than only by their own moves. Any officers' symbolic threat, due to the prisoner's reaction, might eventually turn into a physical confrontation anyway, despite officers' intentions to try to avoid the use of force. Due to the unpredictability of the outcome of such threats, some prison officers might prefer to avoid the use of threat by either turning a blind eye to the critical event or adopting softer tools of negotiation instead (see below).

To conclude this section, it is worth remembering the intersubjective and interactive relationships embedded in any interaction that incorporates a 'threatening structure' (p. 66). For a threat to occur, in fact, at least two social actors must interact with one another. During the interaction, there is a shifting and ongoing power dynamic that depends on how any of the actors involved in the interaction participate with one another and the supportive audience or bystander, to use Collins' vocabulary.

Popitz's lesson is that not only the victim who is threatened depends on his or her perpetrator's acts or threats, but also the perpetrator depends, in turn, on – and becomes constrained by – the following victim's decisions and actions (p. 68).<sup>14</sup> This perspective will be a particularly useful lens through which to observe the first phase of 'doing coercion', the officers' threats of using force (Chapter 6).

In the next chapter, we will move to the research site and enter the custodial institution. We shall unpack the institutional organisation that implements in practice coercion on the wing, and its hierarchical structure.

## Notes

- {ensp}1 Here, I want to warmly thank Roberta Sassatelli for the generous discussions about this approach and for all the suggestion and critiques she offered me throughout its development.
- {ensp}2 Within the body of work considered, only *Asylums* (Goffman 1961a) is focused on prison straightforwardly. *Violence* (Collins 2008) partly touches on bullying in prison and on police ‘bad’ violence. Neither address prison officers’ lawful use of force thoroughly.
- {ensp}3 Park’s influence on symbolic interactionism had been minimised by Blumer, who ‘performed the role of chief expositor of the interactionist’s perspective’ (Athens 2007: 391) after Mead’s death.
- {ensp}4 Notwithstanding the incorporation process, other scholars have tried to clarify what distinguishes symbolic interactionism from other contiguous disciplines such as phenomenology and ethnomethodology. See, inter alia, the special issue of *Symbolic Interaction* (Von Lehn and Gibson 2011) on ‘Interaction and symbolic interactionism’, then ‘Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology’ (Dennis 2011), and lastly Denzin (1985), writing on emotion and phenomenology.
- {ensp}5 According to Fine, symbolic interactionism would have contributed significantly to introducing three relevant debates in mainstream sociology: first, the *micro-macro* debate; second, the *agency-structure* debate; and lastly, the *social realist/interpretivist* debate (Fine 1993: 68–71).
- {ensp}6 Two out of five types of Goffman’s ‘total institution’ deal with penal or administrative detention (Goffman 1961a: 4–5).
- {ensp}7 Goffman, however, contested ‘functionalist interpretation’ time and again (inter alia, Goffman 1961a: 110).
- {ensp}8 It is worth remembering that suicide occurs much more frequently among inmates than the non-convicted population (Liebling and Maruna 2005), and, moreover, suicide rates are also allegedly particularly high in Italy among prison officers. Yet, sound studies on the issue including all control variables are missing.
- {ensp}9 In prison sociology, Hochschild’s perspective has been addressed by Crawley (2004, 2013).
- 10 Not only symbolic interactionism, but also ethnomethodology, have played a crucial role in explaining the interactions that usually occur in day-to-day situations both within and beyond the walls. For a critique of this position from an interactionist’s standpoint, see ‘Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology’ (Dennis 2011). An excellent piece of ethnomethodological research in prison is *Language and Social Reality: The Case of Telling the Convict Code* (Wieder 1974).
- 11 Collins deals with actual bodily violence rather than threats or so-called symbolic violence.
- 12 On the other hand, Wieviorka strongly contested Collins’ approach to violence by writing: ‘Violence indicates rupture and not relation and violence involves the subjectivity of the person or persons who perpetuate it, much more than the inter-subjectivity of actors in relation and interaction’ (Wieviorka 2011: 5).

- 13 Despite prisoners being potentially active agents (rather than being only passive recipients of state control), it is worth remembering that many prisoners kept in custody in Italy either show psychiatric symptoms, or are under psychiatric treatment. Therefore, their actual agency is often severely limited. Popitz's philosophical stance has to be mitigated by the hard reality lived by the persons in custody, this ethnography showed.
- 14 Perpetrators and victims are not terms used by Popitz, yet in my understanding they can be used safely.

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3

## Peacemaking and beyond

### The everyday prison officer's duty

This chapter illustrates the day-to-day tools of negotiation prison officers would use on the wing to routinely administer and *control* the people in custody, while performing their duties. It introduces the complexity of managing a precarious and difficult status quo that characterised the wing life, showing how the officers' routines were interspersed with the more or less proactive wing officers' (occasionally aided by a superordinate officer or the security manager) interventions, aiming, most of the time, at solving problems, requests, disputes or any other issues in a reasonable way – or, said more appreciatively, 'getting relationships right' (Liebling *et al.* 2011: 205). By getting relationships right with inmates, prison officers could limit the use of more coercive means of influence, such as the threat and use of force.

According to Liebling *et al.* (2011), writing on prison officers in the UK:

[i]n one day, an officer can be a supervisor, custodial, disciplinarian, peacekeeper, administrator, observer, manager, facilitator, mentor, provider, classifier and diplomat. Different situations require quite different blends, and different types of establishments or populations may demand a slightly different mix. Versatility and flexibility are key requirements.

(p. 48)

Furthermore, prisons are also institutions in which power relations are particularly unbalanced and where 'authority is imposed upon prisoners' (Drake 2008: 155), and prisoners' indiscipline can lead directly to the use of force. The threat and use of force was particularly visible in my ethnographic field, which was a fairly violent wing in which many so-called troublemakers were held in custody, yet the way in which 'doing' coercion was performed was very different to what the MUFTI team does in the UK (in two maximum security prisons), according to Drake (2008):

Due to indiscipline [{}] physical and coercive control over prisoners was thus employed by the staff. For instance if a prisoners was perceived by staff to be a potential risk to the good order and discipline of the establishment, that prisoner might be subject to a 'planned removal' to the segregation unit. This would consist of several members of staff (usually 7–10,

some of whom might be dressed in full riot gear), arriving at the prisoner's cell to forcibly move him to the segregation unit [{}]  
[T]he prisoner would not usually be given an opportunity to walk on his own but would be physically restrained and walked there by the removal team. Prisoners argued that heightened control responses such as these were often not required and were over-reactions.

(Drake 2008: 161)

The emergency squad I observed worked differently indeed. First of all, in Italy, riot gear is not usually allowed in ordinary emergency squad interventions. The emergency team would require a special authorisation by the governor to use that gear. The governor is allowed to give such authorisation to the security manager or the commander only under exceptional circumstances (yet, in practice, some officers told me that whenever they had used any riot gear without authorisation, an authorisation had been granted *ex post*). I never observed the emergency squad arriving to execute an order like that described above following a prisoner's indiscipline, but only in more violent cases of a prisoner-prisoner fight or assault of an officer. Usually, as I will explain and describe in Chapters 6 and 7, the emergency squad would always arrive at the 'critical event' looking to try to de-escalate the situation, despite individual prison officers' resistance in doing so; in Liebling *et al.*'s (2011) terms, trying to do peacemaking most of the time. The emergency squad almost never use force directly without first trying to find a way out of the situation via negotiation, yet direct force would be very likely in the case of the assault of an officer.

Even after the failure of the threatening phase (see Chapter 6) and the following bodily intervention, officers would use force to compel the prisoner to surrender. After the prisoner's surrender, the emergency squad's staff members would start to loosen their restraints. Afterwards, the squad would escort the prisoner to his destination: a seclusion room, the infirmary or anywhere else. A mechanical restraint could never be an option, being completely unlawful inside the walls now. Exceptional alleged overuse of force in cases of an assault of an officer, so-called 'lessons', have been reported by both staff and prisoners (see Buffa 2013a).

## A few critical accounts on officers' use of force

Despite the usual practices I observed day in, day out, I will now briefly quote two interviewees challenging the ways in which the use of force was performed. One prisoner I trusted disclosed his opinion to me in a recorded interview (in which he explicitly required anonymity), by saying that:

guards are not always right! They often are right, though; in other occasions, we [prisoners] are right {.} because they {.} they also [ab]use the situation from time to time. They know that if we [prisoners] have a dispute with them, it's a mess for us and can easily turn out to be very costly for us in terms of early release,<sup>1</sup> and even of new penal proceedings against us, which will surely lead to more years in prisons. It would be resistance to a public officer, you know? Knowing our subaltern position, turnkeys sometimes push the situation to the limit. And some prisoners react anyway. Some have done it like that more than others, and they have long tariffs now; you know a few of them, do you? Well, actually, it never occurs to me {.} they treat me decently most of the time {.} because I work and never create trouble for them. I've never had any serious dispute. But, yes, I can say to you there are also officers who do not work professionally here. I just turn a blind eye to what they do and never talk about it.

(summary of an audio-recorded interview with Gioachino, a prisoner)

Other prisoners's accounts would confirm Gioachino's quote, insisting that occasionally officers provoke prisoners to start a fight for personal interest or just because they simply do it. Most of the prisoners recognise that officers work fairly most of the time. But I am not sure to what extent they felt comfortable speaking honestly to me, being that I was in the company of officers most of the time. A prison chaplain offered an interesting interpretation, dialoguing with me on the use of force by saying:

It is important for me to realise that I should spend time not only with prisoners, but also with prison officers working in here. I say it because here, more often than not, violence is the main

instrument of communication used by prisoners and officers to communicate with one another.

(video-recorded photo-elicitation interview with Padre Ambrogio, one of the prison chaplains)

I had a different impression than Padre Ambrogio, yet his long experience inside the walls urged me to consider his opinion seriously. However, I think his remarks were more suited to the past than to the most recent situation I was able to observe. Anyway, surely the wing was not governed with Christian fraternity, which would be his utopia.

Another quote already published elsewhere is particularly problematic. It is a senior officer describing their ways of intervening in critical events in the past, which resonates quite well with the Padre Ambrogio quote:

[In the case of a critical event] I intervene[d] to procure pain [ {. } ] I am not interested whether he [the prisoner] is forced to gasp for air, bang his head [against the wall or the bars], or whatever { . }. From my point of view, though, I just try to take him by the neck; in fact, I try to decelerate his breathing, but I do not know what I should do. I simply learned by doing that, whenever I take him by his neck he stops resisting.

(quoted in [Gariglio 2016: 371](#))

Those three quotes illustrate different problematic dimensions of the officers' use of force in the fieldwork at stake, which would deserve a book by their own. The two most relevant issues would be, on the one hand, the low level of accountability, and, on the other, the insufficient training. After these 'critical' notes, I now return for the rest of this chapter to the less coercive prison officers' day-to-day duties. From Chapter 4 onwards, 'doing' coercion lawfully will be the focus of the book.

The following sections of this chapter are crucial because not only do they introduce the complexities and conflicting roles imbuing the wing officer's job – in particular, enforcing 'order and security' while concurrently aiming at rehabilitation – but they also show the recurrent ways in which officers manage the wing – both

formally and informally – by trying most of the time to find a feasible way out of the recurrent possible critical situations, before constructing them into a ‘critical event’ (see Chapter 6).

This chapter will introduce a few tools of negotiation (see also [Kauffman 1988](#); [Crewe 2009](#)). Writing about these interactive tools, I mainly aim to provide a larger picture to interpret the prison officer’s job, avoiding, by doing so, presenting the officers’ daily routine as mainly dealing with threatening and using force.

I now turn to the issue of prison officers’ discretion. Then, the following section moves on to the classical sociological concept of authority, dealing in particular with officers’ authority deficit, addressing a few particularly relevant points. The chapter finishes by addressing some tools of negotiation.

## On prison officers’ discretion

The relevance of prison officers’ discretion emerged from the outset of prison studies and is discussed thoroughly in *The Prison Officer* ([Liebling et al. 2011: 121–50](#)), and was clearly pointed out as early as in the classic prison publications of [Clemmer \(1940\)](#) and [Sykes \(1958\)](#). Discretion expresses the crucial tension between ‘flexibility and consistency’ that always enters the picture when an officer enforces the rules in practice ([Liebling and Price 2001](#); see also [Liebling et al. 1999](#); [Crewe 2011](#)). The centrality of discretion and the prison officers’ efforts (others might call them struggles) to rule the wing can be reread in the light of the classic ‘street-level bureaucracy’ ([Lipsky 2010](#)). Reading prison work through Lipsky, discretion emerges as a structural dimension that is necessarily needed to allow officers to cope with their working environment and flexibly follow the laws, regulations and procedures, and to translate them into practice in a particular organisational and institutional context, while going about their job day in, day out.

Lipsky suggested that at a ‘street level’, the routine and logic adopted by street-level bureaucrats may be based on local scripts and informal norms that may differ significantly from the institutional goals and means as interpreted at a higher hierarchical level within the organisation. Discretionary interpretations and the adoption of common sense are shared characteristics of many street-level bureaucracies.



Despite the fact that discretion necessarily impacts officers' interpretations of day-to-day routines and orders, it is noteworthy to stress that in a custodial institution, discretion can be not only an instrument of reconciliation and negotiation, but can also lead to abuses, wrongdoings, crimes and cover-ups, particularly so in the absence of serious procedures of accountability. Therefore, it is useful to state that discretion ought to be bounded by 'the ability to discern correctly', rather than 'arbitrary judgement' (Harrison 1992, quoted in [Liebling et al. 2011: 149](#)). This normative account is predicated on the need for a dialogue between managers, officers and prisoners. Governors and senior managers, in consultation with 'rank and file officers', ought to formulate and provide a shared understanding of the values and norms to be used in order to apply discretion, adopting what has been defined as a 'flexible consistency' (see [Liebling et al. 2011: 146–50](#)). Senior staff displayed (and often enacted) the intention to solve disputes by negotiations consistently, before calling for an emergency squad's intervention. Senior staff would try to negotiate with prisoners even during the threatening phase of the use of force. These seem to confirm the importance of discretion and of a good collaboration between managers and base-grade staff. Unfortunately, that was not always the case.

I now turn to authority (deficit), then to the set of 'tools of influence' used by officers to administer and control the wing.

## Authority (deficit) and prison officers

Authority is a well-known relevant concept in the social sciences. It has been considered as one ingredient shaping the *Interaction Ritual Chains* ([Collins 2004](#)) and the relationships between the keepers and the kept in a 'total institution' ([Goffman 1961a](#))<sup>2</sup> on a daily basis (see also [Sennett 1980](#)).

Authority, to put it simply, is a legitimated power that produces a normative obligation to obey to a lawful order in those under its influence. [Terrill \(2014\)](#) argues that it could be grasped as the opposite of coercion. Coercion, in fact, according to Terrill is the enforcement of obedience through a physical interaction, whether or not the subject complies spontaneously<sup>3</sup> with an officer's lawful order. [Crewe \(2009\)](#) distinguishes between 'power that is taken-for-granted and power that is accepted as just or legitimated' (p. 84). Those two types of power would work differently. The first

one would be based on habit or ritual, and the second one on 'normative commitment' (p. 84).

Others suggest that '[s]ome [inmates] may obey rules from fear' and then add that 'others might support them out of habit of loyalty' and that '[t]hey may even be obedient because they believe in the legitimacy of regulations in their own right' (Bosworth and Carrabine 2005: 506). This multifaceted understanding of the legitimacy of officers' authority was a good lens to interpret what I witnessed of the field.

Writing about the 'prisons and their essential similarities', Liebling (2004: 462–4) states that:

[p]risons are, primarily, places of punishment [(.)] Prisons are special communities (but communities nevertheless), which exist at once outside and inside the social community. Their form is shaped by social and political ideas held about crime, punishment, social order [as well as conflict] and human nature. Many of the practices within them are also shaped by these ideas. Prisoners are generally held against their will. In this sense, but also in others, prisons suffer from an 'inherent legitimacy deficit'.

(p. 462)

I experienced that 'legitimacy deficit' over the entire period of the ethnography. It seemed evident to me that 'total consensus' was very difficult to achieve, and momentary resemblance of the so-called order was very precarious and needed constant efforts in peacemaking. It is a question of degree of legitimacy rather than the overarching presence or absence of it (Carrabine *et al.* 2009: 367).

I also realised the importance of the so-called *delegitimising effect*. Kauffman (1988) introduced the issue brilliantly. Her ethnography shows that: 'Authority failed the officers in their quest to control the prison in part because the behaviour officers sought to compel of inmates so often *violated what inmates considered to be in their own self-interests* (p. 51, emphasis added).

Officers' and prisoners' cultures did not always allow for negotiation. By obeying officers' commands, in fact, inmates may also be required to break informal

rules, values and norms (the so-called convict code(s))<sup>4</sup> that imbue the underworlds, producing unintended consequences in return, such as disputes with fellow prisoners, exclusion from peers, retaliation and even safety risks. Being too docile with officers might occasionally even lead to fellow inmates' violence in return. Sparks and Bottoms (1995) offered an illuminating lesson on the delegitimising effect, focusing in particular on officers' responsibility towards it:

Every instance of brutality in prisons, every casual racist joke and demeaning remark, every ignored petition, every unwarranted bureaucratic delay, every inedible meal, every arbitrary decision to segregate or transfer without giving clear and unfounded reasons, every petty miscarriage of justice, every futile and inactive period of time – is delegitimising.

(p. 60)

Despite all difficulties using the idea of authority inside, I agree with Kauffman, writing '[a]t each of the institutions studied here, *most* officers exercised authority over *some* aspects of inmates' lives' (Kauffman 1988: 47, emphasis in original; see also Liebling *et al.* 2011). In fact, often 'inmates recognized the legitimacy of the officers' control in certain spheres and obeyed' (Kauffman 1988: 47) (of course, this implies that inmates did not recognise officers' legitimacy in other spheres).

Implicit coercion (see Chapter 5), which is always embedded in any custodial institution, is grounded on the shared knowledge that officers are compelled to use force lawfully when the situation calls for it. Nonetheless, I agree with Kauffman (1988): saying that prison officers 'exercise *no* authority overstates the case' (p. 47, emphasis in original). Even in the critical field of this ethnography, the majority of the interaction between the keepers and the kept ran decently and did not display any particular criticality. Both institutional rules and officers' orders were usually obeyed. Negotiation, more often than not, would usually suffice to 'run the wing', if not due to prison officers' authority, then due to prisoners' 'dull compulsion' (Carrabine 2004) of rituals and their taking for granted the situation. In other words, their pragmatic resignation, which did not allow for any other non-violent way out from any critical event, rather than obedience, surrender or negotiations. Moreover, even during 'doing'

coercion, prison officers would usually make all efforts to avoid an escalation, let alone a physical confrontation.

I now turn to the description of some tools of negotiation I observed time and again within the walls.

## Tool of negotiation

Officers' authority (and its deficit) does not operate in a vacuum. It is often not sufficient as such to induce prisoners' docile compliance. Some tools of influence are used routinely inside to govern the wing and to compel prisoners to follow the rules and obey orders. Drawing on both the literature and the ethnographic research, a large *bouquet* of 'tools of negotiation'<sup>5</sup> enters the picture.

Below, that *bouquet* is organised for the reader's convenience in a 3{x}3 table (Table 3.1). In the following sections, however, only a few tools will be addressed in more depth. They will either be those most frequently observed on the landing, or those that have more significantly influenced the academic debate on the power relationship and the use of force between the keepers and the kept.

In the following table, different tools of negotiation are organised, taking into account two main dimensions. Horizontally, they are organised in the three columns normatively distinguishing the tools of influence between those clearly legitimate (or with a lower degree of legitimacy deficit), the ones clearly illegitimate (with a high degree of legitimacy deficit) and yet others that are neither one nor the other, but in the large grey area in between (Terrill 2014). Vertically, each particular tool of influence is positioned according to its level of coerciveness. In the higher row of the table, there are the non-coercive tools; in the second row, there are the verbally (or symbolically) coercive tools of influence; and in the last row, the physically coercive ones.

[[START TABLE]]

Table 3.1 Tools of negotiation

	Legitimate	Grey area	Illegitimate
<i>Non-coercive</i>	Negotiation, rewards, <b>persuasion, inducement</b>	<b>Manipulation</b>	<b>Manipulation</b> with false and incorrect use of information
<i>Verbally coercive</i> with UOF	Verbally coercive enforcement of a legitimate order;	<b>threat</b> of sanctions lawfully enforceable	Verbally coercive enforcement of an ambiguously legitimate order Verbal abuse, yelling, joking, verbally discriminating, provoking
<i>Physically coercive</i>	Physical <b>use of minimum force</b> for the shorter period of time if and when strictly necessary	<b>Use of force</b> , pushing, restraining, locking in and/or retarding unlocking of the cells for no clear reasons	<b>Use of force</b> if clearly not necessary, overuse of force, torture

[[END TABLE]]

Describing the distinct characteristics of working with (or warehousing, as Goffman suggested) prisoners, Goffman put it clearly, arguing that:

by the exercise of threat, rewards and persuasion, human objects [meaning the prisoners] can be given instructions and relied upon to carry them out on their own. The span of time during which these objects can be trusted to carry out planned actions without supervision will of course vary a great deal.

(Goffman 1961a: 80)

The next sections will offer an interpretation of some of these tools.<sup>6</sup>

## Legitimate non-coercive tools of negotiation: negotiating through persuasion and inducement

The inmates' will to obey and follow the rules does not always necessarily produce inmates' cooperation on the ground of officers' authority. The officers' toolkit therefore includes a set of tools of negotiation by which they can strategically interact and negotiate with inmates on a daily basis, issue by issue.

The first two tools that officers can adopt to gain prisoners' cooperation legitimately on the wing during the day-to-day *interactions* are: (1) persuasion; and (2)

inducement. Neither the first nor the second imply physical coercion or the threat of it. They are both grounded – at least in the interpretation proposed here – on the human capacity for (rational) reasoning,<sup>7</sup> empathy, emotion management and emotional labour (Hochschild 1983, 2003), or, following Crewe (2009), ‘habit, ritual or fatalistic resignation’ (p. 83, emphasis in original).

Persuasion and inducement were frequently sufficient in pursuing a timely bargain to a dispute in one way or another during the ethnographic observation. However, officers valued and prioritised their own interests and prisoners’ interests differently, and they were allowed de facto to work accordingly without any serious form of accountability<sup>8</sup> regarding their own performance of their duties, which is usually invisible without, and often also within, the walls. Putting it differently, staff’s priorities were not always automatically prisoners’ interests and rights. Sometimes, the simple act of listening to a prisoner’s request was interpreted by officers and staff as very costly, unnecessary or even unreasonable because, as one officer put it:

[prisoners] always say the same things and ask the same questions: ‘do you have a cigarette?’ I just do not go anymore [when they call me]. When they really need your help you can get it straightforwardly from their tone of voice {.} you can’t miss it.

(field note)

Occasionally, the relationships between the keepers and the kept would be ameliorated by an interactive cooperation with one another. That would be more likely to occur in the contexts of prisoners’ workshops or schooling programmes, and in some particular rehabilitative (or re-educative) programmes, such as those for drug addicts. On those occasions, persuasion would be a valid tool to move the interaction towards the officers’ intended goal, turning the situation, using rational choice’s vocabulary, into a *win-win* game.

Negotiation is often used on the landing in one form or another, yet it does not always suffice in ending disputes or avoiding fights. The two principal forms of what I call lawful negotiation here are persuasion and inducement.

## Negotiating by persuasion

[[START SHADED BOX]]

### Vignette 3.1a

Jason is a fairly young prisoner with a long experience of doing time. Over the last six years or so, he has been in and out continuously, mainly for petty crimes. Now he is on the wing with a tariff of a few years, though. He is neither considered to be very easy nor can he be defined as a troublemaker. He has been in his cell with a fellow prisoner for the last three months, and nothing special, meaning bad, has occurred between the two so far.

For some reason, this evening the situation is different. Who knows why? He calls Luigi, the wing officer on duty, to tell him that he needs to be put into another cell as soon as possible, meaning now. He says he cannot stay with his companion anymore for personal reasons. The first officer reaction is to deny the request by saying that it is something that should be requested in the morning, following the procedure, which Jason knows pretty well. Jason does not reply to the officer. Instead, he turns around and goes to his bed. Half an hour later, Jason is calling again and the guard starts to get a bit nervous, because he has been dealing with all the other prisoners in the meantime and he needs a short break. Jason is still behaving properly, understanding the officer's need, and stops calling. Luigi is unsure whether or not Jason will actually continue to be so docile all night long without obtaining any satisfaction to the request he made in front of a fellow prisoner. Therefore, Luigi prefers to try solving the issue in one way or another. Going towards Jason's cell, cell number 25, which is the last one on the wing almost in front of the infirmary, Luigi asks Jason directly what can be done to avoid problems the coming night. Jason is surprised since he is not creating any problems at all. In fact, he is laying in his bed watching TV. Jason knows that his 'good' behaviour might have put him in a good position to obtain what he is looking for, yet he knows that it is really unlikely that a cell change could occur peacefully in the evening. He just repeats that he really wants to change cells. The officer explains to him that it is impossible before the following day. He suggests that Jason be patient and

promises that tomorrow he will personally take his request into account, providing a good solution tailored to him.

Jason is not satisfied by the promise at all. His request is not satisfied. Luigi is not taking him seriously. Moreover, all this is occurring in front of his fellow prisoner. Suddenly, the fellow prisoner stands up and goes to the prison officer, quite nervously saying that this change is urgent indeed. He approaches the officer less calmly and the officers simply seem to ignore him. This time, persuasion does not seem to work, yet on another occasion it did.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

*Persuasion* would potentially be a good tool of negotiation between officers and prisoners in the field,<sup>9</sup> yet it works only intermittently. It is based on the idea of convincing the counterpart to accept an accord (often potentially clear and fair to both parties) over a certain state of affairs through reasoning and rhetoric devices. This option is predicated on the recognition of ‘the other’. In the previous vignette, the officer did not want to waste time by responding to the prisoners’ requests consistently. Furthermore, just like in the previous vignette the presence of an audience (which includes at least both the fellow prisoners and me) might complicate the negotiation, and that is an ethical issue for the ethnographer working with vulnerable subjects. I have always stopped observing (and also being an audience) each and every time I perceived that my presence could increase the tension or risk of harm. Usually, however, I felt that my presence was quite irrelevant. Occasionally, I had the impression that it helped to avoid the quick escalation of the situation.

Moreover, persuasion requires the intention of the persuader to convince the other by discussing the issue thoroughly with one another, which is neither always possible nor the normal type of de facto prisoner-officer interaction occurring on the wing. In practice, the persuader’s goal is persuading (or dissuading) the counterpart to follow or leave a particular course of action, attitude or conduct that has already been defined by the persuader as either appropriate or inappropriate (Kauffman 1988: 52). In Vignette 3.1a, in Luigi’s opinion, Jason’s appropriate action would be to accept the ‘fair bargain’ and wait until the following day, with the informal promise that the cell change



will occur as soon as possible the following morning. The point is that Jason's interpretation of the situation differs significantly from Luigi's.

By adopting persuasion, any officer would frame the discussion in a collaborative way. The officer, with or without the support of a fellow officer, would try to convince one particular inmate (or a group thereof) of doing something he was supposed to do or, alternatively, stopping doing something forbidden or no longer allowed or tolerated in one particular contingency. Persuasion is a fair way of facing disputes (or crises) when the two parties have some formal degree of freedom to influence the outcome of the interaction in one way or another, and accepting the bargain is not too costly. It is worth noting that adopting persuasion is not always compatible with one particular prison organisation's routines, time schedules, formal and informal cultures, value systems and norms due to its time-consuming nature.

In order to persuade an inmate, in fact, an officer needs a certain amount of time, privacy and degree of 'familiarity' with him. Persuasion is therefore unlikely to suffice in an institutional context in which, traditionally, the common type of interaction between the keepers and the kept is based on forms of quick dialogues. Officers' cultures based on the display of toughness might also resist a communication based on a slower, less powerfully biased, communicative relationship. Unfortunately, persuasion is often not performed for a long enough period of time, and risks being quickly interrupted for one reason or another, also independent of the officer's or prisoner's will. However, a better use of persuasion would be a 'good' tool for trying to 'make prison more human' (Buffa 2015). Persuasion is likely to imbue officers' cultures and styles of interactions in more rehabilitative-oriented facilities, such as the 'Arcobaleno' community in Turin prison, where I started doing sociological research in prison 'from the prisoners' perspective' back in the 1990s as a BA student of political science.

Despite the best practices and reforms, in my experience prison officers rarely thought of persuasion as a sufficient tool for dealing with disputes effectively. The opportunities for reasoned communication between the keepers and the kept do not frame the everyday wing relationships, yet they do so in subtle and often less visible ways. Some officers would stubbornly try to use persuasion most of the time, avoiding by so doing as many contrasts as possible with prisoners. Yet, in my conversations with officers, persuasion was rarely considered to be a valuable tool. On the contrary, it was usually criticised on the grounds of being time-consuming.<sup>10</sup>

The main weakness of persuasion, however, is the following. By adopting persuasion, officers do not directly offer any symbolic or material good (such as a cigarette or an extra phone call), which directly respond to a prisoner's daily needs, or to a precise request. That would instead occur with another negotiation tool: inducement (see below). Furthermore, the effectiveness of persuasion would be further significantly diminished, taking into account the condition of deprivation and powerlessness that characterise, more often than not, (Italian) custodial institutions (Buffa 2013b).

The next tool of influence put the prisoners' interests at the centre of the interaction between the officers and the prisoners. By doing so, the relationship becomes more instrumental and does not necessarily need a thoroughly open dialogue lasting a long time to operate efficiently.

## Negotiation by inducement

I return now to the previous vignette, just in front of Jason's cell at the point in which it was clear that the situation could not be resolved by avoiding consideration of the prisoner's urgent request.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

### Vignette 3.1b

It is clear that the situation will not be arranged without providing any satisfaction to any prisoner's need now. Luigi, the prison officer, is worried about having a 'really nightmarish night' and prefers to try to adjust the situation differently, as he has learned to do by doing the job. He asks Jason what else he could do for him. Jason asks to bring a letter of his downstairs, but that is unfeasible at that time since the officer is not allowed to leave his duty and exit the wing. Jason knows it, and is only looking for a refusal to make another more feasible request, a quite usual one. He probably just wants to show his companion they listen to him, that they respect him, or more pragmatically he needs to smoke. The officer starts to get a bit nervous, though. He is looking forward to closing the 'issue' because he has something else to do. Luigi says, 'OK, I'll bring two cigarettes to each of you. Jason refuses the offer: 'No, I want four'. The officer

says, in an effort to please Jason, ‘Jason, I will have a look at how many we have, OK?’ Jason just nods in return. Luigi comes back in 10 minutes or so and gives four cigarettes to Jason, saying ‘For the two of you’, adding nothing further and displaying no intention of continuing the negotiation. Eventually, Jason shares the four cigarettes with his fellow prisoner and says ‘Grazie!’ to Luigi. The other prisoner instead says nothing. Luigi says, ‘It is good to work with you, good night!’ Jason, with a sarcastic smile, says, ‘It is my pleasure’, and returns to his bed.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

Kauffman (1988: 54) describes inducement as a style of interaction that takes the other into account as *also, or mainly*, trying to pursue his or her own self-interests. With inducement, negotiation is reinforced by putting into the picture particular exchanges, yet not necessarily physical items. Also, a different array of services, such as providing a translation or writing a letter, or informally talk to the commander on prisoners’ behalf, were also highly valued inside. Both economic and value-based rationality – in Weber’s sense – are clearly at stake. In a situation of ‘prisonization’ (Clemmer 1940) characterised by extreme deprivation and infantilisation (Goffman 1961a) and other ‘pains of imprisonment’ (Sykes 1958), officers can induce an inmate into cooperation, focusing on his or her own basic needs in different ways (Kauffman 1988).

Despite emphasising persuasion and inducement, following Goffman (1961), and drawing from the fieldwork experience, it is also necessary to consider that a few very formal ‘old-fashioned’ (yet not necessarily old) officers and medical staff working ‘by the book’ might prefer to enter into a fight with inmates rather than mediating with them by seriously taking into account their ‘stupid’ requests. A few might even prefer heading for a fight than offering a cigarette, or even refusing a cigarette in an alleged attempt to ‘provoke’ a fight, as some prisoners suggested to me. To be honest, those types of provocations had hardly ever occurred in front of me during my ethnography, yet some cases of alleged provocations have been collected in the semi-structured interviews.

Although negotiations such as persuasion and inducement have been highlighted from the beginning of prison research, and can be considered a crucial structural dimension of both *governing prison* (DiIulio 1990) – or, to put it differently, *administering suffering* (Buffa 2013b) – and staff-inmate interactions, following Kauffman (1988), a few critical aspects of this practice have emerged that will be briefly outlined below.

First, ‘inducement is nearly always a double-edged sword: I get what I want in exchange for your getting what you want’ (Kauffman 1988: 54). This exchange is said to lead to officers’ corruption. Second, inmates may tend to easily take for granted – as if they were rights – what they had been given once as a favour. Old informal exchanges, moreover, might occasionally ‘be used as blackmail by inmates wishing to ensure that those rewards are granted repeatedly, in which case inmates end up controlling officers at least as much as officers are controlling inmates’ (p. 55). Third, according to Kauffman, an unequal distribution of privilege, in a context of very limited resources, might also lead to less order and security, and not necessarily to the pursued goal. Fourth, different ways of informally applying inducement – that is, applying it in discretionary ways – may produce disputes among officers with different ‘styles’ of policing and attitudes towards prisoners. On the one hand, an officer might be seen in a more favourable fashion than another by inmates because he is more ‘generous’ than his fellow colleagues. On the other, inducement might push some inmates to request a service or favour from other officers, justifying that request because ‘others’ would always allegedly perform those services.

One empirical example I saw time and again on the wing made this question very clear. It was the distribution of ‘free’ cigarettes made available by the chaplain that – although organised efficiently and clearly ruled through visible procedures displayed in visible posters on the wing – was put into practice by different staff in very different ways inconsistently. That inconsistency in distributing cigarettes has often been one of the causes of harsh inter-staff conflicts, as well as prisoner complains and requests.

## Legitimate coercive tools of influence: coercion as a rational, emotional and ritualistic action

Despite other public functions, custodial institutions – such as prisons, forensic psychiatric hospitals or detention centres for immigrants – are first and foremost coercive institutions built and organised to segregate prisoners from their own community and the broader ‘non-captive society’. In those facilities, the actual use of force or the threat of it following any so-called ‘critical event’ is a day-to-day routine, or at least is implicitly in the picture alongside much thicker and more multifaceted networks of negotiation (almost) always pursued by officers and prisoners to find a feasible outcome to a dispute (not constructed as a critical event as yet), a request or a need. Of course, as mentioned above, negotiations are invisible and do not make noise. Therefore, critical events appear more clearly.

It is useful to note, following [Klockars \(1995\)](#), that ‘[w]ith rare exception, the force used routinely and regularly by police [or prison officers] would constitute criminal offences were they done by persons who were not police [{}.] acting in the lawful performance of his duty’ (pp. 12–13). Klockars’ quote clearly expresses something often taken for granted: the actual exceptional coercive capacity given to law enforcement agents by the law. That capacity clearly calls for accountability (often de facto negated, or at least limited by secrecy and invisibility) and for respect to human rights standards.

I now turn to a tool that does not seem to work well in the long run. It is neither an honest nor a humane way to treat prisoners. I observed it rarely; it was used only as a shortcut to solve a dispute ‘more easily’. The topic shall be dealt with thoroughly in the following chapters.

## ‘Manipulation doesn’t work’: a tool of influence in the ‘grey area’ between lawful and unlawful practice

As [Goffman \(1961a\)](#) noted, officers on duty not only perceive a structural conflict between custody and rehabilitation, but also ‘a further set of characteristic problems is found in the constant conflict between humane standards on one hand and institutional efficiency on the other’ (p. 78). The institutional constraints caused by the institutional efficiency or by any other institutional policies, or formal and informal goals (as well as personal officers’ attitudes and needs), may suggest that officers use ‘shortcuts’ to

arrive at the institutionally urged or personally desired outcome more quickly.<sup>11</sup> One way of reaching those goals might imply using manipulative tactics.

*Manipulation* is an ethically and morally problematic tool potentially producing unintended outcomes. Following Collins (2004):

[m]anipulation is possible precisely because ordinary life is an endless succession of situations that have to be acted out to be defined as social realities, and that constrain both actor and audience to take part in the work of keeping up the impression of reality.

(p. 21)

Manipulation is based on the differential of power and knowledge between the actors in interaction.<sup>12</sup> It implies some form of cooperation (Collins 2004). It is a problematic practice. If 'complete' information was available to all parties, in fact, manipulation could not play a big role in pursuing the desired outcome, and other tools of influence should possibly be adopted instead. On the contrary, in an environment characterised by the strongly unequal distribution of resources, information and power between the keepers and the kept, manipulation could, and occasionally would, work.

It would work particularly well with those inmates that move in and out of the system through the 'revolving doors'. From a manipulative officer's perspective, manipulation is a way for obtaining the desired outcome quickly and efficiently, without 'losing too much time' explicating the situation thoroughly time and again to the convicts, thereby (ab)using his own knowledge bias at his own advantage.

More generally, manipulation is surely not a win-win game, and its frequent adoption can be detrimental to the prison regime in general and to officer-prisoner relationships in particular. In coercive institutions in which the interactions between the keepers and the kept are repeated and frequent, this tool of influence is producing – as a not intended consequence – de-legitimation, disrespect and mistrust among all parties especially when officers are using it frequently.

Kauffman (1988) suggests that:

[e]ven their ability to use other forms of power suffered: their authority was eroded, their ability to persuade undermined, their offers of inducement suspected. Moreover, each recourse to manipulation served to erode the credibility of officers as a group.

(p.58)

Notwithstanding its characteristics, manipulation is occasionally used strategically to quickly control inmates that are on the wing for a short and fixed period of time, and therefore have little contextual information. In fact, from the staff's standpoint, inmates with a high degree of volatility deserve 'little effort', and would be treated accordingly despite the fact that those volatile inmates are very likely to be among the most vulnerable and traumatised ones on the wing. Often they arrive on the wing just arrested, in transit or simply as defendants waiting for trial. In other words, they would deserve more consideration, yet in practice that is not always the case (despite the official procedures and regulations requiring closer attention and care to those vulnerable subjects).

As an officer put it to me in an informal conversation:

Saying 'bullshit' is the easiest way to go on with so-called whiny detainees (examples of what officers would call 'bullshit' are: promising something that is unlikely to occur, or promising to do something for the prisoner without actually trying to do it). Prison officers considered manipulation (in any of its forms) as the best way to deal with those caught in the 'revolving door' of short-term prison sentences, who stay on the wing for a few days or weeks. With those type of detainees, officers hardly ever even try to build a rapport (or succeed in their efforts if they do try doing it). More commonly, they quickly move to manipulation instead. It does not make any sense to spend time and energy with them, talking about things thoroughly trying to explaining them all, if they will then leave in two days or so { . } and there is a quicker and at the same time more practical way to convince them to do it in the way you wish them to. I just

mind my own business and manage crises as best as possible every time they occur.

(field note summary of an ethnographic interview)

In my experience, manipulation is a situational adjustment that could be used, and was used occasionally, by both keepers and the kept whenever it was considered to be convenient in a given situation or was presumed to be more efficient in effectively reaching the desired outcome in a possible shorter period of time. A few people, on both sides of the bars, seemed to adopt manipulation because they felt comfortable using it. It was their 'style' of communicating and interacting with one another, or at least it seemed so to me. They 'played' with manipulation, cheating with one another repeatedly.

*Manipulation does not seem to work properly* for either of the parties involved. In fact, it isolates the manipulator from the non-manipulative peers and the counterparts, both of whom will avoid any interaction with the subject if allowed to do so (it is a quite predictable outcome, which appeared to be true inside most of the time).

On a few occasions, being considered to be manipulative, and therefore being left alone by the inmate, was a good solution for those guards that were only interested in paying the mortgage. As one officer told me, 'Working here, my main goal is to get the salary and then return home with what I earned. While working here I mind my own business, trying to remain untouched by whatever might occur (field note).

Officers would say that prisoners would do whatsoever to pursue their own goals. Seen from the other side, however, one might say that prisoners' legitimate requests were not always addressed properly, nor in consistent ways (from prisoners' point of view). Therefore, the only way prisoners might feel able to be heard would be by 'manipulating' the situation (i.e. simulating a crisis or a physical problem) or using force (i.e. completely destroying a cell, a washbasin, a TV, and so on), forcing the officers' attentiveness to the prisoners' requests.

Some apparently irrational inmates' conducts, behaviours and interactions, in fact, could be better understood ethnographically by trying to grasp the indirect consequence that had been pursued by a particular prisoner through a particular sequence of events rather than trying to comprehend the apparent sense of it sticking to



what was visible on the spot, which occasionally did not make any sense at all. Doing so, however, requires prolonged ethnographic fieldwork. Grasping the insider knowledge is often a slow process indeed.

Observing an inmate laying on the floor to get medical attention can be considered by officers (and interpreted by a social researcher) as a manipulative inmate who is either asking for undeserved attention or is simply unwilling to wait for his legitimate turn. Yet, from the opposite standpoint, the same phenomenon can be understood, either plausibly or not, as a way to ask for help in a context in which all other 'normal' ways to see a doctor have been pursued but have not worked at all.

Not only prisoners, but also prison officers, might manipulate the situation illegitimately for their personal advantages, either alone or with the help of fellow officers. One particular officer might even provoke one particular inmate, to trigger his violent reaction in order to be 'assaulted'. By provoking such an 'assault', he might easily secure either sick leave or significant compensation. Officers might also use manipulation to alleviate boredom, and even to have some fun. However, to the best of my knowledge, those should be interpreted as wrongdoing rather than the norm.

I now turn to introduce what **Joe Sim (2008)** called 'the inconvenient criminological truth', in which he directly challenged prison officer practice as such, as well as denouncing institutional violence. However, despite its merits, I do not embed that approach at all.

## Illegitimate coercive tools of influence: bad apple or institutional violence?

The issue of illegitimate coercive tools of influence is only sketchily introduced here and resonates with both the critical criminological literature and with the interviews I collected on the officers' and prisoners' interpretation, understanding and justifications of the use of force that will be developed elsewhere. However, some notes on the issue will follow.

Abuse of power happens within the routinised bureaucratic regime 'through distortion of policy and procedures: exaggerated suspicion, misuse of the IEP system, and other such acts, whose inequities cannot be easily discerned, let alone proved'

(Crewe 2009: 105). However, actual officer violence does occur secretly within the prison (Cohen and Taylor 1976), in a situation of structural invisibility, cover-ups and uneven accountability both in Italy, in England and Wales (Drake 2015), and beyond. Critical criminology suggests that often, whenever a wrongdoing appears in the public domain, a scapegoat, or more than one, is likely to be (lightly) punished or prosecuted, thereby denying (Cohen 2001) the structural dimension of the phenomenon (Scott 2008; Sim 2008). However, a few Italian Prison Service managers did write straightforwardly on the issue, showing a pragmatic and theoretically informed stance on the issue that responded effectively to the issues introduced by abolitionists (Buffa 2013a, 2015).

The problem of abuses is felt and discussed not only by prisoners, but also by officers. One officer told me spontaneously during an interview:

they sent us prisoners here to give them a lesson ‘back then’; and sometimes we were eager to do it indeed. Convicts were often ‘forgotten’ in empty cells for days and days for no reason. Using force [suddenly showing a very serious face] was our routine. Please, Luigi, write this, everybody knows it [here]. I won’t mind if you write it; afterwards, the director could call me to complain [about what I told you]; then, the area manager could call me to complain [about what I told you]; next, the President [of the Italian Republic] could call me to complain again [about what I told you]; I don’t mind. Maybe, at the end, Father Christmas will also call me to complain as well, ah, ah [smiling, as he often does when he makes jokes]. I do not [mind]! Write this, I beg you, *they* told us to do it. They asked us to do so ‘back then’; everybody knew it. They knew it and they all agreed with that, or at least they did not disagree. It was normal over here. If they call me, let’s see what they say { }

(field note summary, an ethnographic interview with a prison officer)

Some other officers did introduce the issue of ‘bad’ officers’ violence differently.

**Klockars (1995: 12)** addresses the root of the problem. Paraphrasing Klockars, I argue that the enormous range of the legitimate authority of the prison officers to use force is, of course, at the heart of the problem of defining and controlling the excessive and abusive use of it. I agree with this position, and this is one of the reasons why I decided to focus on studying ‘doing’ coercion.

## Notes

- {ensp}1 Early release (in Italian, *liberazione anticipata*) refers to the release of any prisoners prior to the completion of their tariff due to good behaviour (and participating in rehabilitating activities). The original tariff can be reduced by up to 45 days for every year (art. 54 of the Penitentiary Law and art. 103 of the Prison Execution rules).
- {ensp}2 See also **Sennett (1980)**.
- {ensp}3 It is necessary to note, though, that **Terrill (2014)** considers coercion a synonym to the use of force. Instead, Kauffman’s definition distinguishes between the two, specifying that coercion refers to the ‘treat of sanction’ (**Kauffman 1988: 61**), and not only to the use of force.
- {ensp}4 A discussion on different ways of studying the convict code is proposed by **Wieder (1974)**. Wieder, then, offers a very different reinterpretation of that set of approaches from his ethnomethodological perspective that has remained practically unnoticed until now in extant prison sociology.
- {ensp}5 I slightly changed **Kauffman’s (1988)** idea of ‘means of influence’.
- {ensp}6 **Kauffman (1988)** presented them slightly differently in her chapter ‘Power in prison’ (pp. 45–82) more than 25 years ago, yet her framework on the issue of ‘means of influence’ (p. 52) is still crucial today, and has been very influential on some of the ideas that will be discussed in the next sections of this chapter. **Crewe (2009: 80–6)** recently reinterpreted the issue at the light of the new literature. His discussion is also really stimulating, particularly so his idea of ‘soft power’ (**Crewe 2011**). However, my ethnographic observations conducted within an interactionist perspective (**Collins 2004, 2008; Athens 2005, 2007**) resonate particularly well with Kauffman’s interpretations and with her focus on the use of force and violence, which is less present in Crewe’s book.
- {ensp}7 Following Weber, rational actions are of two main types: the first is based on a utilitarian perspective; the second, on the contrary, is based on the motive of the action: the value embedded into it (a typical example is someone risking one’s life to help a person or to defend his or her belief or opinion against his or her apparent personal interest). Both persuasion and inducement can be read in the light of Weber.
- {ensp}8 In fact, there are some inspection and monitoring bodies dedicated to prisons. ‘The law states that one of the tasks of the surveillance judges is the legal supervision of prisons. The surveillance judges have a visiting mandate and can talk with prisoners, who can also

file a complaint with them. However, traditionally the surveillance judges have not fully accomplished their mission of prison supervision, because of the many other tasks the law assigns them (to evaluate the possibility of admission to alternative measures, to authorise volunteers to enter prisons, to evaluate the request of sending a prisoner to an external hospital, etc) (quote from prison observatory, [www.prisonobservatory.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=10:prison-conditions-in-italy&catid=13&Itemid=116](http://www.prisonobservatory.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10:prison-conditions-in-italy&catid=13&Itemid=116)). Recently, a national prison ombudsperson has been appointed. The NGO Antigone is authorised annually to enter prison facilities and produce an independent annual report.

- {ensp}9 It is also discussed by Kauffman (1988: 52–4). Crewe does not specifically address it in his ‘Elementary forms of social power in prison’ (pp. 80–6), which he defines as: (1) coercion; (2) manipulation or inducement (we treat them separately here); (3) habit, ritual and so on; and (4) normative justification or commitment.
- 10 Other interpretations of persuasion exist among officers’ cultures. Persuasion has also been considered suspicious, too soft and not masculine enough, as reported in other research focused on masculinity (Sabo 2001; Ricciardelli *et al.* 2015).
- 11 This attitude can be understood using the concept of innovation, one of the five types of adaptation proposed by Merton (1968). Innovation takes place when any subject accepts the culturally defined goals or values but rejects the structurally defined means to pursue them.
- 12 It is now almost commonsensical to interpret the relation between power and knowledge following Foucault. He notoriously argued, oversimplifying a very thick issue, that power constitutes – and at the same time is constituted by – knowledge (Foucault 1980a, 1980b).

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4

## The bureaucratic organisation of 'doing' coercion

In this chapter, I will illustrate the main characteristics of the organisation of the custodial complex, focusing on the organisation of 'doing' coercion at the wing level. I have studied it through observation, dialogues, and interviews with custodial and non-custodial staff, prisoners and patients in order to shed light on the context of 'doing' coercion in practice and to unpack the particular chain of command through which the threats and the actual use of force are exerted by prison officers onto prisoners each time the situation calls for it.<sup>1</sup> However, this book is not primarily focused on the

organisation as such. Studying the organisation is not its main goal and would require a specific research agenda. Rather, this chapter intends to shed some light on both the social organisation and the social actors whose duty is ‘doing’ coercion. The scope is therefore mainly to help the reader understand the context in which the study had occurred, thereby shedding light on that particular ‘secret world’ (Cohen and Taylor 1972; Fassin 2015).

In the next sections, first I will introduce the bureaucratic organisation of coercion by a way of describing the main officers’ roles as I observed them inside. Next, I will reconstruct the prison officers’ chain of command in Reggio Emilia. Finally, I will address three informal prison officers’ divides that shaped, to a greater or lesser extent, the relationships between the officers on (and sometimes off) duty.

## The bureaucratic Italian prison system: a note

Italy is a modern centralised, largely industrialised parliamentary republic. The central government, in particular the Ministry of Justice and the Department for the Penitentiary Administration (DAP), administer and control the penal system and shape the penal-scape within which the Italian prison system operates (Gonnella 2013a). Italian Prison Law (n. 354) (in Italian, *Ordinamento penitenziario*) dates back to 1975 and was the result of a long parliamentary debate (De Vito 2009) that followed and tried to address a period of prison revolts that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s (pp. 58–91) within a reformist philosophy. Many prison officers did not appreciate the far less punitive approach introduced in 1975 overcoming the previous regulation embedded in the ‘fascist penal code’ (the so-called ‘Codice Rocco’, dated 1931). At that time, officers were a military force called custodial agents, and had huge discretionary power to rule the wing and almost no accountability.

A different set of punishment measures had been introduced by the so-called Legge-Gozzini<sup>2</sup> in 1986, which also introduced in the Italian prison regime an Italian version of Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP), also called ‘stick and carrot’. Thanks to that law, a better management of the prison became possible, and it also helped administrators and officers to maintain order and security, as well as reducing violence and prisoner escapes (De Vito 2009).

The so-called ‘Legge-Gozzini’ also had the merit to introduce the structural presence of non-custodial staff, whom De Vito (2009) called ‘rehabilitation technicians’ (in Italian, *tecnici del trattamento*). Rehabilitation started for a short period of time to be one of the actual goals, or a rhetoric mantra, in public discussion on ‘prison life’.

Initially, Italian prison officers called, on the one hand, for democratisation and union interventions for their own career development, and, on the other, they rarely accepted to share their power in governing the prison system with the new penal staff recently introduced, nor did they accept a less punitive approach in managing prisoners.

In the 1990s, religion (read, the Catholic Church) stopped being one of the three official pillars of the rehabilitation programme, yet the informal influence of the Church hierarchies, the prison chaplain and the Catholic volunteers continues to this day. They are still very present in prisoners’ and officers’ daily lives, influencing, both in informal and formal ways, many decisions regarding single prisoners’ cases and also the selection of one rehabilitative project or another. In the 1990s, chaplains would lose part of their authority and power in favour of educators, who would be in charge of managing almost all recreational activities and implementing both the schooling programme and prisoners’ work (in Italy, prisoner rarely have the possibility of working inside). Prison custodial and non-custodial staff’s opinion would be seriously taken into account by the Surveillance Magistracy when deciding whether or not to hand out, and in which form, an alternative treatment, or parole (in Italian, *misura alternativa*), to a particular person in custody.

In Italy, the rehabilitation-oriented penitentiary culture just introduced by the ‘Gozzini law’, according to De Vito (2009), already started declining in the same decade with the ‘end of a new penitentiary culture’. A punitive turn occurred, producing both a general restriction to the use of the alternative measures and, concurrently, a reinforcement of tough measures against organised crime.<sup>3</sup> According to De Vito (2009), at that point, Mario Gozzini considered his prison reforms de facto abolished. The rehabilitation-oriented reform was overcome by a new punitive penal philosophy focusing on security and neutralisation.

‘Under the provision of the Penal Code, courts have powers to hand out a range of punishments, from actual life sentences (with no possibility to exit prison, such as the so called *ergastoro ostativo*)<sup>4</sup> to fines’ (Gonnella 2013a: 226). Probation (in



Italian, *misure alternative*) in Italy involves a total of 33,754 persons (16 April 2016), while persons in custody are 53,725 (30 April 2016). Alternative measures include: being involved in social service (12,465); semi-liberty (724); and home detention (10,025). In Italy, the possibility of working outside prison and the possibility of spending some days outside prison (in Italian, *permesso premio*) are not alternative measures, but elements of the penitentiary treatment.

## The bureaucratic organisation of ‘doing’ coercion in the custodial complex in Reggio Emilia

The custodial complex of Reggio Emilia is one among the 192<sup>5</sup> public Italian penal custodial institutions.<sup>6</sup> The Italian Ministry of Justice has a department called DAP, ‘Department for the Penitentiaries’ Administration’, which specifically deals with detention in the realm of criminal justice. That department has eleven decentralised offices (*provveditorati*), each one managing one of the 11 areas into which the Italian *custodial-scape* has been recently divided. Each of these areas is directed by one area manager (in Italian, *provveditore*).<sup>7</sup> Each *provveditore* also governs the so-called UEPE’s offices, whose main aim is facilitating the re-entry of former prisoner into ‘free’ society, also collaborating with relevant local administrations, social services, volunteers and NGOs.

Immigration detention is an administrative task in Italy (Campesi 2013), just like in the UK (Bosworth 2014), and it is therefore not included in the departmental duties. Instead, the Centres for Identification and Expulsion (CIE,<sup>8</sup> *Centri di identificazione ed espulsione*) are managed by local authorities (*Prefetti*) under the Italian equivalent of the UK Home Office (*Ministero dell’interno*).

The Department for the Penitentiaries’ Administration manages and directly administers *all* the Italian custodial institutions for adults (and juveniles), a professional group of almost 39,000<sup>9</sup> Italian people, mainly coming from the south of Italy (Buffa 2013b) and ethnically homogeneous, despite the Italian prison archipelago being long inhabited by an ethnically and racially diverse population. Foreign national prisoners

are 18,074 in a total population of 53,725 inmates, of whom 2,213 are women. Moreover, until now there has not been any policy or training to effectively cope with the multicultural and multi-religion population inside the walls.<sup>10</sup> This scarce sensibility of the department, or the difficulty to find the adequate officers with the appropriate backgrounds, also due to the formal law-regulated selection criteria, negatively impinge on prisoner-officer relationships. Foreigners and ethnic minorities are surely among the most vulnerable prisoners in Italy. It is really time for change, particularly on this point.<sup>11</sup>

The custodial complex in Reggio Emilia (*Istituti penitenziari di Reggio Emilia*) is one of the 10 custodial institutions managed by the area manager based in Bologna. That custodial complex hosts both a prison (CC)<sup>12</sup> and a forensic psychiatric hospital (OPG)<sup>13</sup> in two exactly identical buildings designed and built to be a maximum security prison in the 1970s (*infra*, Figure 4.1).

[[INSERT FIGURE 4.1]]

**Figure 4.1** Aerial view of the site

Source: <https://maps.google.it/>, graphic elaboration added by Luigi Gariglio

Not only were the asylum and the prison identical<sup>14</sup> in terms of architecture, interior design (Jewkes and Johnston 2013), furniture and even colours of the walls and bars. They are also almost the same in terms of hierarchical organisation, particularly so regarding the prison officers' chain of command (*infra*, Figures 4.2 and 4.3): the focus of this chapter.

In fact, both institutions are directed by one prison governor (*Direttore*) who is a civil servant without any military or police professional training or expertise. Both institutions have the same medical director (*Direttore sanitario*) trained as a psychiatrist<sup>15</sup> providing healthcare to those in custody, and managing all issues regarding prisoners' and patients' physical, psychological and mental health.<sup>16</sup> The prison governor's duties are divided into four main areas: bookkeeping (in Italian,

*contabilità*), prisoners' rehabilitation (in Italian, *trattamento*), administration, and lastly security (in Italian, *sicurezza*), as the custodial complex's governor explained in a video-recorded interview (see also Buffa 2013b).<sup>17</sup>

## The prison officers' chain of command in Reggio Emilia

Generally speaking, the prison officers' (in Italian, *Polizia penitenziaria*) chain of command is structured in five levels of authority.<sup>18</sup> In practice, referring to the custodial complex of Reggio Emilia, a commissioner (in Italian, *commissario*) was at the apex of the chain of command. During the ethnography, she was the general commander and was only directly subordinated to the governor. Being at the top of the prison officers' hierarchy, she directly commanded two police inspectors (in Italian, *ispettore*) (third level in the Italian prison officer hierarchy), one of whom would be the local commander of the prison, and the other the local commander of the asylum.

Until a couple of years ago, the two institutions have been de facto run completely independently of one another, yet in terms of the organisation of the use of force, they both work as prisons. A reorganisation had occurred that formally unified the two previously independent organisations into one organisational body, yet some resistance still existed among staff, not only at the 'rank and file' level, but also at higher positions in the hierarchy throughout my entire fieldwork. In fact, I experienced a fairly low level of collaboration and sympathy among the staff working in each facility (see the divides below). The same kind of low level of collaboration had also been reported by staff during the interviews in both the prison and the asylum.

[[INSERT FIGURE 4.2]]

**Figure 4.2** The chain of command of the custodial complex

*Source:* Designed by Luigi Gariglio

Figure 4.2 shows the chain of command of the complex. Figure 4.3 highlights the actors involved in 'doing' coercion. It shows that both chains of

command below each local commander were practically identical at the prison and at the asylum, as the woman commanding the whole custodial complex explained in a formal video-recorded interview.

[[INSERT FIGURE 4.3]]

**Figure 4.3** The three main actors of the chain of command of ‘doing’ coercion

*Source:* Designed by Luigi Gariglio.

All prison officers in the local chain of command were continuously potentially involved in threatening or using force if necessary, yet ‘doing’ coercion was possibly slightly more frequent at the asylum because, as the commander clearly stated in an interview, critical events were just ‘a normal business’ there due to the presence of both so-called ‘violent prisoners’ and some ‘heavily decompensated psychotic patients’. One prison officer, just transferred from another prison to the forensic hospital, said that, in his opinion, the psychiatric hospital was more problematic, stating that in the prison (a remand one), he found that less than 60 per cent of the problems he observed at the psychiatric hospital would occur at the nearby prison. Usually, problems with inmates occurred more than 10 times a day on the wing observed during the fieldwork, yet only few of those episodes were officially labelled, or just treated, as ‘critical events’, and much fewer were put in the appropriate *register of critical events* accordingly.

Answering an informal question as to why so few critical episodes had actually been treated as critical events, an officer argued:

if we scribbled on paper all the shit happening here { . } we’d never stop writing { . } and when would we start working then? All the prisoners { . } you see { . } are here because they gave problems somewhere else [implicitly stating that Reggio Emilia is de facto a punitive institution]. We only have those kind of kids here { . } OK { . } let’s put it like this. What is absolutely normal and acceptable for us here could be very critical somewhere else { . } you know what I mean? Anyway, we must work in here { . } it’s our job.

(field note summary of an ethnographic interview)

Predictably, the lower-level rank and file officers were more frequently doing coercion physically than the higher-ranking ones. At the top of the chain, the general commander and other higher-grade officers would rarely enter the wing, and would consequently be less likely to be involved in day-to-day routines about ‘doing’ coercion. They would be more involved in peacemaking, instead.

The *general commander* was the one who, as she proudly told me, ‘redesigned the service order regarding how to deal with critical events [*Managing critical events; service order n. 23/14 (23/05/14)*]’ and the rules, regulations and procedures that prison officers must follow in case of emergency.

She was clearly proud of her job, and she was doing her best to cope and to manage all the difficulties and resistance she encountered in her daily interaction with ‘her men’, as she usually called the ‘rank and file’ officers working on the wings. Not only was she a woman, the only one allowed to enter in a male detention wing (due to her role. In Italy, in fact, wings are sex-segregated both in terms of prisoners and custodial staff), but she was also trained as a lawyer and had no previous experience in any law enforcement agency. One senior officer told me:

Should we learn from our commander how to use force? Are you kidding? She has written some lines on the paper [the service order] but she has never had any fight in her life; surely, she has never had a single fight with any prisoner. How can she, the commander, teach us how do what we have long been doing? She simply doesn’t know what she is talking about. I think it is quite ridiculous, isn’t it?

(field note summary)

Despite her positive and enthusiastic approach, the commander was often described by the officers working on the wing, yet only informally, as a distant manager doing all her duty ‘from her desk’ and without ‘boots on the ground’. Initially, she had not given me any confidence, and I also shared the ‘rank and file’ common opinion about her, thereby understanding her as a distant and cold manager. Afterwards, however, she had been very open and friendly to me, speaking quite openly both in the informal dialogues and in the two video-recorded formal interviews in which she did

not put on any politically correct face. She disclosed a strong criticism about the difficulty in working with the medical staff due to the resistance she felt from their side (medical staff often reciprocated that opinion talking with me). She even criticised cover-ups and disclosed her critical opinion about officers' alleged wrongdoing. Her critical attitude towards cover-ups and wrongdoing was highly criticised (and even ridiculed) by many 'rank and file' officers, who in this way showed a very disputable component of their culture. Furthermore, she was had a formal interaction style and commanded formal respect from front-line prison officers. She would even visibly mark her position at the top of the hierarchy by avoiding interaction with low-grade officers, if not strictly necessary. That was hardly tolerated by base-grade staff; their relationships were quite easy, notwithstanding the hierarchical positions of the person in interaction.

One step below the general commander, each one of the two male local commanders would be at the head of his local chain of command, responding directly to his general commander and occasionally directly to the governor. Despite an organisational difference at the wing level – that will be illustrated below – each of the two chains of command were very similar indeed to one another. Below each commander, there would be a so-called security manager (in Italian, *responsabile sicurezza*) (see Figure 4.3) supervising all security aspects of his or her facility, a '*capo-posto*' who would organise and manage all the day-to-day routines occurring in all four wings of each facility, and who would continuously dialogue with other fellow officers working in other offices.<sup>19</sup> Lastly, at the very bottom of the hierarchy, there would be those rank and file prison officers working on the wing: the wing officers.

The main difference between the chains of command of the two facilities is the role and presence of one member of the paramedic staff on the wing. At the asylum, the psychiatric, medical and paramedical staff were more relevant than in the prison. At least one nurse would be on the wing, in the infirmary, 24 hours a day, day in, day out. Seeing it from the officers' perspective, it became clear that the non-custodial staff presence on the wing was perceived concurrently as both welcomed and problematic. 'We have to take care of their security as well, you know? Just like it happens with you being here with us now', one officer told me critically. 'They do a lot of things we previously had to do ourselves', said another, more appreciatively, then added, 'they are

the ones who take care of many of the prisoners' daily little problems, and we do not have to think about it anymore now'.

Focusing on prison officers' organisation of 'doing' coercion, both institutions would be very similar, yet in prison only one officer would always be on duty simultaneously. On the contrary, at the asylum, for few hours a day and some days a week, two officers would theoretically be working concurrently (often being busy somewhere else or at the infirmary). First, a prison officer working as a wing manager would be working patrolling the wing, or, said differently, doing policing (Liebling 2000). Second, another prison officer working as rehabilitation officer would 'work' helping healthcare staff 'just doing rehab', or, as they would also call it, doing a 'social worker's job' (see Figure 4.2, asylum 4th wing and prison 4th wing).

Inmates and patients living in any *close-cell* regime wing<sup>20</sup> such as the one I studied would be locked up for a minimum of 21 hours a day. Almost all of those prisoners had the formal right to do exercise (going to the yard) twice a day for two hours each time. It was a close regime cell, yet not a cellular isolation such as in the US. All the cells were usually closed with barred doors, and prisoners would communicate both from one cell to the other and by the mediation of the persons passing in front of their cell. In fact, there has hardly ever been a strict control on prisoners' internal communication within the wing. Despite being illegitimate, it was frequently tolerated. Moreover, many of those prisoners would go to do their exercise on one of the concrete yards or at the recreational wing.

## Prison officers' shifts: working at the detention facilities

The asylum's wing, in which this ethnography is based, is still operating with a closed-cell regime in a traditional fashion. Few prisoners de facto live in their own cell continuously, hardly ever exiting it by their own free will.

The job of 'wing officer' in that wing is organised in four shifts and is normally performed by a first-level officer.<sup>21</sup> Only the night shift is does not overlap with the previous and/or the following ones. The officers doing 'the second [shift]' in

any particular wing, in fact, must arrive one hour before his colleague ends his own duty leaving the wing. Of course, no one could ever be authorised to leave his own '*posto di servizio*' unattended. Doing so would result, a senior officer said, in a prison officer crime:

A wing manager should not leave the wing even in case of an alarm; this is a personal decision, though {.}. If I hear a nurse screaming {.} I will leave it {.} and will not consider the personal consequence. There are laws and we must respect them; but there is also logic (in Italian, *buon senso*) and I try using it. You always need to do what you feel more comfortable with, without thinking too much about the consequences.

(field note, summary)

When the incoming officer starts his shift, however, he does not have to head directly towards the wing. Rather, the officer is allowed to have lunch first, and this would normally happen at the canteen, where two professional cooks work full-time preparing freshly cooked good food, most of the time. Only after lunch should officers move on to the facility, passing by the security manager's office, the all-wing manager, to start their new working shift on the landing. Similarly, before the second shift stops, those doing the third would arrive at the canteen, have their dinner, then move on to their superior and eventually to the wing to actually start working. The role of the wing manager is clearly expressed by the asylum commander's quote below:

well {.} obviously we have our '*modello 14 A*', a document that specifies each officer's role and shift in any area of the custodial institution [either asylum or prison]. Inside 'his' wing the officer is {.} for example, the officer responsible for the security [the one we described doing coercion] {.} first of all he has to guarantee order and security within his area, hasn't he? Then he has to guarantee the prisoner's life and safety; therefore, if any inmate is agitated, he has to call his boss, who calls his other boss; then, eventually, if necessary, the security manager would go upstairs to understand why the prisoner is agitated [by agitated, he seems to intend something such as destroying a cell or fighting with a room-mate seriously] {.}. If anybody is unable



to solve the issue talking with the person, he will climb the hierarchy until me [the local commander] {.}. The main function of the prison officer who patrols the wing is to guarantee order and security inside the custodial facility, as well as guaranteeing a safe access to everybody to the available activities.

(video-recorded semi-structured interview with local commander)

In yet another conversation, one officer clarifies that the role described by the commander, as it was previously remembered, is called ‘wing officer’ (*responsabile di sezione*): ‘his duty is to watch over and observe the inmates and the patients on the wing [the wing name in the asylum would be ward but it is hardly ever used by officers]’.<sup>22</sup>

The *officer doing ‘proper work’* (the wing officer) starting his ‘first [shift]’ (7.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m.) would normally arrive upstairs just a couple of minutes before 7.00. He would be just in time to be updated by his fellow colleague, who must give him the keys and tell him about how many prisoners are locked in, whether any particular order (i.e. the ban order we referred to above) has been issued by the commander, any particular prisoner’s record has been updated by the doctors, or any ‘ticket’ (in Italian, *rapporto disciplinare*) has been issued at all by the fellow officer during the night, and if so for what reason it had occurred. Occasionally, and by the rule, these procedures might be time-consuming, yet they would often be oversimplified in practice, even after ‘a war night’ (which the officers used to describe a night full of problems and/or fights), becoming a simple informal routinised exchange such as the following.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

It's eight to seven. I am sitting in the officers' box on the closed wing. The 'officers' box' is located just in front of the cell number 14 where the prisoner Ryan (not his real name), the 'officer's enemy', is smoking a cigarette hanging on his cell's barred door just wearing a light blue slip and white socks. The young green-eyed officer is now at the end of the wing entering into the infirmary. Suddenly, a fellow officer arrives at the box and, a bit surprised about me being alone in there so early in the morning, asks me whether or not I knew where his colleague was. I indicated to him that his colleague was in the infirmary at the end of the wing. The officer sat down on a chair next to me and we had a short talk while waiting for his colleague to arrive. He suddenly stood up and checked whether all the keys were in the key locker next to the toilet where they were supposed to be, then he sat down again watching the morning news on TV. Eventually, the other officer arrived from the infirmary. The officer sitting next to me smiled to his colleagues: 'Ciao Marco, is everything fine here? Has anything happened tonight?' His fellow officer replied, 'It's all right Giorgio, no worries. They [the kept] are 35; I really need some sleep now! It has been a terrible night {.} please just read it [the register]'. 'OK, have a good sleep then, and forget it all!' Marco exited the wing and went downstairs. Eventually, Giorgio became the 'boss' of the wing.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

After a tremendous night shift, some officers are eager to go home and just try 'to reduce bureaucracy to a minimum', inviting their colleagues to read the notes, often very badly written and not detailed, rather than following the procedure and thoroughly explaining what had occurred. Occasionally, however, a very formal officer would require all the formal procedures to occur properly, and that may require more than 10 minutes to happen. During my ethnography, I never witnessed any officer arriving late on duty. Arriving late on the wing not only creates organisational problems, but, more importantly, it is one of the worst informal offences (in Italian, *sgarbo*) one can commit to a fellow colleague finishing his night shift, and would not be tolerated by the fellow officer. Stories about officers arriving late are only told to denigrate someone, explaining how little that person is. Another crucial aspect of prison officers' work is imbued in Goffman's notions of front stage and backstage.

## Trading working shifts within the internal group in the asylum: performing both authority and paternalism

Shifts are organised differently between internal and external staff. The internal group works in the detention facility within the security area. The external group works at the governor building in the low security area. Some particular jobs – such as the officer working in the kitchen – would have a specific shift. The main difference, however, is that ‘internals’ would work on 24/7 shifts and regularly do night shifts and weekends as well, day in, day out. On the contrary, officers working in the external group – except those working at the ‘Block-House’, the very entrance to the prison, and other gates – would never do night shifts and would often only work on a maximum two-shift basis, often on one shift only.

These differences would be crucial to comprehend the particular staff cultures and the different sense of belonging characterising those working either in one group or in the other. Although this is not the goal here, these particular cultures imbue the officers’ narration of ‘doing’ coercion.

Shifts were regularly ‘traded’ and exchanged among colleagues. It was a very common activity on the landing during one’s duty, in some periods more than in others. I regularly observed it time and again throughout the entire fieldwork. Not only have I observed older staff friendly convincing rookie officers to consider older officers’ needs and exchange their shifts with them accordingly, thereby respecting their authority, but I also observed older staff being paternalistic by helping rookies ‘to have some fun’ exchanging their own shift with their younger fellow officers, who would publicly show thankfulness afterwards both with the benefactor and with other colleagues working in the internal group with him. Thankfulness would be shown during both informal and formal conversations for at least a few days. After returning from the exchanged shift, rookies would be expected to share their stories that occurred on those occasions. I now turn to describing my way into the wing from the outside world.

## Backstage, front stage and ‘make-work’

Prison staff had, of course, many different physical backstages to avoid interaction and pollution with prisoners (Douglas 1966).<sup>23</sup> Custodial staff, in particular, had their own officers' offices, rooms and a canteen to avoid contact either with inmates or other non-uniformed staff, both on and off duty.

Of course, any person in a particular position in the officers' chain of command had particular opportunities and constraints that influenced the access to one particular backstage or another. Prison officers working on the wing would consider 'their wing' as their own backstage during night shift or whenever any high-grade officers' visit was *not* in the picture. Usually, they would be informed in advance of the arrival of any high-grade officers, the commander, the governor or any other relevant visit by their colleagues controlling CCTV. On other occasions, however, the same wing would become a crucial front stage arena during official visits of either the prison governor or any public body, such as a parliamentary inspection. On those occasions, officers would display their best professional behaviour 'by the book', thereby performing what Goffman (1959: 68) called 'make-work'. The same had occurred when I was arriving on the wing in the initial stage of the ethnography. Officers would change their behaviour upon my arrival (i.e. taking their boots off the desk or talking more formally to each other and to prisoners, as I later understood).

By the same token, the commander's office would also be adopted by the commander at certain moments, as his or her impenetrable backstage in which he or she could not be seen or disturbed by anybody without prior notice, but also in other moments turning into a front stage, during the implementation of a prison disciplinary hearing, a formal meeting and other similar situations.

The same physical space (either the office or the wing) would be lived differently by a subject acting in his or her own front stage or in the backstage at one time or another. Actors would adapt their behaviours, proxemics and language accordingly at any particular time. They would also include different kinds of display of their belongings and attitudes. According to Goffman (1959: 75), in fact, the 'backstage character of certain places is built into them in a material way'. However, on the wing, each staff member would more or less challenge the backstage character constrained by the materiality (see Goffman above). He would do so by transforming the available spaces, taking into account his personal needs and introducing objects such as magazines, posters, a radio or a TV. These objects would work as tools to overcome the

rigid designed features of such places. During official visit on the wing, forbidden items would be temporarily eliminated, while other items, on the contrary, would enter the picture to display reputation or power on one occasion or another (i.e. those items that embed particular meaning or power, such as a complete official uniform in order, the penal code, a critical event register, and so on).

Front stage and backstage are constructed and reconstructed ritualistically and are not fixed, nor are they necessarily always bounded by a physical space. Particular items appear and disappear recurrently. One good example is the presence of the TV in the prison officers' booth on the wing (they call it a box, and so will I from now onwards). Everybody knew it was there and, moreover, that it was forbidden. It was forbidden, but it could be used smartly and represented a prison officer's symbol of power and of freedom from the prison rules' constraints during day-to-day activities by which officers displayed their powerfulness to those in custody. However, the same TV would disappear as quickly as possible whenever a higher-grade officer, or the commander, would enter the wing. By displaying the TV, prison officers showed their powerfulness. By hiding it, they displayed their symbolic respect to the rules, as well as their deference to their superordinate.

## The disciplinary hearing

Notwithstanding both officers' perceptions and my initial observations have shown the commander's 'absence' from the asylum day-to-day life and her greater personal attention to the prison, her formal role in dealing with all cases of alleged discipline occurring either in prison or in the asylum was indisputable, and had often, if not mainly, to do with cases that eventually ended up in officers threatening or 'doing' coercion with prisoners.

Every time the prison governor would hear a case of alleged breach of discipline, the commander or her nominated deputy would sit next to the governor, or his nominated deputy, in a very formal setting inside the commander's office. The prisoner would be escorted to the room. The situation would be often described by prisoners (and by some low-ranking officers) as unfair and to a certain extent even intimidating. The accused prisoner has almost no way to defend himself from the accusation and hardly ever finds a fellow prisoner to testify in his favour. The accused prisoner would be at an obvious disadvantage. Rank and file staff would be trusted the

most by their commander, who would be the de facto judge. As a corollary, the situation of the disciplinary hearing would more often than not result in a predictable prisoner's punishment or sanction of one type or another. I now turn to a crucial actor of 'doing' coercion: the emergency squad.

## The emergency squad: threatening and using force as routine

The emergency squad's main duty and organisational *raison d'être* is specifically the symbolic or credible threat of force (*infra*, Chapter 6) and its actual bodily use (*infra*, Chapter 7). Notwithstanding its main duty, some emergency squad members are sometimes used for different purposes as well. For one reason or another, that team is also called 'available officers team'.

The squad's entrance in and exit off the wing (or any other space where prisoners are behind a barred door, such as a dynamic security wing or the yards) will clearly time-mark both the beginning and the end of the emergency squad's intervention (see Chapters 6 and 7).

One particular group of more or less officers, depending on the time of the day or night, the period of the year or simply the personnel available at a particular point in time, would work together in the emergency squad (*squadra emergenza*). Only some of the officers usually included in that team would be particularly well built, muscular and experienced. Usually, they would actively perform their 'face-work' (see Goffman 1967) and talk with a strong masculine, but not necessarily macho, attitude. More often than not, they would be pretty well thought of by their fellow officers working in that same environment, which some officers have defined as hegemonic or even hyper-masculine (Messerschmidt 2001; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Jewkes 2005).

The emergency squad is not a fixed group of persons waiting together somewhere, nor is it based in any of the wings. The emergency squad would not enter the wing in ordinary, non-critical, day-to-day routine situations if not ordered to do so by either the security manager or the commander. Normally, only after an alleged critical event, the security manager would order the emergency team to get together,

heading where there is a need for their intervention. No single officer worked exclusively in the squad. However, some officers would be more frequently likely to be part of it than others. Yet, others would refuse to be part of the squad as much as possible, and in case of intervention would remain at the rear of the front line, far away from 'where the action is'. A few seemed to slightly enjoy the action, perhaps resembling a version of those police officers **Collins (2008: 378)** called 'cowboy cops'. The majority of the officers in the squad, however, would instead try to avoid intervention and violence by starting a negotiation most of the time. Officers who actively and regularly participated to the emergency squad interventions had a slightly better reputation among a group of officers than those who tended to avoid participating in it, and vice versa.

Unsurprisingly, the emergency squad's main duty was 'doing' coercion, both symbolically and physically (infra, Chapters 6 and 7), whenever ordered to do so. They would also be frequently called each time a very 'violent' or 'dangerous' inmate had to be escorted anywhere outside his cell, either within the wing or outside of it. The emergency squad was quite often busy at the asylum, yet there were also occasions in which mainly boredom, reading magazines and watching some TV would help emergency team members to kill time.

## Three cleavages at the 'rank and file' level

The officers' chain of command seemed to be working quite smoothly and efficiently, yet three cleavages would separate different staff member from one another in different ways.

### Working with the 'crazy' versus working with the 'criminals'

The first cleavage would divide prison officers working at the prison and those working at the forensic psychiatric hospital. An us-versus-them approach characterises many of the relationships between the officers working with the 'crazy' and those working with the 'criminals' at most grades of the hierarchy – yet to a different degree.

The divide 'working with the "crazy" versus working with the "criminals"' was possible due to a process of prisoners' labelling performed by the officers (and the

psychiatric staff), which divided prisoners into two clear-cut groups: the 'crazy' and the 'criminals'. Such a labelling process was understood, shared and performed by many prison officers on a daily basis in their day-to-day interactions with one another, and with me. Prison officers working 'with the crazy' often explained their job to me by way of comparing their duties and practices with those of their colleagues who were considered to be the 'real' prison officers, because they were working in an actual prison context, with actual 'criminals'. Yet, the majority of the officers in both facilities considered both institutions primarily as custodial ones, de facto as prisons. That's the way in which I would frame them. That's also the way in which tens of personal interviews with photo-elicitation answered consistently (Gariglio 2015). This divide was even evident through observation. Both ways in which officers of one group sat at a table at the canteen, and the spontaneous groups outside the cafeteria in which people were smoking or simply talking with one another, were two easy examples in which that divide was visible. Normally, custodial staff working in one group would not mix with fellow colleagues working in the other. Neither would the few officers who had just be moved from the nearby prison to the forensic hospital mingle with their former colleagues because, as many often said, 'we are a real group here; we're a family [at the psychiatric hospital]'. During night shifts, when only a few officers were inside, things might evolve differently and the prison officers working in both facilities might eat together at the canteen (see also Wieder 1974 for an ethnomethodological approach to the issue of spatial configuration at the prison canteen's table).

In almost all interviews conducted over the last period of the ethnography with both prison and asylum officers, it clearly emerged that officers working at the asylum had a much stronger bond with each other than those working 'on the other side'.<sup>24</sup> One officer said that working at the psychiatric hospital had helped him to be accepted quickly. He then added that 'either we like a new staff member or a guest like you, or not, over here; fortunately, they liked you from the very beginning. You were interested in us and not in them; that's new for us'. However, the reason is far from clear. Two officers that started working at the asylum a few months before being interviewed expressed their positive surprise about the friendly working environment that they had found at the asylum. They contrasted it with the previous long experience they had in prisons, where 'coldness and distance', in one officer's words, frequently characterised the officers' relationships with one another. That particular benevolent representation of the asylum might have been caused by the interviewee's



understanding of me being on the side of officers working in the asylum, where I was based most of the time, yet that divide was also often perceivable during observation.

### ‘Rank and file’ officers working in the internal group: fighting on the wing, or just working as an ‘external’?

A second cleavage separates officers working in each of the two institutions. That would occur not only symbolically, but also physically. Rank and file officers working in the internal group would be the ones doing the dirty work on the wings (or within the detention area). Those working in the external group, instead, would help ‘managers by doing paperwork’. The former would work in close contact with inmates; the latter would usually work at the governor’s building, often without wearing a uniform.

The interactions among one another recorded in the interviews clearly described a strong divide *separating the lower-ranking prison officers* (first level) clearly into two large groups, in other words those officers having ‘quasi-regular’ jobs, almost not polluted by the constant interaction with prisoners, less exhausting, and less penalised by the effect of prison work (Liebling and Maruna 2005; Bennett *et al.* 2008). On the other hand, the internal group would include officers working in close contact with prisoners on the wing at the detention building, who would usually work following three ‘wing shifts’. The officers working as ‘internals’ would perform one particular task or another, depending on the day’s schedule, prescribed by an official document that is communicated daily at the ‘operative unit meeting’ (in Italian, *conferenza di servizio*), in which a high-grade officer would order face-to-face with his or her subordinates the day’s duty to all those starting their daily shifts.

Some of the most important activities performed by officers working in the internal group are: supervising prisoners working on the wing, either as wing officers (in Italian, *agente responsabile della sezione*) or as rehabilitation officers (in Italian, *agente responsabile della riabilitazione*). Being part of the emergency squad; being in the ‘reception’ group to the new patients (and prisoners) entering the institution on a daily basis; carrying out patrol duty on the yards when prisoners ‘exercise’ (in Italian, *sono all’aria*); supervising visits when prisoners meet their own family or other authorised visitors (in Italian, *vigilanza sale colloqui*); and supervising prisoners’ visitors while they are waiting for their turn to meet a person in custody (in Italian, *rilascio colloqui*).

Some officers would prefer to work in the external group, and others in the internal one, for different reasons. Staff preferring to be internal normally think that working on the wing is what being a ‘proper’ prison officer is actually all about, and this could be culturally explained referring to the police and prison officers’ culture literatures (Wieder 1974; Bennett *et al.* 2008; Fassin 2015). The wing is where the action is and where ‘war stories’ are narrated and experienced, yet a more pragmatic explanation could be included in the picture. Many officers also want to work in the internal group for two pragmatic reasons: first, doing night shift pays much better (about 30 per cent more, or so); and second, it gives a better opportunity for organising one’s life and family responsibilities flexibly.

However, some showed some pride talking about their own ‘actual’ prison work. One prison officer at the end of my ethnography, apparently not joking, told me that:

they [the officers working in the external group] just do paperwork and do not have dirty hands at the end of the day, they don’t risk assaults, and they are not afraid and busy protecting each other on the wing [like we do]. They do not feel like a group at all.

(field note summary of an ethnographic interview)

Each particular officer has the right to apply to be part of the external group for a fixed period of time on an equal opportunity basis. An officer has the right to apply to a particular position after a certain period of time working as internal. The right to obtain work ‘outside’ the wing was intended to allow officers to calm down, and reduce stress and anxiety due to the so-called ‘wing work’ (in Italian, *lavoro in sezione*), thereby looking forward to reducing burnout and sick leave, a real organisational problem in Italy (Buffa 2013b).

### Working on the psychiatric hospital wing: doing proper prison officers’ work, or just doing the social worker’s job?

The third and final divide was visible at the asylum wing only. Only at that facility two officers would work on the same wing (albeit not together) for a few hours a day. It can

be described simplistically as the divide between ‘doing police work’ and ‘*doing a social worker’s job*’, as a few put it. One would have the crucial duty of patrolling the wing authoritatively, and the rehabilitation officer would instead have the softer (some scholars would say more ‘feminine’) duty of care. Its femininity would be particularly evident when a particularly tough officer (yet tough officers are not necessarily the norm) would be on duty. To put it clearly, officers doing rehab would have to help other non-uniformed staff or prisoners to perform rehabilitative or re-educational activities, such as pet therapy, theatre and reading at the prison library, but also helping staff to help prisoners to have a shower, cleaning the wing and securing other non-custodial staff on the wing, such as paramedics, doctors and psychiatrists (although ‘violent prisoners’ would usually be escorted by other officers, or the emergency squad, if available).

Each role, either ‘doing’ the social worker’s job (rehabilitation) or patrolling the wing, was always performed by low-ranking officers (first-level grade), both belonging to the internal group. From Monday to Friday, there would usually be, intermittently, two officers working contemporarily on the same wing, theoretically from 8.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m. The one doing rehab would have slightly more freedom of movement than the officer responsible for the wing, and would often be off the wing or at the wing’s infirmary. Therefore, they would not often be concurrently on the wing together in practice.

I observed officers performing both activities over the entire time span of the ethnography, both those doing proper prison officers’ work and those working almost as social workers taking care of prisoners’ rehabilitation (instead of prison security). I also discussed with the staff members their experiences of working on the wing. I feel I got at least the gist of the most common officers’ different interpretations of each of the two roles. Officers, at each shift, would be formally compelled to be either the wing officer or the rehab officer, according to an official document (*Modulo 14A*), which would assign officers to one role or the other. Usually, each officer would display a quite different face and attitude when performing one role or the other, signalling, by doing so, his particular role in any particular moment, both to staff and prisoners on the wing (in Goffman’s 1974 terms, by doing so, the officer would perform *keying*) (see Chapter 2).

Many officers would agree that the *wing officer* is the crucial one on the wing. One officer explained (and justified it) by saying that ‘after all, this is still a prison! [well, actually it should be a hospital, but almost everybody considered it a prison]’, clearly downsizing the role of rehabilitation to an annexed activity. Another officer argued that “‘order and security” is the proper prison officer’s job, that’s not bullshitting’. He then added:

Patrolling the wing, ‘order and security’ are the reasons why I decided to be a prison officer and not a social worker. That’s our hard-core business we must do; I wear a uniform, don’t I? It is really frustrating to think about a police officer jumping into a bank to stop a robbery while being in front of some old naked men taking a shower. Do you understand what I mean?

(field note, summary)

By saying so, that officer claimed what he understood to be a prison officer’s main duty and, to a certain extent, master professional identity. ‘War stories’ over the emergency squad interventions also marked and at the same time displayed to me the gist of one component of different prison officers’ professional cultures. That helped me to comprehend that, in practice, there existed a plurality of prison officers’ cultures. In other occasions within more rehabilitative-oriented institutions (such as the Arcobaleno unit for drug rehabilitation in Turin Prison, or in the best practice prison of Bollate, close to Milan), I heard very different stories too. Hearing different sets of comments helped me to grasp a more complex picture of extant variety of prison officers’ cultures (it would require a specific research agenda to start studying it). What is clear is that even in alleged punitive institutions, prison officers’ cultures can hardly ever be reduced to one hyper-masculine culture. That is surely a hyper-simplification; plural masculinities are surely a better option. The big majority of ‘rank and file’ officers’ interpretations were clearly biased towards a particular understanding of the prison grounded on order and security, though. Officers’ interpretations often addressed the well-known questions of ‘What is prison?’ and ‘What is it for?’ in two main particular ways that, to a certain extent, are related to one another and are often also found in the popular, and particularly in the populist, political debate. The prison would often be interpreted first in terms of public discourses about uncertainty, drug-related criminality, *crimmigration* and security (see also Drake 2012). Second, in terms of

*either collective or selective incapacitation* before, during or after detention (Mathiesen 1990: 85–103; Zimring and Hawkins 1995; see also Mathiesen 1965). Those two sets of ideas emerged and re-emerged time and again both in the ‘natural’ discussion occurring on the landing between one officer and another, as well as in formal interviews. That kind of populist penal culture was not only widespread, but also predictable in this particular historical moment in Italy. However, much less predictably, other discourses often emerged too. Some officers, not necessarily the younger ones, showed interest in the complexity of the new frontiers of their job that would include a much more complex and nuanced attention to human rights and to the needs of those in custody and of their victims. However, some have also righteously stressed the prison officers’ own needs for better safety, better training, better and newer equipment, better hygiene, and so on, mainly for their own interest as workers (see also Fassin 2015 for the French context).

Officers embedding a violence-averse culture, however, would less openly display it with fellow officers, being worried about jokes, not of retaliation or isolation. They would publicly display a low profile instead, accepting the situation ritualistically (Merton 1968) by simply doing their job.

The question ‘Why prison?’ was out of the picture in officers’ discussions. Most of them, in fact, believed that prisons had always existed. They were naturalised in prison officers’ accounts. Officers hardly ever believed me when I tried to explain to them that the contrary was true.

## Call centre operator’s feeling

Officers tended to resist what one called the ‘call centre operator’s feeling’. Usually, officers very much disliked when they had to move continuously from their desk to the prisoners cell to discuss matters with them (even though they should be walking back and forth on the wing much more frequently than they actually do, a few officers told me). Always being there to respond to any kind of request asked from those in their cells (or in the yard) was not considered a crucial part of their job in practice, despite what some of them might have said in interviews whenever asked about it. Sometimes officers would shout ‘What’s up?’ in return and not think about it for a few minutes or until the next ‘real request’. By using the words ‘real request’, officers would often consider only those very urgent needs or cries for help that could be postponed.

According to a few officers' narrations, it was a shared belief grounded on experience among staff in uniform that prisoners who really do need your immediate help would have a specific tone of voice. All the rest can be solved bureaucratically when it is possible to do so.

I am not sure whether or not officers are aware that what they call the 'call centre operator's job' is a crucial duty of theirs. It is the core business of being a prison officer based on humane officer-prisoner interaction (Liebling *et al.* 2011). As Goffman and others stated, in fact, prisoners can do very little alone, almost nothing where I did my fieldwork (*contra*, Ugelvik 2014, writing about a low security prison in Norway). Prisoner-officer relations are inscribed in a coercive bureaucratic structure of the situation that impinge on their daily necessity to make a phone call or to have toilet paper. Every request must be written in Italian on a form called 'little request' (in Italian, *domandina*, a very patronising term).<sup>25</sup> Raising awareness in officers' culture and practices is a crucial goal if prison officers are to become the actors, if not the protagonists, implementing and developing the process of humanising the prison, described in Buffa's (2015) book *Umanizzare il Carcere* (which, once translated into English, reads *Humanising the Prison*).

## Notes

{ensp}1 Art. 9 of Law 395/1990 dictates the hierarchy in which any prison officer is embedded and the roles to which he or she is subordinated.

{ensp}2 Law n. 663, 10 October 1986.

{ensp}3 The so-called 'regime of enhanced surveillance' (in Italian, *Regime di sorveglianza particolare*) (art. 14-bis, Prison Law) and 'special prison regime', so-called 'hard prison regime' (art. 41-bis Prison Law).

{ensp}4 'Prisoners condemned for specific crimes (among which mafia and terrorism) have access to alternative measures only if they cooperate with justice. Then, if a prisoner serving life sentence for one of those crimes does not cooperate with justice, maybe because he has no information to provide to the judges, he will be an "actual lifer". "Actual life sentence" in Italian is called "*ergastolo ostativo*". The number of prisoners serving "*ergastolo ostativo*" is not exactly calculated, but it seems to be around 800'. Prison Observatory:  
[www.prisonobservatory.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=10:prison-conditions-in-italy&catid=13&Itemid=116](http://www.prisonobservatory.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10:prison-conditions-in-italy&catid=13&Itemid=116).

- {ensp}5 An interactive Italian map providing a link to each institution can be found on the website of the Ministry of Justice: [www.giustizia.it/giustizia/prot/it/mg\\_2\\_3\\_2.wp](http://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/prot/it/mg_2_3_2.wp)). The page of the custodial complex is:  
[www.giustizia.it/giustizia/prot/it/mg\\_data\\_view.wp?liveUid=2014DAPCARD&Nome=UFF56869](http://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/prot/it/mg_data_view.wp?liveUid=2014DAPCARD&Nome=UFF56869).
- {ensp}6 During the ethnography, a total of five forensic psychiatric hospitals, or asylums (OPG), are still functioning despite the law that prescribed their definitive closure within a year from the publication of the law. (On 22 December 2011, the Italian government issued a legislative decree n. 211/2011, converted into Law n. 9/2012, that ordered the closure of all Italian Ospedali psichiatrici giudiziari, OPG.) Only one asylum, Castiglione delle Stiviere, a forensic psychiatric hospital near Mantova, in the north of Italy, has been officially closed so far. In fact, it has been renamed as a ‘residency for the execution of the security measures’ (REMS, *residenze per l’esecuzione delle misure di sicurezza*). Before the law that ordered the institutional closure, they were ready to comply with the new normative. However, Reggio Emilia’s staff considered the asylum ‘Castiglione delle Stiviere’ an easy institution to run. It was often referred to as a ‘hotel’ where only good prisoners and patients are locked up. This is probably not completely true, yet in Reggio Emilia I saw many ‘difficult’ patients arriving from the ‘hotel’ because they were considered to be too dangerous to be kept there.
- {ensp}7 In Italy, there is not any private penal custodial institution.
- {ensp}8 Article 12 of Law 40/1998.
- {ensp}9 Personal communication with a ‘funzionario’ of the Ministry of Justice. These data refer to December 2014.
- 10 Data refer to 30 April 2016, Ministry of Justice:  
[www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg\\_1\\_14.wp?selectedNode=1\\_5\\_32](http://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_14.wp?selectedNode=1_5_32).
- 11 I thank Alpa Parmer, who suggested that I consider this point, as well as for her suggestions and critiques.
- 12 A remand prison for defendants (in Italian, Casa Circondariale, CC).
- 13 In Italian, Ospedale Psichiatrico Giudiziario, OPG.
- 14 Only 25 cells have a shower inside their toilets.
- 15 Since 2008, the prisoners’ healthcare has been a duty of the Ministry of Health. Before that, the Ministry of Justice employed or hired in different forms doctors, nurses and specialists, providing a very bad health service to the population kept in custody.
- 16 On medical power in the UK, see [Sim \(1990\)](#).
- 17 In the institution organisation, there is one more area, a fifth one, dealing with secretarial work.
- 18 The polizia penitenziaria’s personnel is divided into five levels: from ‘ruolo agenti assistenti’ to ‘ruolo dirigenziale’: [www.polizia-penitenziaria.it/le-insegne-di-qualifica](http://www.polizia-penitenziaria.it/le-insegne-di-qualifica).  
During my observations, there were very few superintended (second-level officers, *sovrintendenti*) and inspectors (third grade) to manage all the crucial nodes in the

organisation or 'posto di servizio'. Often, prison officers (first level) complained that they had a role in practice that did not match with the power position they held in the hierarchy, thereby performing roles with high responsibility – such as managing recurring crises – with nothing in return.

- 19 One crucial office is the reception (in Italian, *Ufficio matricola*), which assures that the required information is gleaned, assessments made upon a newcomer's arrival and that all the available personal information is properly archived and accessible by any fellow colleague that would need them.
- 20 Some wings in the custodial complex were operating with an *open-cell* regime.
- 21 Shifts are organised as follows: the first shift (7.00 a.m.–1.00 p.m.), the second (12.00 p.m.–7.00 p.m.), the third (6.00 p.m.–12.00 a.m.), and lastly the night shift (12.00 a.m.–7.00 a.m.).
- 22 By using the words 'ward' and 'patients' instead of 'wing' and 'inmates', he subtly stressed the fact that the asylum should theoretically be, and work like, a hospital.
- 23 I thank Enzo Colombo for stressing the relevance of Douglas.
- 24 'On the other side' was the usual expression by which officers working in the asylum referred to prison. I never heard the contrary happening. However, it took me some weeks to understand what they all mean by 'di là'.
- 25 A maximum of one 'little request' form per day is available. Occasionally, they are hard to obtain. Foreign nationals must be helped by other prisoners since the form must be filled in in Italian. This impinges on foreign nationals' power relations inside.

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[[NEW PAGE]]

## Implicit coercion logic

[[START SHADED BOX]]

### Vignette 5.1a

Mario is a 32-year-old man. He now lives only four cells away from where his brother lived only a few months ago. He is Italian, just like more than four out of five prisoners in custody here. Mario comes from the capital, Rome, but he is a Lazio hooligan (he would say *Ultras*).

He is middle-aged, white-haired and quite muscular. He has been on drugs for many years and spent all his adult life going in and out prison for both petty and more serious crimes. Being addicted to cocaine, a substance hardly available in that wing, and being restricted into the boundaries of the custodial institution while doing time in there, he is now using any *escamotage* available to get high, such as inhaling butane gas or heavily misusing psychiatric drugs he is able to obtain through informal trade in one way or another, either on the wing or the yard. A market of such drugs is clearly at stake in the psychiatric hospital, staff say. Real stuff, such as cocaine and heroin, is not commonly available on this wing normally.<sup>1</sup>

Mario is slightly racist and does not hide it at all. He seems proud to be seen as a racist. Therefore, he has a formal ban to encounter black or North African prisoners. He can neither walk free if any prisoner with such characteristics is there, nor can black or North African guys *move freely if Mario is in the picture*; nowhere, neither within the facility, nor doing exercise. He has already been involved in violent confrontations and prisoner-prisoner assaults.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

A *ban service order* is issued daily by the institution commander, listing all the inmates who must not encounter a particular group of people or a particular individual for one reason or another over a number of days. That written order is available to all officers at the facility. Daily, a copy of the ban service order is released for the wing officers' booth (or officers' box). Officers cross-check individual ban orders every time a shift change occurs to be able to organise the prisoners' movements accordingly, minimising, by doing so, risk and workload. Ban orders impact on the prison officers' organisation of the prisoners' activities and movements. Therefore, they are issued only if strictly necessary or formally asked for by one prisoner for his own safety.

Walls, bars, cells, isolation rooms, corridors and CCTV are all technologies and devices of power, control and surveillance. Altogether, those technologies keep in custody, and under strict control, a more or less large number of persons in close proximity, regulating almost any aspect of their lives (Goffman 1961a; Crewe 2009; Drake 2012; Fassin 2015). Prisoners must live under such conditions, whether they like it or not, for a fixed or indeterminate period of time, depending on their tariff. They can do it either docilely, cooperating with the custodians, or coercively, conflicting with them, or, to put it differently, resisting. Usually, a few prisoners might do both in turn.

## Implicit use of force and physical constraint in Italy and beyond

Within the implicit coercion logic enforced by the custodial facility and its organisation, prisoners either learn to be docile and cooperative with staff and strictly follow the rules, or they will be coerced by officers, using physical force, to do what they must do, or to stop doing what they are forbidden from doing. This can even happen for such apparently mundane things (for free citizens) as refusing to enter or exit the cell (or any other place) when lawfully ordered to do so. The relevant point is that all parties involved, officers and prisoners (but also a few newcomers and some psychiatric patients), know that implicit coercion logic is the backdrop to any interaction occurring inside, or, to put it differently, is one of the most relevant characteristics of prison life. Even during the most rehabilitative-oriented activity, the use of force is always in the background, and both officers and prisoners perfectly know that it will enter the picture

if the situation calls for it. Unlike usual day-to-day social relations between human being in the ‘free world’, prisoners are always, more or less strictly, administered and controlled by staff. This is a typical characteristic contradistinguishing, to a greater or lesser extent, any custodial institutions, from an Italian maximum security prison for mafia prisoners,<sup>2</sup> to an open prison in Finland.

The most coercive prison I have visited so far is the Bucharest maximum security prison. The least coercive one is probably the Inari open prison in Finland. I now refer to an informal conversation I had with a very kind Finnish prison officer when I was busy doing my photographic project on prisoners and prisons around Europe. A small part of it is published in a book called *Portraits in Prisons* (Visser and Vroege 2007). Some images are collected and have been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, and elsewhere. I remember now that I was puzzled by seeing such an open prison, and I asked the officer how that openness was possible at all. He told me something like ‘this open system [or prison regime] can work here, because there is nothing out there where they can hide. Very few people live in the area’. Answering another clear direct question of mine (I had no training in Ethnography then), directly addressing my perplexity about what I was experiencing, he added something I remember quite clearly now. It sounded more or less like the following:

Prisoners here must follow a lot of rules. There is no wall to climb but they can’t move past that line on the floor. They have to learn to respect staff and each other if they hope to cope with the regime and stay here. If they create problems for us { . } if they cannot cope with it, we simply get them and take them to a close regime prison. They know how it works here, they know how it works in a closed-cell prison. Most of them have been in a closed prison before. All of them know the difference all too well. Many of them will continue here. Others will be brought elsewhere.

(an ex post reconstruction of a conversation I remember from a previous research, not based on an ethnography)

In other words, had any prisoner created any problems at Inari prison, he could have been easily escorted to another one, such as the old, not so nice Helsinki prison I visited and photographed for a few days. Therefore, if I understood it, the Inari prison open regime was grounded on the Helsinki closed one, and to a certain extent vice versa. In Helsinki prison, coercion was clearly in the picture. I felt Helsinki prison was very similar to, for example, Amsterdam prisons (one of which is now used for immigration detention purposes) and HMP prison in Edinburgh in Scotland, to cite but a few of those that I visited for my photographic project (Visser and Vroege 2007). The previous account, however, might be biased by the perception of who was then a young photographer (enrolled in a political science university BA at Turin University) doing his photographic project on European prisons. Therefore, I now turn to a recent academic account from a Norwegian scholar writing on *Power and Resistance* (Ugelvik 2014). In Norway, according to Ugelvik:

[I]t is clear that the prison has, as a last resort, the right and ability to subjugate prisoners' bodies 'in the old fashioned way' when it finds it necessary. This does not happen often [though, it happens], but at the same time it is part of everything that does happen. It is the potential sanction that structures every interaction between prisoners and officers. The officers *can* put prisoners on the ground, carry them down into the cellar and strap them to a bed. The fact that there are, at the same time, alternative and more indirect forms of power at play in the institution does not mean that the power cannot subjugate the body openly and plainly.

(p. 44, emphasis in original)

Nowadays, Italian officers are forbidden by law from using any coercive means such as a constraint bed (or any other bed or chair adopted to physically coerce prisoners), such as the one to which Ugelvik refers to, for disciplinary reasons. In fact, *only* psychiatrists working in prisons or in forensic hospitals can mechanically restrain prisoners who already have a formal psychiatric condition (insanity). Psychiatrists must ask for an external written authorisation to physically coerce prisoners without a psychiatric condition stated in the sentence. Physical coercion should *never* be used as

sanction, and should *only* be used in the prisoner's best interest to avoid suicide or self-harm under continued care.

## The invisibility of coercion

Time and space mark each particular experience of detention. Different sets of opportunities and constraints influence the daily interactions on the wing, as well as the visibility or invisibility of coercion. Coercion is usually hidden, not only in public institutional communication, but also in daily prison routines, 'humane' or 'quasi-humane' practices, rehabilitation programmes, school classes, university lectures, workshops, and so on (whenever any of these are available). Lawful coercion and restrained practices are also hidden, or left unnoticed, within the extant academic communities. They are hardly ever, if at all, discussed within books or articles. Occasionally, those topics appear in a few commonsensical lines, usually without a specific section title. They are told and hidden, if not denied at the same time. Yet, the implicit coercion logic, the huge potential physical coercion always available to enforce 'the rules' forcibly, is always there in practice, whether we study it or not. Moreover, physical coercion is also clearly embedded, in different degrees, in the prison architecture, in the prison routines, and in the emergency squad's (whatever their name or organisation within each prison system) potential, symbolic and bodily interventions.

## The minutiae of the presence of coercion

Implicit coercion at the very least is the possibility of enforcing any lawful rule by threatening or using force as a last resort. This occurs in different ways in a prison context, more often than not characterised by particularly biased lawful power dynamics, in which officers, on behalf of the institution (and of 'us'), have almost total control over prisoners, whether or not prisoners decide to comply with the rules for one reason or another (Carrabine 2004; see also the section entitled 'Authority (deficit) and prison officers' in Chapter 3). Almost each and every interaction between the keepers and the kept occurs within a 'frame' of implicit coercion.<sup>3</sup> I now return to Vignette 5.1a, which started this chapter, continuing the narration from where I stopped.

## [[START SHADED BOX]]

### Vignette 5.1b

Mario is not young, but has got a reputation of being a good street fighter anyway. He lives in a cell with another guy from Rome. He once told me that he does not like his cellmate that much, but the guy is rich and generous, offering coffee and food to Mario for nothing in return but company. He is very talkative and cannot stand to be alone.

His cell is a few steps away from the prison officers' 'box', where I often sit with the agent on duty who should be walking back and forth all the time, 'like we did before', as one senior prison officer put it.

Mario had been living there for more than four months; his cellmate a few months longer than that. Mario sarcastically calls that room 'my home'.

The cell is quite dark inside. The barred window is in fact almost all covered by weekly papers' spreads, mainly Catholic ones, brought inside the wing and distributed freely by the chaplain to both the keepers and the kept, and a few pornographic images that circulate in not such a high proportion as normally is the case in other facilities. The remaining part of the window is clear. The cell's walls are particularly dirty, though, with lots of drawings and phrases written on them, as well as some visible blood spots of previous fights or self-harm that remained there during all the ethnography.

In a nearby cell, a worn-out small dark-purple linen tissue is fashioned as a curtain to completely obscure that barred window in order to sleep better at night. This is only exceptionally allowed because both prisoners living there apparently present no sign of any suicide risk. In Mario's cell, images were directly taped on the glass, one next to the other forming a quite colourful collage when the sun hit the wing from behind. Most of the other cells' windows are clean of images. Instead, images are usually taped on the cell's walls despite the prescription not to do so. Every now and then, officers remove images from the wall forcibly, and the dirty and old fading yellow paint and all sorts of spots, drawings and handwritten texts remain visible on the 'clean' wall.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

I do not know the rationale for why they have to remove images forcibly in the way they do, but they do it. I would tentatively read it as a display of the minutiae of the implicit coercion logic.

At this point, I want to remember that not only does the Italian Constitution prescribe the rehabilitative function of imprisonment (which mainly remains on paper only), but also the extant Italian Prison Rule dated 1975 already stated that Italian prison officers are not only on duty to perform order and security, but also to do or help others doing prisoners' rehabilitation (see Chapter 4). *In Reggio Emilia, prison officers had a large set of duties*, yet 'doing' coercion is the focus of this book.

This chapter continues by showing the well-known differences characterising any particular custodial institution in respect to others. Then, it describes the idea of the punitive institution that was frequently spontaneously told to me by officers. Next, it presents a vignette in which I tell my of the coercive institution where I conducted this research by describing the coercive route and routines I had to cope with while heading towards the wing, each and every time I conducted this ethnography. Lastly, a few officers' coercive routines are outlined.

## Facilities are not all the same

Each particular custodial institution (and wing) is characterised by an implicit and explicit coerciveness, which may vary in terms of level of visibility and of rhetorical display (also depending on the security level of it) (Buffa 2013b).

As I wrote in Chapter 1, I am interested in the new approach of global prison ethnography, which I think is a relevant extant theoretical effort occurring within some academic communities. From that perspective, however, despite doing micro-pills of ethnography (i.e. what journalists and documentarians often do) grounded on short-term observation or on some interviews, I follow Ryan (2013), calling for ethnographies dealing with particular facilities in particular contexts 'focus[ing] more on national particularities rather than across the board commonalities' (p. 5, emphasis in original). And I think that to study an institution in depth while being, concurrently, open to



serendipity, it is necessary to return to long-term prison ethnography, whether or not those efforts are feasible within the extant academic ‘publish or perish’ official goals of current academia. There is always the possibility of working as an independent researcher within the larger community.

Coercion is often experienced, performed, resisted and displayed between the keepers and the kept. It is also clearly there when any person is locked up in any environment behind bars, such as a wing with a dynamic security regime, let alone in a cell, without the possibility of making more than a few steps, or dozens of steps, freely without being physically blocked by doors, walls and bars:

What is prison after all? All those people behind bars. It is unbearable to see all these people locked in their cells. It is a very heavy emotional experience, I feel, to be tough and masculine and all that. Yet, I now feel that my psychological well-being is under assault. I’ve really had enough. I cannot stand all this.

(field note)

I am not sure anymore what I was precisely thinking about when I wrote that note, yet now I continuously reason not only about the officers’ performance of the use of force, but also about the embodiment of coercion in architectures, spaces and design. The cell could be the prototype of the coercive space. It is a small closed place where persons are locked in coercively, using force if necessary (if they do not want to do it docilely every time they must return to it, something usually occurring at least twice a day).

The centrality of ‘doing’ coercion, and coercion as such, and their more or less suffuse presence in almost any aspect of the everyday life inside, has clearly emerged in different moments of the research. Not only in the ethnographic observation by which I perceived it bodily and psychologically and have often be affected by it (*infra*, Chapter 9), but also, yet in different ways, in the informal and formal interviews with the prisoners and the staff members, either custodial or medical, I conducted during the ethnography.

## ‘This is a punitive institution’: rhetoric discourse versus war stories

A security-oriented hegemonic local officers’ culture was quite evident. That is hardly surprising taking into account that some officers have clearly stated that ‘their’ institution has long been considered to be, and still would be, a punitive institution where at least some of the most difficult ‘dangerous and violent’ inmates would be sent to as a ‘punishment’ for breaching the rules in more rehabilitative-oriented institutions. Whether or not the reason to be sent to Reggio Emilia would occasionally be punishment, something *explicitly and strongly denied by a few senior officers and by managers*, in practice, I quite often witnessed very ‘difficult’ prisoners arriving there from more rehabilitative-oriented institutions. Those new ‘difficult’ prisoners were also likely to create more problems shortly after arrival. Whether this was a consequence or cause of the alleged punitive reputation of that facility is still unclear to me.

However, some officers’ interviews, and many prisoners’ ones, disclosed that the ‘normal’ welcome to the prisoners in that facility for many years until recently (less than five years ago or so) would have been to be tightly constrained to bed for a week or so for no reason (video recorded interview with a senior officer in which he explicitly asked to show his face to the reader, although I did not do it).

The area manager completely contested this interpretation based on shared understanding from below, by saying that *‘punitive institutions do not exist in Italy’*. The institutional role of the manager and the formality of the interview setting, as well as the video recording, might have informed his formal and lawful version of reality. Talking to me, in fact, he was performing a public communication with a researcher. It is also likely, on the other hand, that officers speaking to the researcher might have emphasised old legends and ‘war stories’ by telling their stories in a colourful and rhetorical way to display their previous powerfulness, masculinity and position of power constrained by almost any unaccountability. However, I am not sure whether or not to dismiss the interpretation I got from below since it has been confirmed by some keepers and kept. I would at least consider it to be one among different partial representations of the shared perception (or truth) of that situation from below. It is also worth considering that, according to [De Vito \(2009\)](#), over the 1960s and 1970s, prisoners would usually be transferred from one prison to another as punishment in

Italy. Some institutions had a strong punitive reputation: Volterra, Pianosa, Porto Azzurro, and others.

The Ministry of Justice, and in particular the DAP (Department of the Penitentiary Administration), policies have been addressing and challenging this first-line officer culture straightforwardly for many years in different ways (e.g. by recruiting two higher-level personnel of the prison officer chain of command among people with a university degree, with better knowledge and sensibility about social issues and punishment, and no previous role in any law enforcement agency). Yet, paradoxically, most new rank and file officers, in order to become prison officers, must show on their CV to have served in the army for at least one or two years, possibly in peacekeeping international missions.

All in all, governors and high-ranking officers are often much more attuned than base-grade officers to such critical issues as human rights, personnel training, staff's accountability, decency, prisoners' work, and so on. Unfortunately, base-grade officers live together with prisoners, day in, day out, on the wings and do not have any serious training to help them effectively change their taken-for-granted attitude. Moreover, in Italy, many officers still tend to live in the prison, doing so to have more possibility of being allowed to return to their families, very often in the south of Italy or the two main islands, Sardinia and Sicily. By doing so, officers tend not to integrate with the local community culture where the facility is situated, nor do they tend to invest so much in their job (Buffa 2013b), remaining trapped in their local colleagues' prison officer culture and life.

That cultural gulf between the high-ranking and low-ranking officers is something that prisons have in common with other bureaucratic organisations. That cultural gulf was neither fully challenged nor appreciated by either party, particularly not by low-ranking officers, who would often contest new do-gooders' attitudes imbued in their superordinate (higher-ranking officers, governors and area managers), contrasting them with the well-known hard reality the wing officers would know all too well. Officers, more often than not, would prefer the 'less eligibility' rhetoric rather than the new rehabilitative-oriented ones proposed by department managers.

Inmates and psychiatric patients, both Italian and foreign nationals, were locked in 'their' cells, often with another prisoner, for a certain amount of hours per day (usually 20). On living within cell confinement, both Shalev (2009) and Rhodes (2004),

each writing from their own perspectives, have published illuminating pages. Whenever each of them had the right of being out of his cell, for any reason, he would be still trapped in a larger but still very limited coercive space and architecture (Jewkes and Johnston 2013), the ‘hardware of the prison system’ (Shalev 2009: 60), to which he was granted escorted or non-escorted access. Moreover, he was also constrained by his ‘classification’, as well as by the available network of possible interactions, available goods and prison routines – and in the particular histories and chains of (previous) interactions that had already occurred in the past between the keepers and the kept, embedding in many prisoners a particular reputation.

Despite the long-standing dilemma between coercion and rehabilitation recalled above, in Italy, de facto, managerial rules, regulations and officers’ practices are imbued in a culture of control deeply grounded on the power differential between the keepers and the kept. Over the last two decades or so, the Italian criminal justice system’s approach to detention has been changing significantly. During the last year, a crucial rethinking of the prison system has been on its way. The Ministry of Justice has organised something that we might call a *think tank* made of experts and professionals to reform the Prison Rule and the prison system thoroughly. Yet, it is unclear whether or not will it have any impact on the governance and legislation on prison issues.<sup>4</sup>

## Me, entering the coercive institution: writing about my perception of the claustrophobic architectural route to the coercive environment of the wing

Before turning to Chapter 6, in which implicit coercion is unpacked, I will attempt to tell narratively *what it meant to me as a researcher* entering prison both with a formal external recognised status and concurrently with my own body. I try, by doing so, to share an ‘authentic description’ of my day-to-day experiences and emotions.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

## Vignette 5.2

Entering the custodial complex is not a neutral emotion. It is neither an easy nor a quick walk. I have to pass *three main supervised gates* and approximately 20 barred doors,<sup>5</sup> one after the other, before entering ‘*my*’ detention wing.<sup>6</sup> First of all, to enter the complex, I must pass through a gate called ‘Block-House’.<sup>7</sup> It’s the first checkpoint that must be crossed to enter the low security area of the custodial field. An eight-metre-high white fence protects the perimeter of the complex.

By showing my documents to the prison officer at the Block-House, the first security check procedures begin. The officer has to control each visitor’s access permission level and check its validity; mine is OK. Afterwards, he gives me, just as he would do with each authorised visitor, a particular appropriate badge. A green one is for those who are not allowed to proceed to the following gate, and are therefore compelled to stay within the low security area. He gives me a red one since I am authorised to enter the security area. That area is secured by an impressive 10-metre-high concrete wall, which is controlled by both CCTV cameras and sentinels walking on it.

Normally, the visitor’s role is clearly written on the badge (lawyer, magistrate, visitor, teacher, and so on). However, after a couple of weeks in the field, I am hardly ever given any badge. They all seem to know me now. ‘You don’t need it, do you?’

Here in Reggio Emilia, only one entrance – the Block-House – is available to enter the custodial complex. The keepers, the kept, the visitors, the prisoners’ visitors, and so on, all need to pass by the same gate to enter the facility. Normally, not many visitors would enter or leave the institution on a daily basis here. On the contrary, in larger institutions, such as the bigger ones in Rome, Milan and Turin, to recall but a few, different gates are provided to clearly separate at least those entering the prison as prisoners’ visitors from all the others (staff, volunteers, politicians, journalists, and so on).

Three buildings are located within the minimum security area between the white metal fence and the concrete wall that isolates the security areas. Those three facilities are even visible from the outside of the institution through the fences. The first

facility is an independent two-floor building built near the fence, just a few steps away from the main entrance (Block-House). It is completely separated from the main custodial complex. It hosts two very different groups of persons: one group includes the prisoners kept in custody with a particular Italian probation measure called *semi liberty* (art. 48 of the Penitentiary Act).<sup>8</sup> Those prisoners live in a low security wing on one side of the building. The other side of the same building hosts the ‘transferring and escorting’ prison officers’ team (in Italian, *Nucleo traduzioni e piantonamento*)<sup>9</sup> that has its offices on the opposite side of the security area for the *semiliberi*. The two remaining buildings within that low security area are leaning on one side of the concrete wall securing the security area. They are situated just in front of the main entrance to prison, yet none of the two has any other privileged passage through the wall (to the best of my knowledge) to directly enter the secure areas. Only one gate in the concrete wall allows anybody with the appropriate security clearances and day permit to enter (and to exit) the security area beyond it. This is the second supervised gate, called the central gate (in Italian, *portineria centrale*).

One of the remaining two buildings, a two-floor office facility, hosts the governor and all his secretary staff, as well as other civil and custodial personnel who hardly ever have to work on the wing (the external team; see Chapter 4). On the ground floor of that building, a quite wide, shabby lobby is used both as a ‘check-in’ point for prisoners’ visitors who have previously booked a visit and as a delivering point where visitors (and other persons, such as volunteers) can leave any allowed goods to staff, who would first check it out, and then would bring it inside (mainly clothes and food items), and eventually would deliver it to the specific inmate who was the recipient of that particular good. The other facility is a three-floor building. The bar (in Italian, *spaccio*), the canteen (in Italian, *mensa*), the prison officers’ unions offices and the prison officers’ meeting room (in Italian, *sala conferenza*) are all located at the ground level of that facility, one next to the other. Above, on the two remaining upper floors of the facility, officers living in the barracks would share a double room.

I have a red badge and I am heading towards either the prison or the asylum. I need to arrive at the central gate. Giorgio is working there with two colleagues of his. All the prison officers and other enforcing agency officers must leave their fire-weapons there.<sup>10</sup> Officers’ protective equipment, such as riot helmet and riot shields and other

riot gears can only be used with a special governor written authorisation and are stored in that same area. The emergency squad might exceptionally use them if authorised to do so in exceptional circumstances. All those equipment are stored at the central gate as well. Its use is strictly regulated and controlled. To be honest, some 'tools' are alleged 'secretly' hidden near the wing just in case a senior officer told me, yet they are very rarely used.

At the central gate, the identity of each visitor should be double-checked. The officer knows me, and directly scribbles my name, surname, researcher, and the entrance time, 6.40 a.m., on an old paper register from the 1990s, transformed ad hoc into a 'visitors book'. Eventually, the officer would let me enter the security area without escort, due to the level of my clearance.

Giorgio is also responsible for securing the gate by stopping those who are not allowed to cross it either in one direction or in the other by all means. Even calling the emergency team is an option. He should also keep the records updated in the registers provided, and should also politely order each and every visitor and staff to put all forbidden items not previously authorised into a locker provided: weapons, cell phones, laptops, cameras, hard drives, USB pens, medicines, umbrellas, knives, forks, spoons, chewing gum, and everything not expressly authorised cannot be taken beyond that gate. Each staff member would start his or her shift there by sweeping their badge before the shift start time.

I always feel uncomfortable at this point. Passing through the walls is like entering a new dimension. The walls are a powerful symbolic and physical device separating those on both sides of them. Moreover, leaving my personal belongings, such as my phone, my keys and my umbrella, has a strong impact on me. I feel stripped of part of my identity and endorsing a role. Doing ethnography in prison is quite different than doing it in a public square. Our presence must be justified time and again. Until the end, I was asked by any new officer or staff who I was and why I was doing it. I feel this coercive space on my body. I have not even entered the security area and I have passed so many barred doors. I have to continuously follow what they tell me to do. I can move freely back and forth, yet I feel constrained and I try to imagine passing by here escorted with no possibility to choose where to go. I feel that I have no way to negotiate anything here. One officer I do not know tells me a bit rudely, 'any item entering inside [the secure area] must be authorised! No authorisation, just leave it in

the closet. No discussion'. I feel the distance between me and the man in uniform, who had not even listened to me and simply mechanically repeated his script. I experience how cold rules can be when enforced without empathy, or at least politeness. Moreover, at this stage, I feel imbued in a physical and organisational structure of power that overwhelms me. I feel that my freedom of movement could be stopped in a second for no reason, and that feels awful. This feeling shades away slowly over time. It never disappears completely, though.

Afterwards, I simply keep on walking forward through the only corridor I can see in front of me, and suddenly arrive at a secured electric door, a blue one, just like all the other barred doors in this facility. It is closed. It is the last door securing the entrance in the corridor, which goes from one side of the concrete wall to the other, allowing people to enter the security area coming from the low security one, and vice versa. That corridor is controlled with CCTV cameras. One officer opens the first door via a remote at the beginning of the corridor, and in turn the next one allows me to enter the secure open area. At that stage, the two *secure* detention facilities,<sup>11</sup> the asylum and prison's secure detention wing of the *Istituti penitenziari di Reggio Emilia*, would be less than 40 metres away. Vehicles are normally not allowed to proceed beyond that area, yet some personnel or visitors might have some specific authorisation to do so.<sup>12</sup>

Police, Carabinieri and any other Italian law enforcement agencies arriving to bring an arrestee inside or to conduct a police interrogation would just park in that open secure area anywhere. Prison officers' vehicles would also be parked there in order to collect sentenced or defendant prisoners to be escorted to the outside of custodial institutions, to other facilities, to the court, to the hospital or anywhere else.

In order to continue my journey towards the detention wing, I head on towards the internal gate. Anybody intending to proceed through the internal gate, myself included, has to ring a bell. I do it, then I am electronically searched. Still new security checks and new identity control. It is really exhausting. Although my identity has often been checked by those who are supposed to be doing so, whose duty it is to control the gate, I have never been searched, let alone strip-searched. I was granted trust, or it appeared to me so, over the entire ethnography. I follow a long corridor ending in a rotonda.



The complex general commander's office and the administrative logistic team's offices (in Italian, *ufficio matricola*) are just a few steps away from there. The prisoners' kitchen is nearby as well. I turn left, following the arrow indicating the OPG (to the right, I would go to prison: CC).

At the rotonda, one officer should be on duty in the booth, policing the area. Now there is nobody, though.

To enter the forensic psychiatric hospital, I must cross two more doors controlled via remote by CCTV cameras. Above the door at the entrance of the facility, a label reads 'Ospedale Psichiatrico Giudiziario'.

Entering either the psychiatric hospital or the prison, one would automatically arrive in two symmetrically designed buildings by going upstairs.

I am going to the asylum now. I enter again through yet another long corridor. Walking towards the entrance of the detention wing area, I walk by in front of a corridor where the local commander, the 'security manager's office and other offices are located nearby (i.e. the infirmary, the educators' office, and so on). In both institutions, the gate to the detention wings' area is just in front of either the prison or the asylum commander's office, and it is controlled by a prison officer in a security box who would regulate the movement to and from the detention wings area by opening and closing an electronically controlled barred door.

A label hangs next to the door; it reads 'Detention wings' (in Italian, *Area sezioni detentive*). That is the last of the *four main supervised doors* I need to cross each time I do my ethnography on the wing. In the asylum, this gate is called 'first-block' gate (in Italian, *portineria primo blocco*). In prison, accordingly, it is called 'second-block' gate.

There are two wings on each floor, with an entrance controlled by the wing officer. Moving from one wing to the other on the same floor is a very short walk. To go upstairs or downstairs to another wing, a visitor must, in fact should, use the elevator. The prisoners instead must use the stairs, either escorted or not, depending on the security level of each particular prisoner, and also on the discretionary decision of each particular wing officer.

To go to the closed wing where I do my ethnography, I go upstairs and turn right at the first floor. Normally, the door is open, and it is possible to enter the wing straight away if allowed to do so by both the security clearance and the 'wing manger'. Today, it is closed, and I call the officer to be let in. Nicola welcomes me on the wing. He looks tired and does not seem to be talkative at all now. He is finishing his night shift and only wants to go to sleep.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

I now turn to a few coercive routines that enact in practice the 'bureaucratization of control' (Shalev 2009).

## The bureaucratisation of control on the wing and a few coercive routines

At about 9.00 a.m., any inmates can be sent to the yard or to other recreational, working (if available) or educational activities. This is the first large-scale routinary operation that the wing manager officer doing the first shift must organise, enforce and control in the morning, 'giving the inmates' to the escort team. Inmates who do not intend to go to the yards (*andare all'aria*) are allowed to stay inside their own cells, but there is a clear informal accord that they will not 'stress staff with unnecessary requests' over the next two hours. All non-urgent requests will be taken into consideration only afterwards, when all inmates are back from the yard and in their cells again. It is an officer's responsibility, before sending any inmate to the yard, to check whether or not any particularly critical situation is known.

### The wing register and the wing cell board

Starting a new day at work on a prison' wing can be particularly heavy for those who are too tired to do their job. It may mean starting a shift in which one would only or mainly be interacting with '*camosci*' (prisoners). At the asylum, however, the situation would be quite different, and almost any officer starting his own shift would first greet his colleague 'in white' working at the wing's infirmary. Then, he would sometimes

take a coffee with him while updating each other on work issues, as well as doing small talks. Lastly, he would return to his box, starting his 'new day doing time', yet in the company of other staff, not only prisoners.

Before entering his 'box', the prison officer would probably neither answer nor consider any of the multiple requests prisoners would be whispering, asking or screaming to him, by saying to prisoners to wait until he is 'ready to start [working]'. Once, I heard an officer – smiling at me – say to a prisoner he was still a 'ghost' and not actually on duty yet, requesting, in other words, that particular prisoner to wait a minute or so before being considered.

The officer doing 'the first' shift could be told by his colleague finishing 'the night [shift]' that a few prisoners were already out of their own cells. That might have occurred for a bunch of different reasons and would also appear on the *wing register* each officer must fill in continuously, in which all prisoners' movements must be clearly reported dynamically. They would write, still on paper with a pen, something like 'exit: 6.30; name: Prisoner Giorgio Bianchi (not a real prisoner name); [to work in the] kitchen', and all the other movement within the institution by which a prisoner is required to exit his detention wing. That register is also used to register the movements of any prisoner exiting the wing for any reason, such as to go to the yard for exercise, to the lawyer downstairs, to the dentist on the ground floor, and so on.

The wing officer is in fact responsible for the movement of all inmates from the wing to the outside of the wing, and must report it on the register accordingly any time any prisoner enters into or exits from the wing.

A '*wing cell board*' instead hangs inside the officers' box and visually represents the 'structural' situation *hic at nunc* in the wing: it particularly displays where any prisoner is 'housed', and in which cell he must be locked in, and is not changed as frequently as the dynamic register above. On the wing cell board, one or two names of prisoners are placed next to the corresponding cell (from Cell 1 to Cell 25). That is the structural configuration of the wing population at any particular time. It does not change any time any inmates enter or exit the wing to perform their normal routinary tasks. Each prisoner's name label on the wing cell board is attributed to his particular cell number (from 1 to 25). Usually, most prisoners remain in the same cell, at least for a few months (yet occasionally only for a few days). Therefore, one can read pretty much the same names on the wing cell board over a long period of time. Prisoners' name

labels appear on, or disappear from, the wing cell board for different reasons. It may occur each time a new prisoner is allocated to the wing, coming either from liberty or from another facility (i.e. prison, court or hospital); is moved from one cell to another within the same wing; is moved to another wing within the facility; is moved to another institution temporarily (to the hospital or to court, or to another prison); is transferred to another institution permanently; is returned to liberty; or, in the worst case, when he ends his own life behind bars, either due to natural causes or as a consequence of fatal self-harm. Each inmate's label – with the prisoner's surname typed or handwritten on it – is positioned either in one of the 25 cells numbered from 1 to 25, or in another position provided on the board (constraint bed, hospital, process, and so on).

Filling in the board was a task performed without particular emphasis by the wing officer; it was just routine. Yet, occasionally problems emerged when a new foreign inmate with a 'strange' name was allocated one of the cells. Normally, officers would call the registration office (in Italian, *ufficio matricola*) to check the correct spelling, particularly when foreign nationals were at stake, but sometimes they did not care and sometimes names were simply written incorrectly. On a few occasions, the officer wrote the name incorrectly and did not mind too much about it until someone else realised the mistake and corrected it accordingly. Occasionally, when a new prisoner with a 'strange sounding' family name arrived onto the wing, officers and nurses would laugh about such a strange name with one another. That would more likely occur if the name could be easily misspelled (or misread), attributing to it a secondary meaning (i.e. with an explicit sexual reference), or if a prisoner had a name whose meaning was related to sexuality. Often, then, the nickname was used to refer to the prisoner, who would accept it docilely with a smile of circumstance. I saw only few prisoners resisting this process, and their resistance was neither appreciated nor understood by the staff, who would consider them unable to accept a friendly joke, displaying not only little professionalism, but also little human empathy with the newly arrived prisoner. On a couple of occasions, a handwritten label with the prisoner's nickname that had been written by the officer was hanging next to the prisoner's cell door, as a temporary (unauthorised) replacement of the label with the real prisoner's family name that was supposed to be there. Officers would frame such an officer's malpractice as a 'joke'; that 'joke' would occasionally trigger a smile or a laugh in those passing by. The effect that that malpractice might produce on vulnerable prisoners was not taken into account at all.

One officer even put the nickname in the name label next to the door, and the psychiatrist laughed loudly when he saw it. Some stories were shared with me on different occasions about ‘funny jokes’ performed with inmates’ names ‘back then’.

Something completely different has also occurred. One patient pretended to have a different identity than his real one. He did not accept his own identity, pretending to be called something different instead. The street-level bureaucrats, in other words the wing officers, accepted his version of the story and allowed him to change his own name on his own cell’s label accordingly, and he really appreciated it. He was not the guy who killed both his parents as the sentence declared. He would simply pretend to be Joseph, a Turkish professor, who, due to the condition of incarceration, was unable to speak Turkish any more, while speaking Italian perfectly.

## Wing officers checking inmates’ incompatibility with one another

Vignette 5.1a, which introduced this chapter, shows the worst critical situation for moving inmates together is the ‘*prisoners’ incompatibility*’ with one another. The officer must check, in other words, whether or not any inmate has a ‘*ban on meeting*’ (*divieto d’incontro*) for any reason with any other inmate who is supposed to go to the same yard or who could be met on the way to the yard. Failing to consider this kind of ban seriously, or avoiding to do the checks accordingly, could possibly lead to problems, and even to (the construction of) a so-called critical event. Normally, in fact, these bans are the disciplinary ‘stick’ of a prior serious fight between two or more particular prisoners. If the ban is between one prisoner and another that could likely be found on the way to the yard (i.e. passing next to an open wing), one escorting officer would move ahead of the group going to the yard and, if necessary, order the prisoner ‘in the way’ to ‘leave the area’ temporarily. The escort team would follow afterwards. If the ban is between particular inmates that would go to the same yard, only one inmate would be allowed to go to the yard in the morning while another would remain in his cell and go to the yard later on. Each prisoner who cannot go to the yard with another always has the possibility of going alone to a smaller yard. Each single time in which more ‘bans’ are contemporarily in the picture, it may cause an *organisational issue*, or at least some extra work, given the very few human resources available. In fact, the right to go to the yards must be guaranteed to any prisoner, with only very limited and

lawfully regulated exceptions. The right to do exercise was always granted consistently. Not doing so would cause 'serious trouble' most of the time.

Said differently, each prisoner has the right to go to the yard twice a day, if necessary, isolated from other fellow inmates. Yet, there is neither enough personnel to safely escort all these isolated inmates, nor enough individual yards in which to put those inmates that must do exercise alone. The result of the scarce resources available is the unintended but rational consequence of *reducing the ban of meeting to a minimum*. This clearly, to a lesser or greater extent, might jeopardise the prisoners' and officers' safety during transfer and recreation.

Checking and organising the transfer, negotiating with prisoners about who would go first and where, and preparing the groups of inmates to be escorted to the yards by fellow officers is the duty of the officer managing the wing, and it is not an easy task at all. Nor does it come without responsibilities.

### Escorting 'difficult prisoners' to the yard

Different prisoners are allowed to do different types of recreation on the yard. There are three types of yards where prisoners could be allowed to do exercise (or go to the yard). First, prisoners in judiciary, sanitary or disciplinary isolation must stay alone on an empty concrete yard, each, theoretically, controlled by one officer. Second, prisoners on basic regime because of their 'dangerousness' or critical and unpredictable behaviour, as well as decompensated psychiatric patients, must go to west yard (*passaggio ovest*), a concrete empty standard 'big' yard where a small group of eight to ten prisoners maximum can 'mind their own business', as well as clarify disputes, often fighting with one another, more or less severely. I saw many fights occurring there. Disputes and fights are 'business as usual' down there. Normally, the right to go back to the wing before the yard time in the west yard is finished is not granted to any inmates, unless all agree to return to the wing before and the officers accept it. The officer escorting the group would clarify that rule to the prisoners each and every time before going downstairs to the yard. In practice, the prisoner with a higher status on the yard have a stake in the decision.

Returning back from the yard to the wing before the time is finished is usually granted any time the request is 'collectively decided by all prisoners on the yard and requested clearly to the officer without any singular complaint'. In practice, this

normally means that all prisoners must return to the wing whenever the prisoner higher in the prison hierarchy on the wing decides to go upstairs. Any prisoner can test and publicly assert his dominance on the fellow inmates at the yard with him by urging all other fellow prisoners to accept to follow him (and the officer heading them) and return to the wing prematurely. ‘Low-ranking’ prisoners would never dare (or be allowed by peers) to try to urge all other prisoners in the yard to finish their exercise ahead of schedule. On the contrary, ‘very high-ranking’ prisoners would dare to do it each and every time they saw fit as a way to show their power to their peers and to the officer patrolling them. However, ‘very high-ranking’ prisoners would do it infrequently; to lose exercise time is very costly for each and every prisoner. The request to return in advance to the wing is usually not abused, even by a prisoner with a very high reputation among his peers. Fellow prisoners on the yard would usually agree to the rewarded prisoners deciding to go upstairs most of the time. However, prisoners might intend to challenge the authority of a peer and start a dispute, occasionally a fight.

Lastly, the third way to do yard time is going to the recreational wing. A few prisoners kept in the forensic hospital closed wing are allowed to go to the recreational wing. There, a bar, an open library, theatre activities and another ‘open’ yard are freely accessible, normally to those inmates that have to be tested before being transferred to an open wing or who are already living on such open wings.

### Counting, lock ups, and checking locks, bolts and bars

At each shift change, a group of internal officers must count the inmates actually locked up in their cells or present in any particular wing or area of the facility. In fact, counting the inmates should be performed at least six times a day (3.00 a.m., 8.00 a.m., 12.00 p.m., 4.00 p.m., 10.00 p.m and 12.00 a.m.). This is done by each particular officer in a particular way. The majority do it very professionally and are fully aware of the stress that this security procedure repeatedly causes to those vulnerable inmates being counted (the stressfulness of this procedure was pointed out to me by one senior officer and some inmates). Others do it using impolite manners – or treating inmates unprofessionally – while counting them, causing sorrow and stress.

Normally, entering the wing, the officer would shout ‘counting’ (in Italian, *conta*), urging the inmates to be visible in their cells. Although, in principle, all inmates are required to move to the cell’s door or to be visible, some officers are more flexible

than others. In the asylum, some inmates would do what they were required to, while others would not even be aware of what was happening and would continue to mind their own business or would resist, pretending they had not heard the shout. The officer would start from cell 25 and go backwards to cell 1, or vice versa, occasionally making small talk with the kept but consistently refusing to give them any information or respond to any enquiry that might arise while counting. Any staff member I escorted during counting took his duty very seriously and did not go to the next cell until he was really sure that the person was there, and, more importantly, still alive. One officer explained to me:

we are supposed to go back and forth continuously in the wing [to check inmates]. That's our duty; that was what we were told to do when I began working in prison. My boss would come to my 'box' suddenly checking my chair with his hand to feel if I had been working or sitting all the time. This work was taken very seriously years ago. Now, you saw it {.} how they work [the young officers] {.}. Now we have to check whether prisoners are alive at least at any shift change [exaggerating to emphasise the difference and talking a bit rhetorically about the good old times]. Remember that for any officer, to find a cold dead body is a serious problem that any friendly doctor, or any lovely nurse, could never cover up! {.}. It must be at least a bit warm still {.} otherwise it would be a big shit!

(field note, summary)

This kind of conversation was not an exception on the wing. Although initially shocking, by staying there I must admit I became quite anesthetised. Possibly, at the beginning of the ethnography, my presence might have affected those dialogues in one way or another. It was really difficult to comprehend how cynical officers could be talking about other people's lives and deaths with respect to their own accountability or, better, unaccountability and daily routines.

Checking the bars is another security check that must be performed early in the morning and then time and again during the 24 hours, yet only high security prisoners (in Italian, *alta sicurezza*; AS1, AS2 and AS3 and 41 bis) cell and door bars must be checked at any given time.



Each time any officer arrived at the wing to check bars, he would hold an iron 'baton' (an instrument only used for this purpose, and locked up downstairs in a locker otherwise) in his hand, and would occasionally joke about it with very low-ranking convicts. 'Take your dirty hands off of me or else {.}' could be an example of the 'jokes' an officer could exchange with friendly docile inmates, smiling and often receiving a smile in return.

Both checking the bars and counting inmates was performed consistently, almost in the same way by each officer and yet, again, with different levels of empathy and humanity. I observed this during my ethnography, each and every time with no exception at all. Counting inmates and checking the bars were considered to be 'proper officers' jobs', by which officers avoided escapes and, more importantly, clearly signalled and enforced their own role and authority on prisoners while enforcing institutional coercion and control.

In order to check the bars, a prison officer would let the prisoner out of the cell escorted by a colleague of his. Checking the bars would occur with a precise set of seemingly standard consistent movements. First, he would bang his 'baton' vertically from the top to the bottom, rattling three times to test all the horizontal bars. Then, he would check the vertical bars by banging the 'baton' from left to right and from right to left, time and again, for two times or so. Once '*la battitura*' was finished, the officer would exit the cell and tell the inmate that everything was OK, and then move to the next cell. Sometimes a 'joke' about escaping would be performed by either the officer or the prisoner. Sometimes a rhetoric docile smile exchange would occur. Other times, some resentment was displayed by prisoners to the officers doing it.

Some inmates told me that they hated that procedure (as well as counting) because they felt untrusted and humiliated by the officers doing it. It was clearly a strong symbolic way to enforce domination and coercion from one side to the other a few times a day. However, despite the terrible psychological effects that might have on prisoners, those inmates whose doors were checked really had a very serious criminal curricula, and this was simply a lawful standard control the institution must do by law. That duty was mandatory and was normally performed very professionally. One experienced officer told me in an interview that he knew very well how to hurt inmates 'without doing nothing wrong' (meaning nothing unlawful) when closing the cell door or checking bars:

It all depends on how you do it; you can really make them suffer seriously {.} you can destroy them [psychologically] if you only wish to; you can do that simply by closing their barred door in one way or another. You can close it politely, normally, or you can bang it disrespectfully. They get it clearly; I know they do.

(video-recorded interview with an officer)

However, these procedures have almost each and every time been performed professionally in front of me. Yet, some more care and empathy for the persons in custody would surely benefit the persons in custody.

## Notes

- {ensp}1 Prisoners trying to come off drugs are given methadone, with distribution strictly regulated by doctors.
- {ensp}2 In Italy, the higher level of control is exerted on high-ranking organised crime prisoners, who are usually in custody in specific prisons (or wings) with a so-called 41bis regime.
- {ensp}3 Implicit coercion, as vague it might seem to the reader, is an idea I embodied inside through my participation and through the many dialogues I had with the keepers and the kept. Of course, neither prison officers nor prisoners described it to me as I present it, yet the dialogues I had with them all chimed quite well with the emotions I felt inside, forming the ground to this idea.
- {ensp}4 See '*Gli stati Generali dell'azione penale*' (in Italian): [www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg\\_2\\_19.wp](http://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_2_19.wp).
- {ensp}5 A video of the road to the inside, uncut, is visible privately on demand. It is not authorised for publication in any form yet.
- {ensp}6 During fieldwork, participants hardly ever referred to the asylum ward in that way. Instead, they referred to it using 'wing'. I will do the same, therefore using wing to refer to any area where asylum patients' and prisoners' cells (or 'rooms') are located.
- {ensp}7 That gate has that English name. That's the only word used to refer to it.
- {ensp}8 'The sentenced person can spend a part of the day out of the prison in order to work or to carry out any activity that is useful for his social reinstatement. It can be granted after a certain period of the prison sentence, depending on the seriousness of the crime perpetrated' ([www.euprobationproject.eu/national\\_detail.php?c=IT](http://www.euprobationproject.eu/national_detail.php?c=IT)).
- {ensp}9 'Nucleo scorte e traduzioni' also does security service for the Ministry of Justice's staff, yet in this ethnography I only saw them work with prisoners.

- 10 Guns can only be brought inside under very exceptional circumstances, clearly stated by the law.
- 11 Another less secure wing is in the area next to the governor's building.
- 12 Private or public companies providing maintenance services, bringing food to the kitchen, and collecting the garbage with bin lorries usually move on towards the back of those facilities.

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6

Symbolic and credible threat of force

This chapter investigates the dynamic of prison officers' threats of force in so-called 'critical events' through observation and ethnographic interviews. It provides a description of how threatening interactions occur in practice routinely on the wing. It describes the general traits of the recurrent particular situations and, concurrently, provides a few particularly reflexive *thick descriptions* of threatening force by presenting some vignettes describing a few particular occurrences in some detail.

Prison officers' jobs, as I have previously shown, are in fact intrinsically *also* about using force. 'All prisons are, in the last instance, coercive institutions, even if naked power is not immediately visible in their everyday operation' (Crewe 2009: 80). Yet, Kauffman (1988), Bosworth (2014), Liebling *et al.* (2011) and others have also clearly argued that prison officers' work, and even patrolling the wing (Liebling 2000), is mainly about soft power and psychological power (Crewe 2009). Non-custodial staff members such as educators, social assistants, chaplains, nurses and psychiatrists also have a stake in those power dynamics.

Focusing on prison officers here, it can be argued that they use both formal and informal, positive or negative, sanctions in their relationships with prisoners in an effort to implement the rules and regulations governed by a system of Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP), also known as the 'stick and carrot system', introduced in the Italian prison rules in 1975. Moreover, officers often rely on negotiation and 'on informal "tactics of talk" {...} to achieve compliance' (Liebling and Tait 2006: 104). Unfortunately, compliance is not always achieved through negotiation, and other forms of control enter the picture.

Soft power and 'chatting' are crucial ingredients in the power dynamic (*infra*, Chapter 3), yet I would restate that the use of force is very likely to be, and in my case it was, the main frame (in Goffman's sense) within which all interactions occurred within the custodial institution. Negotiations would be implicitly reinforced by the very possibility to enforce them physically by threatening or using force. This chapter shall empirically focus in particular on *threatening the use of force* either *symbolically* or *credibly*.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter begins by introducing the discretionary construction of a critical event. Then, it describes threatening coercion in general. Next, it introduces prison

officers' threats. Lastly, it defines and describes both the prison officers' symbolic and credible threats of the use of force as recurrently observed in the field.

## The construction of a 'critical event'

'Critical events' are defined here as particular conducts, behaviours or interactions that have been formally labelled, or treated as such in practice by officers dealing with them. By either formally writing a report on the critical event register, or by informally calling for a security manager's intervention on the wing, the wing officer (or another senior officer on his or her behalf) would transform any day-to-day 'normal wing's problem' into a critical event.

One senior prison officer told me in a conversation on the wing that:

If we treated all serious events as critical events, writing each and every one of them up all the time, we would always be busy doing paperwork and not doing our job dealing with prisoners [officers resisted paperwork strongly, considering it outside of the important duties any prison officer ought to be involved in; this might be interpreted in the light of the Italian prison culture based on a de facto low level of accountability]. Violence and problems are particularly frequent here, as you know now. We only write problems up in the register when there is a good reason to do it, mainly to be ready to respond to an allegation of mistreatment or to open an allegation against a prisoner who assaulted us and was restrained using force in return. Well, once it was very unlikely that a prisoner could sue any of us; now they sometimes dare to do that.

(field note, summary of an officer's comment during an ethnographic interview on the wing)

Reading the quote above, it appears that any official data on critical events, at least in Italy, are likely to misrepresent the situation, or at least to produce a very biased interpretation that, despite its numeric rethoric grounded on quantitative data, is hardly ever able to offer any sound interpretation of the reality it ought to represent. It is

also clear that officers must interpret their day-to-day reality through their personal and shared understanding of the situation, thereby deciding whether or not to frame (Goffman 1974) any particular occurrence into a particular critical event, and that they do it with discretion (see below). Yet, as shown in Chapter 3, it is important to remember that discretion ought to be bounded by correct discerning rather than arbitrary judgement.

Each prison officer on duty on the wing is continuously potentially involved in more or less violent situations and is therefore likely to respond to them either by turning a blind eye or constructing a particular episode into a particular critical event. The quote above suggests that one context characterised by a low number of problems is more likely than a very problematic one to frame any particular occurrences as a critical event. In very problematic contexts, instead, officers are more likely to turn a blind eye even to more serious problems. There, only a few of these serious episodes would be constructed as critical events and treated accordingly.

The likelihood that any particular occurrence would be transformed into a ‘critical event’ was not a neutral process, and would not only be the outcome of the routinary discretionary enforcement of rules guided by the ‘trained application of reason’ (Liebling *et al.* 2011: 147). Not only was it in fact related to the particular facility at stake, the intrinsic level of violence (or wrongness) of the particular situation at stake, but it was *also* linked, to a higher or lesser extent, to other factors, such as the prisoner’s status and reputation, as well as the previous chain of interactions in which a particular prisoner and a particular officer have been involved so far. Any prisoners’ violent behaviour, annoying attitude, bullying or even minor signs of protest – such as prisoners flooding a corridor with liquids or only banging a door intermittently – is more or less likely to be judged, if not be formally constructed and treated, as a critical event depending on both the prisoners involved in it and the prison officer on duty on the wing.

Prisoners’ status would influence the construction of many critical events in one way or another.<sup>2</sup> Prisoners with particularly low status in prison officers’ eyes were consistently treated differently from those at the top of the status hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> In order to refer to this different treatment related to status, I use the expression ‘*status magnet versus status shield*’.<sup>4</sup>

In my fieldwork, prisoners' acts of resistance, protests, provocations against officers, and even fights between inmates (but not assault of a prison officer) were often *prima facie* dealt with by either turning a blind eye, or adopting soft tools of negotiation (*infra*, Chapter 3). This would occur on a daily basis between the wing manager and the prisoners interacting with each other on the wing. Usually, negotiations would be reinforced by a 'high' grade officer – higher than the wing officers on the wing – entering the wing to 'have a talk' with the 'troublemaker' to calm the situation or to prevent another critical event from starting off again. This can be read as an example of 'peacemaking' (Liebling *et al.* 2011: 146). This would usually happen even before any situation would be officially defined, or simply treated *de facto* as a critical event. In other words, it is just routine. The next vignette<sup>5</sup> will describe one particular event to help the reader to unpack the contingencies and interactive interactions occurring in practice on such occasions. Despite the apparent thickness of the description, this is only a partial, positioned, biased and very synthetic representation of one particular chain of interactions.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.1

Pino has been calling the officers continuously this morning. The officer has been back and forth a few times already. He ping-pong'd from his box to the prison cell, where Pino's fellow prisoner is sleeping like nothing happened. 'Pino is continuously asking for the impossible this morning', the wing officer tells me, yet that's unusual to him. There must be something really troubling him. Normally, in fact, he does not behave like that. The officer, displaying a relaxed face, explains to him that the commander will not be able to come soon, unfortunately. He is simply too busy: 'no way to see him around here in the next few hours!'

Attila, the prison officer, is trying to call the commander anyway, doing it with his wireless phone, in front of Pino's cell, in order to display his own goodwill. I am wondering whether he is so soft simply because I am there next to him writing up notes. The commander does not even reply to Attila's call. Therefore, he confirms to

Pino what he had already said before: 'he will not come, I am so sorry for you'. Pino is only trying to solve a problem of his. He is not willing to create problems or to provoke the officer and steps back to his bed, sitting on it looking to the outside. Despite being comprehensive, Attila is also really bored having to stand up continuously to reply to the same question time and again. He is busy doing paperwork in his office and is unable to concentrate on doing it due to the continuous distractions coming from Pino and his fellow prisoners. One hour or so afterwards, Pino is starting to create problems by throwing a few small objects outside his cell: a little red book is now on the ground and two plastic bottles are in the way of anybody passing by in front of his cell. It is morning, the corridor is busy and Pino's protest is visible and audible on the wing. Turning a blind eye is not the best option anymore. The officer stands up, walks towards Pino and, once in front of him, shows him comprehension, expressing once again his serious intention to follow up his request and promising to take care of the issue, in order to let Pino meet with the commander as soon as possible. Pino appreciates Attila's engagement and kindness (which does not always characterise all officer-prisoner interactions), and thanks him in return. Pino even stresses his appreciation of the situation by not accepting a cigarette offered by the officer, saying, 'No worries, next time I'll take it. I just had one and I got money to buy them now. Thanks'.

The officer can finally return to his box now and complete his urgent paperwork in a few minutes.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

This vignette shows a humane prisoner-officer interaction. It shows one way in which one officer solved one dispute in practice, yet it does not necessarily refer to the most common type of interaction. Furthermore, despite its positive nature, that kind of humane interaction does not suffice all the time to avoid 'troubles'. Interactions are dynamic and can hardly ever be described in a few lines as if they were a static situation. They are better depicted as a process, just like I try doing by writing vignettes. I sometimes observed interactions starting similarly, but developing in very different ways indeed. Occurrences might become critical either due to a prisoner's decision not to accept any cooperation with the officer, thereby rejecting any justification to any set of affairs he does not appreciate, or for the prison officer's untrustworthy reputation.



Occasionally, an officer's display of indifference is also interpreted by a prisoner as the officer's unwillingness to take the prisoner's request seriously enough, and can induce the prisoner to 'create problems'. On other occasions, officers might have acted in such a way to be perceived as a provocation by the person in custody, thereby contributing to the production of the critical event.

Staying alongside with officers and accumulating stress simply by staying on the wing for many hours a day, moreover, I understood that taking all these amounts of requests seriously is daunting and can be draining for officers dealing with it day in, day out over months, or even years. Officers always have a list of things to do, and the prisoners' requests are on top of that. Often, prisoners are very vulnerable subjects (Buffa 2013b, 2015) with scarce economic and social capital, feeling alone and traumatised. Occasionally, a particular prisoner might be defined as a 'requester' by prison staff working on the wing. The label of 'requester' was not only commonly used by officers and other staff to refer to persons calling more than one time a day or so, but it soon also quickly became my interpretation of the situation as well (yet, I always resisted becoming native as much as I could).

Despite the obvious difficulties prison staff face working in such a difficult working environment, which also put social stigmas on the civil servants in uniform working in it (Fassin 2015),<sup>6</sup> it is worth saying that prison officers must not only get acquainted with the idea of prisoners' rights described by the law(s), rules and regulations, for how weird those rights might appear to officers, but they also ought to interiorise, if not incorporate them, in their daily practice since that is not the case at all so far.

## On discretion and far beyond: status magnet versus status shield

Although untangling the diverse dimensions impacting on discretion is out of scope here, it is worth saying that discretion emerged over the entire ethnography, in particular regarding prison officers' jobs, by which officers turn the law into practice (see also Liebling 2000).<sup>7</sup> Discretion is a structural dimension of the situation. Of course, discretion does not only apply to prison officers' jobs, but also to other street-level staff members working in bureaucratic organisations (Lipsky 2010). However, in a custodial

institution, prison officers' discretion – if not compensated by a certain level of accountability procedures that are not likely to be an option in Italy – is particularly problematic since it could be a Trojan Horse that may reinforce and normalise, or lead to, racism, homophobia and trauma.

Two extreme examples of discretion, leading occasionally to positive and negative discrimination, may suffice to show at least the breadth of discretion in constructing and managing a critical event in the fieldwork observed. They can be read as two examples at the extreme of what I called '*status magnet versus status shield*'. On one extreme, persons with very low status, such as 'gypsy' homeless, were less likely to be taken into account seriously. Furthermore, homeless were more likely than others with a higher status to be considered to be 'the perpetrator' of a critical event (although that particular occurrence was constructed as a critical event just, or at least partly, because it was performed by a homeless). Homeless and other marginalised groups, such as gypsies or foreign nationals, were therefore more likely to be considered the perpetrators of critical events (or then to be threatened by officers) as a result of a minor event. Their status worked as a magnet, attracting a particular type of prison officer's attention to their behaviours:

Some inmates really look for trouble here {.} they insist, they call and call again {.} they continuously call me or my colleague for no reason {.} they never have enough {.} they do not know what the verb 'to wait' means. Do they think they are in a hotel? Or what? Some start banging the toilet doors; others threaten us continuously {.} we do not even hear them anymore. Gypsies always do that, you know?

(field note, summary of an officer's comment during an ethnographic interview on the wing)

Returning back to Pino again, we can say that, eventually, he met the commander, one day afterward, and started showing a very different face for a few days. I do not know what kinds of problems were at stake. I think the commander found a proper, or at least acceptable, solution or compromise to the issue, though. The prisoner stopped 'stressing all the time' and seemed quite satisfied about the outcome. A negotiation had been possible between the keepers and the kept due to the interactive negotiation and the shared intention to pursue a feasible solution via cooperating rather

than conflicting with one another. The outcome was acceptable to both the parties and neither of them felt it as too costly.

Another quite possible development of the same story, however, would have also been likely to occur. The same situation could have developed differently, thereby moving the interaction chain to a new level.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.2a

Pino is a ‘gypsy’ [*sic*], and that is worth considering (it is useful take into account ‘*status magnet versus status shield*’). Officers usually say Pino’s cell is unclean (which I think sometimes is true). Uncleaness, however, is often interpreted as a sign or as an outcome of Pino’s ethnicity, of his belonging to a travelling community.

Pino is very nervous and continues to call the officers with his whiny voice. He even bangs his toilet door intermittently. Possibly, he does not accept the officer’s answers, simply dismissing the possibility that the commander will come today. Maybe Pino interprets the commander’s impossibility to come as racism.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

There are of course more plausible interpretations of that particular interaction. Maybe Pino’s interpretation of the situation is biased by his previous experiences, or he is too traumatised by being locked up and completely unaware of the situation of his sick child at the camp where he lived a month before being arrested. What really strikes me is that the complexity of his personal life, which is of course possibly as complex as those of anybody else, is often rationalised and simplified by officers who would say, to put it bluntly, that he is just ‘another gypsy who is unable to do time’. I now continue with the second part of the previous vignette.

## [[START SHADED BOX]]

### Vignette 6.2b

The officer gets really nervous due to Pino's calls and does not seem to care at all about the reason why he is calling (neither do I while sitting next to him, to be honest, I grasp now rethinking about it all while reading the notes and writing this page). Attila is supposed to finish his paperwork but the situation is escalating and he is losing his time with the gypsy's requests. Now he is very likely to be unable to respect his deadline, and he knows that his boss will not take it kindly. It is also possible that one wing officer does not particularly like gypsies.

Pino wears a dark blue shirt, contrasting with his face becoming red due to the tense situation. He looks out to the corridor, behaving nervously while grasping the cell's bar in his hands. He does not really trust the officer who has said that the commander cannot come. Pino thinks that Attila has not even tried to call the commander, thinking that he just pretended to have done it. Pino's idea is reasonable. In fact, officers are prisoners' gatekeepers towards their own superordinate and must evaluate verbal requests carefully before handing them on to their superiors. Attila has a reputation among prisoners for being lazy and untrustworthy, in other words frequently cheating. Of course that is neither standard, nor is it necessarily true.

Now, Attila is too busy, or he pretends to be in that situation, displaying paperwork activities in his box. In either way, he does not intend to continue to lose his time answering Pino, and suddenly stops doing it without any explication. Pino does not accept receiving no answer to his request, remarking that it's a crucial part of officers' job, as he later told me. Eventually, Pino turns back and enters his cell's toilet, and starts banging the toilet door repeatedly. His fellow inmate is on his side, and shows it first by remaining quietly on his bed, then second by not complaining about the noise Pino was making. Attila is also unhappy about the situation and would like to receive help from his boss, who is often reluctant to intervene and pretends that the wing manager deals with his own problems as much as possible alone. The officer complains that his boss is not taking the situation seriously enough, and knowing the prisoner's history on that wing, that is very likely to lead to problems. However, Attila has had

enough of the situation and explains to me his decision to do nothing but wait: 'If my boss does not bother about it, I just mind my own business'. Attila then goes to the prisoner and tells him to stop stressing, and orders him to shut up, then returns to his box to fill in some documents. Attila reminds Pino that at the moment there is nothing else he can do for him.

Nothing happens for a few minutes. Afterwards, suddenly, I see some water in the corridor coming from Pino's cell, who is only six or seven cells away from the box in which I am writing at the moment. I immediately understand the situation and report it to the officer next to me. He gets really nervous, takes a look at the corridor, and shouts, 'Pino, what's this again? What's up?' Pino shouts back, 'I told you that I want to see the commander now!' Attila walks quickly to Pino's cell. 'OK, Pino, are you going to stop now?' asks Attila. 'Forget it!' replies Pino. 'That's your choice. It's up to you; it's your problem. I'll call the security manager now. You know the story very well already, don't you?'

Attila returns to his booth to call the security manager.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

By doing so, as the last vignette shows, the prison officer opens a critical event, *de facto* if not yet *de jure*. This is an empirical example of one way in which one normal issue at the wing level is transformed into a critical event to be dealt with by the security manager officer or the commander, which potentially, yet not necessarily, implies the threat and the use of force, or can result in a local accommodation obtained through negotiation, persuasion or inducement, such as previous vignettes have shown (see Chapter 3).

Vignette 6.2b might suggest that, had the prisoner not been a member of a travelling community, the interaction would have occurred differently. This is not to say that I experienced any kind of a more extreme racist attitude against some particular groups within the walls than outside them. I only wanted to say that racism was not particularly rare inside, and that status, more broadly speaking, is a crucial dimension to be taken into account when dealing with officer-prisoner interactions.

Not only ethnicity, but also economic conditions, religion, sexual preferences, gender and all other vectors of inequality known ‘out there’ have a stake on those in custody or working within the walls. Taking all those dimensions into account is beyond the scope of this book. I will focus only on what I called *status magnet versus status shield*.

During my ethnography, I observed wing officers trying to avoid disturbing their boss. Any time an inmate’s behaviour was unbearable, however, they would ask their ‘boss’ what to do or directly ask for their informal intervention. Senior officers arriving at the wing would go to the prisoner to talk calmly through the barred door, often escorted by the wing officer, who would also intervene in the discussion, explaining the situation. The senior officer would initially suggest paternalistically to the person in custody to adopt a different style of interaction by offering him a not too costly way out of the situation, thereby displaying to the inmate the institutional willingness to solve the issue at stake. He would also suggest to him at any time, more directly, to be polite and to avoid creating problems, to avoid a ‘bad experience’ in return. I could really not imagine before doing my ethnography how many skilful senior managers taking their role seriously would be able to solve desperate situations and issues by negotiating an exit strategy with each and every prisoner time and again. At least this was what I observed dozens of times. This is not to say that there aren’t any unprofessional senior officers in charge of security anymore, nor that ‘rank and file’ officers would never try to provoke the prisoner in order to solve the situation differently. I have hardly ever seen any senior officers working badly with prisoners, though I sometimes heard some informal allegations. One officer even told me about very bad practices of the past in a video-recorded interview, but that’s a completely different story. Yet, what I think is relevant here is that those bad practices are still one component embedded in the prison officers’ cultures, even if hardly ever spoken about in interviews. Officers working on the ‘front line’, more often than not, show a less comprehensive attitude towards prisoners, and often criticise the benevolent paternalistic attitude displayed by their boss (see also Chapter 4). One field note is particularly eloquent:

Our bosses, they do the easy job; they sit all day at their desk in their office and come upstairs only rarely. When they do come upstairs, though, they let prisoners do what they want to do, and they give them what they pretend to have. If we [rank and file

officers] did that, we would not be able to administer the wing, nor would be able to guarantee 'order and security'. I wish I was a senior manager.

(field note, summary of an officer's comment during an ethnographic interview on the wing)

Whether or not the senior officers' 'benevolence' towards inmates that I experienced was mainly the consequence of me being there (as a researcher) is unclear to me so far. The researcher's effect was more likely to be in the picture in the initial phase of the research rather than at the end of it, when everybody knew that I had already witnessed many squad interventions.

All in all, negotiation would be used frequently, yet would not always work. Occasionally, prison officers would either use negotiation as a rhetorical device or try to skip it altogether. Either way, the prison officer would display to the inmate his own intention to move quickly to the next phase. Negotiations were also resisted by prisoners. By doing so, prisoners would publicly display their toughness to one another, or would simply resist what could be perceived as a paternalistic approach towards their rights or needs, which were often treated by officers as a personal favour. By refusing negotiations, prisoners might also simply try to build, rebuild or defend their reputation on the wing.

On the other extreme of the *status magnet versus status shield* polarities, another status works as shield (Hochschild 1983), protecting the prisoners from unwanted attention from severe prison officers. Inmates belonging to organised crime organisations (Varese 2010) had a much more respectful reputation inside, and officers treated them accordingly. The relationships between officers and 'mafia bosses' were characterised by a presentation of self in which, on both sides, *facework* (Goffman 1958) displayed the maintenance of civility, deference, formal respect and interactive accommodations in each and every circumstance. As one officer put it:

[mafia] bosses are gentlemen; they respect me as a worker and never disturb me without a good reason [like other prisoners often do]; therefore I respect them and treat them accordingly. Usually, I try to respond each and every time they call me {.} they always say 'please' {.} and thank you.

(field note)

Officers have never used bad manners with a ‘boss’ in front of me, let alone threats of the use of force.<sup>8</sup> Some officers justified it by saying that ‘*I boss sanno farsi la galera*’ (a boss knows how to behave properly ‘doing time’). However, there might be other factors in the picture. Italian prison officers also fear bosses’ retaliation and the bosses’ capacity, even when incarcerated, to use violence against them or their family outside.

### About tension and fear on the wing

Fear is a recurrent topic in many prison officers’ interviews video-recorded in the field during the ethnography. Fear might also be a frame adopted by officers to display discursively a more acceptable and human side to the research, yet the observation showed a very different picture regarding the public display of tension and fear. Usually, officers’ ‘propensity for action’, sometimes framed by scholars as masculinity, would result in officers displaying tension but, concurrently, hiding their fear almost completely when being on stage ‘doing’ coercion. Fear would only be discussed, with anonymity safeguards in place, in one-to-one formal interviews performed away from the public and fellow officers’ gaze, and this regarded the majority of the participants that I interviewed ethnographically. As I said above, not all the emergency squad’s members would display the same attitude towards action. A few would prefer to be part of it to simply be a supportive audience, spectators of violence or bystanders (Collins 2008). A few officers would even do what Goffman described as footing (see Chapter 2). In other words, displaying distance from their fellow prisoners within the squad, either physically – moving a few steps away – or symbolically, by looking annoyed, angry or bored, or simply joking. All these different positions within the squad would of course be easier in the initial stage of the threat. Using force is in fact a duty and must be performed by all the squad’s members if ordered by the squad commander to do so. However, even in such extreme situations, officers unwilling to participate to action would at least try to resist bodily participation by staying at the border of the confrontation, or at least far from the ‘front line’. Other officers would go head-on ‘where the action is’ instead.

Despite Collins’ (2008) theory of violence not really dealing in depth with prisons, it has been one of the useful theoretical tools adopted to interpret the



observations. However, contrary to Collins, I must state clearly that physical violence inside prison is not as rare as he considers it to be in the outside world (Collins 2008).

Officers would normally use their necessary capacity 'to circumvent confrontational tension/fear' on a daily basis. I also had to learn how to display that ability, being aloof, in order to save face and build my reputation among officers, thereby gaining actual access to the squad interventions. Being tough was a shared code appreciated among many prison officers (but not all). My performance during the first intervention I witnessed, in which I tried to show my toughness despite my fears and emotions, clearly worked as an icebreaker, helping me become accepted by officers. By doing so, I did not want to cheat them. I simply tried to maintain an adequate face (I also did face management and adapted my local identity to the developing situation as much as possible). Although fear was more likely to be visible on the prisoners' side than on the officers' one, red faces and nervous movements displaying a clear tension were visible on both sides on many occasions. In front of the emergency squad, some prisoners would almost faint, show trembling and sweating bodies, cry, and make some very nervous, uncontrolled movements, and so on. Instead, officers would usually display a militaristic 'poker face' or bored face, particularly when still only performing symbolic threats.

I now turn to the crucial part of this chapter. I first introduce the topic of threatening force. Then, I will move on to define and describe the symbolic threat of the use of force. Lastly, I will define and describe the credible threats, a very crucial practice that occasionally leads to the use of force, but more commonly to de-escalation.

## Threatening and being threatened

The physical entrance of the emergency squad on to the wing would visibly introduce the use of force for all the prisoners observing it, either from within their cell or from the outside, as well as, concurrently, for all other staff (and I) on the wing at that moment, either acting as a supportive audience, spectators of violence or simply bystanders.

I have felt contrasting and shifting emotions of fear for the situation. As people's safety was at stake, it was impossible not to feel pity for some vulnerable inmates. Concurrently, I felt my ties and also felt sympathy for some officers and their

very draining work. It has all been very challenging and daunting to me, and I feel I have been affected psychologically by it. I felt, more often than not, inadequate and unsure whether to stay or to leave the field. Eventually, I decided to continue.

Usually, prisoners and other staff members on the wing (such as nurses, doctors, psychiatrists, chaplains, and so on) would only deal with one (wing manager), or at most two (also rehab), officers at a time (*infra*, Chapter 4). Often, those prison officers would be 'invisible' because they would be working in their office, or, as prisoners would say, they would be 'minding their own business'.

The emergency squad would introduce a larger number of officers on the wing, marching like a military platoon. Their arrival would be a visible and audible bodily presence that would produce a remarkable turning point on the wing's atmosphere, suddenly changing the situation for all parties involved in one way or another.

Following Popitz (1990), performing threats is not an easy option for anybody involved in it. Threatening the use of force is costly for officers and strongly influences the credibility and reputation of both parties involved in the interaction. After performing a threat, officers are in fact dependent on the prisoner's next move. Officers who do not respond consistently to prisoners' reactions in these chains of interactions can lose face, not only in front of the prisoners, but also in front of their fellow officers and other staff members. This might be one of the reasons why officers often turn a blind eye in an attempt to avoid the challenging and unpredictable situations in which they should be ready for bodily intervention, or risk losing face.

The threatening 'frame' would usually be 'bracketed' into two different threat configurations. The first threat configuration, what I call the *symbolic threat* – a kind of reinforced 'authority maintenance ritual' (Alpert and Dunham 2004: 172) – is performed by the simple arrival of the prison officers' emergency squad on the wing. The second threat configuration is what I call the *credible threat*. Usually, it follows the first one if, and only if, the symbolic threat did not suffice in de-escalating or even stopping the critical event. Credible threats are performed by the officers in the emergency squad through bodily alignment and body signals they send to one another, thereby trying to push the situation to a new level and, by doing so, urging the prisoner to desist.

To the best of my knowledge grasped within the walls, threats would be likely to occur between custodial staff and prisoners when the first and the second would still be physically separated from each other (i.e. in their own cell, in a wing with dynamic security, and at the yard). In fact, whenever a real crisis would suddenly explode with prisoners moving freely in co-presence with prison officers, the emergency squad would be likely to intervene directly using force. Any symbolic threat implied in the squad arrival would likely produce an immediate effect, thereby stopping the intervention before it started, or cutting it very short.

## The symbolic threat of the use of force: the emergency squad's arrival on the wing

The *symbolic threat of the use of force* is here defined as a symbolic display of authority and physical force by which the 'emergency squad' intervenes in a critical situation to take control of it. The symbolic threat of the use of force is here interpreted as an 'interaction ritual' (Goffman 1967; Collins 2004). The emergency squad can be composed of a varying number of officers (see Chapter 4), and can either be organised formally, looking like a proper military team, or in a more loose fashion. The emergency squad can move towards the critical event's location more or less quickly, displaying a more or less threatening attitude towards the prisoners.

### Two types of emergency squad interventions

The emergency squad's arrival on the wing does not necessarily occur in the same way all the time. However, by simply arriving at the scene of the critical event, it would necessarily start the symbolic threat of the use of force. The emergency squad would intervene for two main reasons: (1) for *security reasons*; or (2) to *enforce a compulsory medical treatment* with a non-cooperative prisoner, often one with psychiatric syndromes (to use a term psychiatrists would use regularly).

By arriving due to security reasons, the squad would be likely to intervene as a consequence of one of three situations. First, an explicit verbal, face-to-face command of the superordinate responsible for security, just like Vignette 6.4 shows. Second, in response to a sudden loud security alarm signalling an emergency on one particular wing. Lastly, as reinforcement to an officer's self-defence after an alleged

assault of an officer (independently of the source of the information and the availability of a formal command to intervene). ‘We always rush to help a fellow officer’, I was told.

By arriving to *enforce a compulsory medical treatment*, prison officers would enter the scene in an effort to help a psychiatrist or a doctor perform his or her own medical duties with a recalcitrant prisoner who is under compulsory medical treatment but is not complying with it by any other means (see [Sim 1990](#)). Psychiatrists’ propensity to ask for prison officers’ help varies greatly. Some new psychiatrists would be more likely to work by the book and would happily ask for the emergency squad to escort them in any critical situation, even during a visit with a very calm and not dangerous prisoner. Others might cope with almost any situation alone as far as possible, avoiding, by doing so, disturbing others ‘unnecessarily’ and, concurrently, displaying their toughness to their audience.

## Performing the symbolic threat of force

Any critical event happening by chance would be more or less likely to escalate also depending on the reputation and attitude of both the keepers and the kept, as well as the presence or the absence of the researcher on the scene.

The squad would enter the wing barred door and move alongside the cells, hierarchically displaying and performing officers’ authority constituting and reconstituting, by their very simple presence, a symbolic threat of the possibility of an imminent use of physical coercion. Once on the wing, the squad would be ready to begin its theatrical display of power on the landing, heading towards the particular cell – or place – where one particular prisoner (or a group of prisoners) had ‘produced’ the event previously institutionally labelled as critical. This symbolic intervention would normally last up to 30 or 40 minutes; the shortest lasted less than five minutes or so. During that period of time, one or more of the officers in the squad would try to perform ‘peacemaking’ ([Liebling et al. 2011](#)) by trying to calm down the ‘agitated prisoners’ pursuing a negotiation, and afterwards would return to their base, waiting for the next intervention or any other duty to perform in the meantime.

Some ‘old-school’ officers would be less likely than more modern ones to appreciate negotiations and ‘peacemaking’, and would mark their distance from those practices. They would do so by performing what [Goffman \(1981\)](#) called ‘footing’ (see

Chapter 2). They would do it by staying on a side, avoiding taking part in the negotiation, smoking a cigarette and chatting with me, or even displaying irritation for the situation. Sometimes, using both using proxemics and gestures, if not words, those ‘old-school’ officers would directly challenge the approach grounded on negotiation and ‘peacemaking’, suggesting moving head-on to the bodily intervention instead. Other prisoners, either in the nearby cells or living within the same one with one another, would have a stake in the situation as well. Often, prisoners living in the same cell would become a supportive audience to one another (see Collins 2008) and would approve uncritically any course of action. Rarely, one prisoner would put distance between himself and the behavior of the other (again, following Goffman, that behavior can be interpreted as footing) (i.e. laying in the bed pretending to be sleeping when being awake). More often than not, however, negotiation would be in the picture, and all efforts would be made by the security officer, if not necessarily by the particular wing officer or prisoner at stake, to avoid the escalation of the situation, at least when I was in the picture.

The following vignette illustrates one particular occurrence of a symbolic threat.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.3a

Its 8 o’clock in the morning. A group of officers is entering the detention area after attending the morning meeting with the commander and having an espresso with colleagues at the prison cafeteria, situated downstairs from the rooms where some officers live.

Just now, three to four officers were assigned to the squad by their commander, or, in other words, ordered to form the emergency squad, yet they all know that they are available for any other duty directly required by the commander or the security manager until the next unpredictable emergency occurs on the landing. They also know that in case of emergency, particularly so when an alarm rings, there is no time to lose. They will stop doing whatever they were doing and run towards the crisis,

the characteristics of which at that stage are still unknown to them. Before arriving on the emergency scene, they usually have no previous knowledge about what has occurred.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

An officer told me in an ethnographic interview that there is always a lot of tension in prison work. It is unpredictable and it is often an exhausting combination of boredom, stress and unpredictability:

When the alarms ring you just have to run upstairs [all detention wings] and solve the problem in one way or another; it doesn't matter whether one prisoner' doing self-harm is fighting with his cell-mate or whatsoever; you just go, see what's up and move head-on.

(field note, summary of an officer's comment during an ethnographic interview on the wing)

Sometimes when doing fieldwork, boredom was the main trait of the situation to me, yet that emotion was never going to last long. I continue now with the description of the previous vignette.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.3b

Emergency squad officers stick with one another most of the time, being ready for an unpredictable intervention. In fact, they all know that, here, it is very likely that something will happen sooner or later. At the least, they will have to perform one soft intervention to try to solve one dispute or another. It is their routine job and they seem ready for it, or at least I got this impression by staying with them a lot of the time.

A not so young prison officer that had just come back from Sardinia (an Italian island), where his partner still lives, looks really tired. He had a very nice week with her and is now yawning repeatedly. ‘It’s time for a coffee, let’s go and get one!’ he says. The three of them go to have a coffee, and one waits in the office just in case of an emergency call.

Just now, two other officers escort the prisoners coming from the yard back to their own wing – one of the most routinary yet dangerous activities performed four times a day, day in, day out, which I observed a few dozen times while *shadowing*<sup>9</sup> officers doing it.

Suddenly, the phone rings. Francesco, the officer patrolling the closed wing, is calling from upstairs in the wing. He is urging the intervention of the security manager due to one prisoner’s behaviour. Richard is in fact refusing to enter his cell and behaves ‘childishly’. He lays on the floor with his arms open wide as if he was crucified.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

A lot of the time, officers have to work with difficult prisoners, and vice versa. Some prisoners only respect the rules intermittently and create problems time and again. It is true, though, that all of the prison rules take the prisoners’ needs, or at least their subjectivity, into account. Some say prisoners making trouble are simply asking for attention. That is surely one of the possibilities. Other possibilities are also in the picture, though. Some are really trying to create problems and go head-on to a fight for one reason or another: reputation building, boredom, machismo, and so on. I saw different kinds of ‘resistance’ that are quite difficult to unpack. Possibly, it was hard for me since I was on the wrong side. I return to the narration now.

I start again describing the vignette I wrote: ‘The security manager, and then the commander come upstairs to try to negotiate a way out and to display deference to the prisoner’s requests’.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

### Vignette 6.3c

One after the other, each of the senior officers in turn tries to convince Richard, a tall, muscular young detainee to enter into his cell; but no way!

After 10 minutes or so, the commander goes back to his duty, leaving the problem to his security manager. Richard, an Italian-Nigerian very heavy, muscular and tall black guy, once again does not seem to intend to cooperate at all. He is really gentle, though. He speaks softly and calmly, just reiterating that 'I do not want to be locked up now. Just leave me a couple of minutes more and I'll do it'. Richard's 'trick' lasts for more than 20 minutes. The security manager knows 'Ricky', as he calls him, and considers him not only completely unpredictable, but also untrustworthy. Moreover, the officers know, by their previous experiences with Ricky, that using force to coerce him might easily turn out into a really violent confrontation. Strangely enough, Richard had been behaving better over the past two weeks. He had not caused any serious problems for the last month or so. That's why the manager is waiting for so long (of course, my presence strongly influences the manager's and possibly also the inmate's decisions). Furthermore, Richard could have intended to show me one of his performances by which he was attempting 'doing freedom' in one way or another (Ugelvik 2014).

The manager is kindly offering to 'help him to stand up', and also suggests that he behaves normally without creating too many problems. He further proposes to 'Ricky' a way out of the situation that is now becoming quite embarrassing; a way out with no consequence for either of them, a win-win solution. In fact, he asks the prisoner sitting on the floor whether or not he needs to see a doctor or a psychiatrist, thereby offering the prisoner the opportunity to lawfully stay for some extra time out of his cell waiting for a visit, which the manager knew was Richard's main request.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

On many previous occasions, that kind of offer had been interpreted positively by the prisoner, and had started a successful negotiation between Richard and the senior officer, leaving both parties winning the game, to a certain extent. By doing so, the senior officer would have solved the problem on the wing and would be able to go back to his office, and the prisoner would have gained the possibility not to return to



his cell straight away, waiting for the appointment with the medical staff member. However, other developments of the situation have always been possible too, and it is to the description of another possible version of the development of the situation that I now turn to.

This time, Richard does not seem to intend to cooperate at all, regardless of the efforts either the security member or the officer make to negotiate a shared exit strategy.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.3d

Richard does *not* accept the deal offered between the line by the manager (yet, did Richard really comprehend it this time?) and continues behaving ‘childishly’. I experience it like a theatre performance, yet one that may become very costly to him, as I had already seen some time before then. The situation is suddenly becoming serious.

A turning point is produced by the security manager ordering the wing officer to call ‘the guys’, meaning the squad, on his behalf. The officer dials on his wireless phone and calls for the squad intervention. Downstairs, the prison officer who waited in the office runs to the coffee point, situated just at the end of the corridor, where the others are still chatting after their cup of coffee, to order them to proceed to an intervention. The guys, understanding what’s happening, start walking towards him.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

Eventually, on that occasion, Richard decided quite unpredictably to surrender. In fact, grasping that the situation was going to get heavy soon, the prisoner decided to stop before the emergency squad’s arrival. Arriving on the wing, the squad is ordered to go back. Not all squad members appreciate the news. Some thought that the guy ought to get a sense of how things work on the wing. Yet, all went back to their

previous duties. They show a very professional attitude, making no comments and going back to the base. Things might also go differently, as follows.

## [[START SHADED BOX]]

### Vignette 6.4

Announcing a call from the security manager, one emergency squad member communicates to his peers an order of an intervention. 'Let's go, someone is calling us'. Hearing the prisoner's voice, one officer replies sarcastically, 'John did not learn the lesson last month {.} ah ah {.} or he forgot ah ah'. Knowing him, they imagine that nothing really urgent is at stake. However, they walk through the corridor, pass by the commander's officer and tell him, 'We need to rush upstairs!' He replies, 'Again? I've had enough!'

They enter the detention wings area through the Block 1 gate (the entrance to the forensic hospital wings; *infra*, Chapter 4), turn left, walk one floor upstairs, and arrive at the wing's barred entrance. The wing officer lets them in.

The wing's atmosphere is quite calm. Some prisoners, though, are also complaining, shouting to John to stop misbehaving. One prisoner shouts from a few cells away, 'Don't be a fool! You should know all too well what to expect acting like this again'. Another even yelled racist words, urging John to go home to the UK.

The morning started badly. There is a lot of tension in the air, and I am waiting for the emergency squad to start a fight soon. Their intention seems quite clear to me, yet they stay quiet.

The officer heading the squad firmly says, 'Just rush in now! Quickly!' Richard is clearly unsure of what to do. He hesitates for a couple of seconds. He knows, though, that with those particular officers in the squad, and with that particular 'boss', resisting further without following officers' orders would likely mean triggering their use of force, which might turn out to be pretty painful. Eventually, and unpredictably, 'Ricky' stands up and enters his cell with a smile on his face. The squad leader displays

a very annoyed face in return, and bangs the prisoner's barred door heavily. Richard lays down on his bed and starts watching TV.

The team walks downstairs and the wing officer finally goes back to his box to finish some paperwork.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

The physical entrance of the 'emergency team' into the wing would visibly introduce the issue of the use of force for all the prisoners and staff observing or hearing what is occurring on the wing. In 'normal' day-to-day life on the wing, prisoners would mainly deal with one officer at a time. The arrival of the officers of the emergency squad would be a visible and audible bodily presence that would produce a turning point in the wing's atmosphere, time-marking the beginning of the threatening phase and introducing the possibility of the use of force.

The squad is ready to perform its symbolic display of power in front of the prisoners involved in the intervention, moving towards the particular cell (or other closed location) where a particular prisoner (or group of prisoners) had 'produced' a critical event. This symbolic intervention would last up to 30 or 40 minutes, over which time the squad would try to calm down the agitated prisoner, pursuing a negotiation to achieve the prisoner's compliance.<sup>10</sup> Normally, the symbolic threat would not occur abruptly. Instead, it would be the outcome of the failure of the previous negotiations, which can be divided into at least two chains of interactions that had occurred beforehand on the wing, one directly after the other. First, a series of (failed) negotiations would have occurred repeatedly at the wing level directly involving both the particular prisoners and the wing staff. Peacemaking (*infra*, Chapter 3) may last for hours or even days, in which the prisoner 'gives troubles', yet not overly serious ones. Second, a following negotiation would start by the wing manager asking for help from the security manager, as shown above. That would usually produce the arrival of one or more supra-ordinated officers on the wing sent by the security manager with the goal of trying to negotiate a peaceful solution to the problem.

Occasionally, the commander would head the squad authoritatively. In his absence, either the security officer, or any other senior officer in charge, would substitute him, then the other officers would follow directly afterwards. The position of each officer within the squad's configuration would often be related to their grade, seniority or even willingness 'to be part' of the action or to take distance by footing (*infra*, Chapter 2).

At that stage, no real physical confrontation, nor assault, could happen yet. The officers would be on one side of the gate, and the prisoner(s) on the other.

In those circumstances, all activities of the prison staff, independently of their duties, would stop immediately. Only prison officers working in the emergency squad would continue working. In such a situation, there would be once again a momentum for a negotiation to start. At least some tools of negotiation, a chat, a cigarette or, exceptionally, a plastic cup of coffee, would be employed by the head of the squad in an effort to avoid a confrontation and open a dialogue, thereby resolving the dispute easily without any physical intervention. Sometimes, different solutions would be discussed time and again between the head of the squad and the kept; seldom, the situation would quickly turn to a very conflictive one. Usually, the situation would either slowly de-escalate and move to an end, or move to the next threat configuration, the credible threat of, or more rarely directly to, the bodily use of force.

Another threat configuration resembled the following one.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.5

Some officers are having lunch together at the canteen watching the news on TV. A newly arrived prisoner-starts to threaten the wing staff, throwing small plastic objects from his cell and yelling. Moreover, he makes so much noise that he is audible from the security manager's office downstairs. Downstairs, due to the prisoner's record that arrived with him, he is already 'well known' as a 'provoker and completely unreasonable' (to put it as simply as one officer described him to me).

The security manager and the commander decide to go upstairs together to explain to him 'how it works here'. Once the commander is in front of the prisoner's cell, the newcomer starts to complain about everything: 'the room is dirty; the mattress is stinky, here it's too noisy and even too cold, and so on' (which, incidentally, was all true indeed).

The commander calmly listens to the prisoner for a couple of minutes, then he suddenly asks, gently but firmly, 'Where do you think you are? In a hotel? We are all working for you { . } don't worry, everything will be all right', and disappears downstairs.

Fortunately for the prisoner, the wing officer on duty is Carlo, a very calm and understanding one. He is an '*accamosciato*' (an officer considered to be on the prisoners' side by his peers, and referred to accordingly with that nickname). In an effort to appear (or to be) polite, he goes to the prisoner's cell and, keeping a safe distance from him, tells Carlo to keep in mind all the times that 'if you respect us, we will respect you. If you do not, we shall behave accordingly'. And then, the officer adds, 'Just for your information, you started really badly indeed!'

The situation escalates and the prisoner starts to urinate in a bottle and tries to hit a nurse with it. Yet, she is experienced, grasps his intentions, and goes back to the infirmary, promptly informing the wing officer with the wireless phone of Carlo's behaviour and of his cell condition. Immediately, the officer calls the commander, who calls the emergency squad and other two guys from the canteen, ordering them to go upstairs and 'explain to the new guy how it works here'.

The squad members wait for a couple of minutes for their fellow officers to arrive, and then promptly march upstairs quite noisily, possibly to impress him. They walk through the corridor, then to the stairs, and arrive upstairs. Once at the wing gate, a fellow prison officer opens the gate and the squad is allowed to enter. They enter the wing in a row, and the last officer bangs the wing barred door behind him loudly, thereby not only locking it safely, but clearly signalling their arrival and intentions to the newcomer.

They march like automatons towards the prisoner's cell, which is at the end of the wing: cell 23. The wing is very noisy and some prisoners are banging their bathrooms' metal doors to protest against the new prisoner, who is not able to behave

properly, just after his arrival on the wing. Others, however, say to me later that he is right because that cell is in a particularly indecent condition and he has just arrived. He is probably shocked not only about his arrest, but also about his new detention environment and the fellow prisoners he sees around him, some of whom are mental patients. He is probably really traumatised.

Regardless, the emergency squad arrives in front of him without particularly bad intentions, yet displaying thuggishness. They hardly ever do coercion for such a 'stupid' reason to someone just arrested, yet they must give him a symbolic lesson to teach him something about his new environment.

They know that new arrestees can show some problems coping with the new situation. The officers' faces are very severe, some of their bodies strong, their appearance not soft at all. Some look more annoyed, others more bored, yet others simply doing their routine job. The head of the squad, however, is more nicely mannered, and tries being polite and displays an understanding behaviour open to a negotiation.

The head of the squad, with a smile that could also be interpreted as sarcastic, says something like 'What's up? Have a problem?'

The new prisoner, possibly overwhelmed by the unexpected situation, faced with such a multitude of squad members, suddenly calms down, goes towards his stinking mattress, walking on his own urine on the floor, lays down and says with a very low tone of voice, 'No problem, I am tired. I'll try to sleep'.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

The emergency squad officers do not always leave immediately after the end of the critical event. They sometimes wait, just in case. Other times, they try to see whether or not the prisoner is really de-escalating. On other occasions, rhetorical questions (I interpret them as such) would enter the picture (time-marking the end of the intervention). When they leave, they hardly ever return soon.

Officers would ask the prisoner:

Can we go now? Is it OK with you now? Can we do anything more for you? Please, don't stress too much if you can, OK? It is in your own interest {.}. Wait calmly and, if you behave properly, today or at most tomorrow you'll see the chaplain, the social worker and if you want it, even the psychotherapist. The prisoner did not wait for the officers finishing their questions, and replied to the officers by saying, 'Do what you want'.

(field note, summary of an officer's comment during an ethnographic interview on the wing)

Occasionally, not only rhetorical questions such as those in the previous quote, but also jokes, would be used to test, provoke or simply have some fun with the prisoner. On one occasion, one officer even added, 'If you need it, we can also call Father Christmas for you {.} ah ah'. The prisoner did not understand the joke. Some of the officers smiled, and I tried to pretend not to have heard it. Rereading the notes, I then realised how degrading and traumatising that episode might have been for the person in custody (however, it did not appear to me so critical on the spot). Those kinds of situation have hardly ever occurred in front of me, mainly due to the researcher's effect. Once, I had a conversation with one officer at the coffee machine who introduced me to some critical practice occurring back then in my fieldwork. Later on, he told me in a more formal setting what follows:

It has not always been like this Luigi {.}. A few years ago he would have been directly taken in one way or another and forcibly tied to the bed for a few days; that was normally our welcome; a newcomer behaving like that {.}. No way! Now it's different. We work and act more like social workers, rather than like proper officers. In fact, we are almost not officers anymore. Some complain about this. I am happy, though. I have really had enough of continuous fighting and prefer to solve the situation peacefully if possible, or at least try doing so. We are not all the same here, as they think out there.

(field note, summary of an officer's comment during an ethnographic interview on the wing)

That note now makes me think about the very illuminating French words Didier Fassin (2015) used when writing about the stigma prison officers's work suffered 'out there' (in France, but it is the same in Italy and in many other countries), and the distorting public representation of it. Quoting one interviewee of his who stated 'prison officers, they do the job people do not want to do' (p. 259), Fassin then explains that working in prison does not lead to glory, clearly using a euphemism. My field note above not only shows a critique of the public representation and understanding of prison officers' work, but it also shows the prison officers' awareness of the multiplicity of prison officers' cultures, a very interesting point that has long been under-investigated (but see Crawley 2013).

It should be clear, though, that the majority of the dozens of critical issues emerging day in, day out on the wing would either turn to a positive end – without further need of any explicit symbolic threat by the emergency squad – or would be left 'unnoticed' by officers 'turning a blind eye'. This might support Crewe's (2011) interpretation of the relevance of soft power, even in such a critical custodial setting.

## The prisoners' reactions to the squad arrival on the wing

Occasionally, the squad arrival was followed by a sharply increasing level of protest. Some prisoners might have been disturbed in one way or another by the arrival of the emergency squad.

Some prisoners might have felt humiliated, and others provoked. Sometimes, a sharp increase of the level of protest after the arrival of the squad occurred because the previous potentially critical event performed by a different prisoner had not been taken seriously enough into account – the squad had not arrived on the wing on that previous occasion. By feeling not seriously acknowledged – not as much as his fellow colleague that caused the arrival of the squad just now – that particular prisoners might feel his reputation at risk with his fellow inmates.

In order to *save face* and regain or enhance one's reputation, one particular inmate might consider retaliating against the squad by giving them serious trouble in return, regardless of the personal cost of it. It is an example of Max Weber's value-driven rationality. Serious repetitive troubles observed have been, inter alia, inmates barricading themselves inside their own cell, destroying it completely and/or flooding it



with water, ‘staging’<sup>11</sup> a suicide or other ‘minor’ kind of self-harm, thereby trying to stimulate the squad’s (or medical staff’s) immediate intervention or getting a response to a personal need of some kind.

On one occasion, I observed (and photographed the aftermath of) one chain of interaction in which one inmate would repeatedly destroy one cell after another, three times in less than an hour and a half. His justification with the guards was that they had to start taking him seriously, at least responding to his requests promptly. As he said, ‘At the end, it is your fucking job, isn’t it?’ It is hard not to think the prisoner was at least partly right in his resistance, which was treated as criminal, though. It was in another way a strongly physical and violent interactional chain, yet it had a particularly strong communicative meaning as well, at least in the expressed intentions with which he communicated, and at the same time threatened the officers dealing with him. That particular situation, however, occurred at the beginning of my fieldwork, and nothing happened to the prisoner, at least until I was sent off the wing by the squad. At a certain point, in fact, the head of the squad told me that the situation was too dangerous for me to stay there, and urged (not to say ordered) me to move away quickly. Afterwards, until the end of the fieldwork, I was hardly ever sent away from the scene – only if new officers who did not know me were heading the squad, which happened only a couple of times – nor did I experience such a ‘lazy and relaxed’ response to a violent and threatening behaviour again. Usually, in fact, in those cases, officers would react to such provocative violence accordingly by moving the situation to ‘doing’ coercion bodily, at least to constrain the prisoner, thereby stopping him from destroying cells.

The outnumbering force of the squad (Crewe 2009) was indeed a symbolic display of physical power that normally properly worked to direct the dispute to a reasonable outcome without the necessity to move the interaction to the next stage of a violent physical confrontation. However, on many occasions, the situation would relapse or would not calm down quickly enough again, thereby evolving at least to the next stage: the credible threat of the use of force, or directly to the use of force.

## The credible threat of the use of force

Officers use force rarely, even on such a violent wing. This ethnography in part confirms Collins’ account, which states that physical violence occurs rarely. Prison

officers were less likely to use bodily force than to threaten it symbolically or credibly. I observed a small number of officers' bodily interventions, but I observed a far greater number of emergency squad threats. This might be interpreted as a researcher's effect, but I tend to read it in Popitz's (1990) terms. Threats are costly for anyone making them, let alone using force with subjects that are very likely to have all sorts of transmissible diseases (at least that was the case with the particular subjects in custody where I did my ethnography).

Therefore, what is the difference between what I called in the previous section the 'symbolic threat' and the 'credible threat' that we deal with here? Usually, only one officer (or at most two of them) is on duty on the wing. Therefore, the arrival on the wing of a much larger number of officers working in the emergency squad, and afterwards their physical presence on the wing, produce what I call a symbolic threat. All those persons in uniform are there symbolically threatening the prisoners of the possibility of a possible escalation towards the use of force. The credible threat of force is instead the result of a performance that the officers do while already in front of the inmate. The credible threat is a promise, in Popitz's (1990) terms, which constrains the officers and the prisoners to one another. If the credible threat of force does not produce the intended results, then force will possibly be used as a consequence. Unfortunately, there might also be officers that are particularly prone to using force and who do not approve of negotiations (Collins 2008). Yet, this was absolutely not usually the case in my field.

The discovery of a set of scripts used by officers to transform their symbolic threat on the wing to a credible one have been crucial, and occurred unpredictably while doing this ethnography. Over a long period of observation, two scripts appeared to be particularly relevant inter alia to transform what I call a symbolic threat into a credible one. The first script would be that in which one or more officers of the emergency squad would start to *wear gloves* while being in front of the prisoner(s), already performing a symbolic threat. The other script would be that in which those same officers, or others, would start to *move fingers* either behind their back or visibly. Sometimes, a combination of these scripts entered the picture.

By adopting those two scripts, prison officers would 'signal' (Gambetta 2009) to one another, as well as interactively with prisoners, that the situation was approaching a violent turning point: the use of bodily force and the entrance into

something similar to what **Collins (2012)** described as ‘the tunnel of Violence’, albeit into a lawful if not legitimate one.

By starting to perform one of those two scripts, a clear emotional dimension and tension was palpable. Any officer might propose to his own fellow colleagues – without necessarily saying anything verbally – to follow him and move on to the next level of the intervention, thereby ‘finally stopping bullshitting’ (field note), or, as another officer told me, just before the intervention:

Now let’s stop it! Who do you think we are? Social workers, or what? Should I waste my time arguing endlessly with him? Do you think I am crazy? Should I become crazy too? It’s simply too much {.} you see it yourself {.} don’t you?

(field note)

Officers in the squad do not always agree with the definition or the situation, nor do they agree with the most appropriate next move. Therefore, some might prefer to change their ‘footing’ (**Goffman 1981**), becoming, by doing so, a supportive audience, a spectator of violence or simply a bystander (**Collins 2008**), taking distance from the situation. By avoiding direct involvement in action, they would publicly display (either to me and to others on the wing) their position towards the particular action at stake and, to some extent, also their position towards the professional group’s values and norms.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.6a

Pino is a young man in his twenties sitting at his clean light-brown little wooden desk in his quite dirty cell one morning. He is an Italian who proudly comes from the north-east of the country. He is quite tall, muscular, usually quite deferent with officers and well known for being very stubborn and not that friendly with his fellow inmates. He is bald, blue-eyed, with a small scar on his face under his left eye and some small handmade greenish prison tattoos on both his head and his hands, hardly visible on his dark brown

skin. He is wearing a grey Nike jumper, a white singlet, red underwear, no trousers, and slippers.

Sitting on his chair at his desk situated near the barred door facing the wing's corridor, he is calmly having breakfast: coffee and milk, biscuits and one fresh orange he has kept from the previous dinner the day before.

Once he finishes eating his orange, he stands up, as usual, and lights up a cigarette, smoking it slowly while resting his elbow on the barred door. He shows (or rather displays) a smiley face and a relaxed attitude to me. He definitely seems to be calm. The wing is not that noisy either in that particular moment. Occasionally, some staff move back and forth with their metal carts creaking loudly. It is just the usual routine. Prisoners screaming, others calling, yet others laying on the bed and seemingly watching the roof or the outside world. A lot of cigarette smoke is in the air, as usual.

The telephone rings at the prison officers' box at the closed wing. The security manager alerts the wing officer that a newcomer is arriving soon on the wing and that a place, any place, was therefore needed to allocate him. The newcomer will be entering the institution coming from another one where he had created too much trouble, yet they already know him in the facility, and the senior wing officer does not show any particular apprehension about his arrival.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

It is worth noting the different ways in which, on the one hand, officers discuss the arrival of a particularly violent prisoner verbally with one another (and with me), and, on the other, the ways in which they manage such an allegedly 'violent' prisoner upon his arrival in practice. There is a difference between the ways in which officers discuss with one another (when I am also present with them) the arrival of a violent prisoner and the problems that might occur, and the ways in which they actually routinely manage any such arrivals in practice. Such a difference, between verbal discourse and practice, can be sketchy, described as a contrast between, on the one hand, the emphasis prison officers put on describing the violent prisoner's reputation to one another, mainly focusing on his alleged 'war stories' and the brutal crimes he has committed (which, incidentally, should be unknown to the officers) and, on the other,

the banality of the actual interaction that occurs most of the time between the keepers and the kept each time a new violent prisoner arrives at the facility and must be allocated to a particular cell. Despite the normality and the apparent banality of such interactions in the facility under study, it must be noticed, however, that very difficult situations and critical events also occurred following a violent prisoner's arrival.

This contrast between what officers said about a particular prisoner and the way in which they were able to manage him softly was particularly evident in the facility at stake, in which 'violent' newcomers were at least a weekly occurrence. The practice of managing prisoners only slightly changed with the alleged dangerousness of the newcomer, yet the story about his war past were really colourful. Often, officers have invited me to look for one prisoner or another on Wikipedia, or in other TV programmes about criminals.

At the end of the ethnography, I discover some alleged specificity of my field that was often referred to as a punitive one (see above). One officer told me in an informal conversation (which he then asked me to use) a specificity of the place where I based my ethnography. It is worth taking his words into account:

Here, they always send us the worst ones [prisoners]. They have the nice ones [referring to Bollate prison in Milan, which I had been talking about with him before]. That is one of those clean and tidy new 'best practice prisons', where they are very good at rehabilitating prisoners [with a sarcastic smile]. They are all so good and professional there { . } they have very good relationships between police [meaning prison officers] and convicts. They are the example of the nation, and the media covers stories occurring in there time and again. What they do not say in those media reports, though, is that whenever a prisoner starts to create problems there, they send him here or to another more punitive institution.

(field note, summary of an officer's comment during an ethnographic interview on the wing)

That chat was very instructive. As usual, many themes emerged or re-embedded in those few sentences. Here, I just point out what has been confirmed by

other fellow officers of his. However, a manager of the Ministry of justice resisted those ‘opinions’ strongly by saying that there does not exist by law any differentiation in terms of punitiveness.

I return now to the end of the previous vignette to continue my narration.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.6b

The officer had already silently told me before about the arrival of the ‘troublemaker’; he knew it already. The officer had defined him as ‘an old friend of mine [of his]’, using a sarcastic voice. A new prisoner’s arrival or departure is nothing new in the facility. Nobody would either display any particular attention or curiosity, let alone emotion (well, occasionally they do), for such a mundane occurrence. Yet, it was very different for me. It was one of my first days on the wing, and at that stage I still felt both excited and overwhelmed by the idea of seeing a new prisoner being escorted into the wing and afterwards locked up into a cell in front of me.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

As I can now read from my notes:

I feel ‘kind of’ worried and strange for the prisoner’s arrival: I am experiencing it first-hand and for the first time; it is weird. The officer Giuseppe [not his real name] seems only worried about a very normal problem here, overcrowding. He is worried simply because ‘there is no fucking place to put this new one; he’ll give us lots of trouble {..} he surely will! I know him very well, believe me’.

(note from my diary, partly rewritten)

I now return to the vignette’s story.

## [[START SHADED BOX]]

### Vignette 6.6c

He bluntly tells me that all ‘easy’ prisoners already have one or more fellow prisoners with them in their cells. Those that are still alone ‘should better stay alone { . } they are left alone for a reason { . } they’ve already created enough trouble each and every time they have put someone else with them in their cell’.

About three hours have passed quickly. Only ordinary problems are in the picture on the wing. The same usual smell of the combination of encrusted dirt, sweat and food is in the air. Before lunch, I stayed downstairs for quite some time, where most of the senior officers’ and psychiatrists’ offices are, following the new prisoner’s ‘welcome’ procedures, medical and psychiatric visits, and social worker’s interview, just staying together with the officer escorting the prisoner from one place to the next.

The security manager shares his idea with the wing psychiatrist, the wing nurse and one wing officer as to where to *put* the new prisoner. Eventually, they agree on the decision to throw the newcomer into Pino’s cell. Giuseppe tells me about that decision, explaining the two reasons that justify the decision.

‘Today, Pino is the only really calm prisoner still living in his cell alone { . } let’s say, not too agitated’. Then, the officer adds the second reason. ‘Pino is under psychiatric assessment; he’s very close to being relocated to the open wing just upstairs’. Having been committed to reach that goal, thereby gaining some freedom, he is not likely to behave badly with the newcomer.

The staff quickly agree with this decision, which is the outcome of less than 10 minutes of dialogue in front of me. The psychiatrist says, ‘Luigi, I am sure he will cooperate. If he creates too much trouble, then tomorrow we’ll see what to do. Pino is a criminal [meaning not a psychiatric patient or someone with psychiatric issues]. He sometimes behaves like a criminal, but he is definitely not so stupid to misunderstand the chance we are giving him to gain his promotion to the open regime’. The psychiatrist then adds, ‘Do you think it is really a problem to spend a couple of nights

with someone in your room?’ I do not think it is as irrelevant to the human being locked in as the psychiatrist pretends it to be, but I do not respond to the question.

‘He’s an experienced prisoner and he knows we do what we can do. There is no other possibility now {.} tomorrow we’ll see, and if possible we will reallocate the newcomer to a new wing. By now, it’s simply like this, and *Kunta Kinte* [*sic*] has to accept it whether he likes it or not {.} I am confident he will be cooperative, though’.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

I had heard the nickname *Kunta Kinte* before, more than once. Officers use nicknames frequently with lots of prisoners. Adopting *Kunta Kinte* is unacceptable, though. The guy was Italian, young and nice indeed. He also used that nickname to present himself occasionally, but this is part of a larger problem. There is no space here to follow this path, yet the issue of racism ought to be addressed seriously by the department.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.6d

In the past, Pino had some minor psychiatric problems. At the moment, however, he is OK. He is ‘well compensated’, as the psychiatrist, and consequently almost all the other medical and custodial staff, would put it. Yet, he usually shows aggressive attitudes and becomes violent time and again for ‘minor reasons’.

‘It’s not strange here in prison, is it? Don’t forget that Pino is a criminal, just like many others on the landing. He has always been like that on the outside as well, it’s his nature, and he is used to being like that’, concludes the officer Giuseppe.

Suddenly, the phone rings again. The officer emphatically tells me, ‘*Arriva!*’ (He is arriving!). The officer then adds that the new prisoner will arrive at the wing’s entrance in a moment, escorted by a group of his fellow officers.



At that stage, the decision was taken. The moment arrives in which the newcomer would be urged to enter Pino's cell in one way or another.

As soon as Pino meets the newcomer's gaze, he starts to yell to him, '*Bastardooo! Bastardooo! Se entri ti ammazzoooo!*' (Motherfucker, motherfucker, if you step in I will kill you). The newcomer stays still, saying nothing, looking towards Pino aloof. Pino's face turns red, and his attitude, as well as visible emotion, escalates quickly. He screams as loud as he can, possibly in order to display his anger and toughness to the new guy, who is going to enter his cell anyway, sooner or later.

Now, a decision is taken. The wing's officer calls the security manager, who already knows the guy and simply decides to skip the talk and directly send the emergency squad instead. They arrive on the wing in front of the cell in less than three minutes. There are only four of them, plus the two escorting the prisoner and the wing officer: seven in total.

The little squad arrived slowly, simply walking, displaying a very annoyed attitude because, once again, Pino turned out to be untrustworthy, despite all the effort they had put in over the last months 'to help him in all the ways permitted by the prison rules and beyond, and all the times they forgave him'. They arrived just now.

The newcomer is quickly pushed out of Pino's sight by the two officers escorting him. Pino is really behaving unreasonably, yet the officers try to negotiate with him in order to convince him to accept the newcomer into his cell. Despite officers trying to convince the prisoner by using a bouquet of tolls of negotiation, Pino does not seem to be willing to accept any reason, any justifications or any officer's offer. He simply tries to have the guy allocated elsewhere, by behaving madly, screaming and committing himself to kill the guy if put in his cell. 'I don't give a fuck if I will have to stay stuck in this fucking shitty wing all my life. That shit will not enter my room! No way!'

The arrival of the squad does not help to de-escalate the situation. Yet, knowing the particular officers at stake in that particular occasion, I feel they are trying to do their best. Well, one appears to be in 'the mood for an intervention', but the other three are doing their best, and suddenly Pino starts to dismount his metal mountable bed in an attempt to destroy the ceramic washbasin or to barricade himself inside the cell, just like he has done a few times before. The four officers are just a few steps from me

and less than one metre from the cell's barred door. One of the officers starts cracking his fingers, and another just a couple of seconds later puts his brown leather gloves on and takes the cell's key in his hands.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

Unpredictability is still an important characteristic of those threatening situations. I would hardly ever get it right, trying to guess the outcome of any particular situation. Too many factors and strategic prisoners' and officers' decisions impinge on any particular situation. In this particular situation, in my interpretation, the prisoner's surrender was very unlikely. He was very agitated and surely had no fear at all of violence, as some officers had told me. He had no problem with fighting at all. The newcomer was tiny and short. There was no doubt about the end of the fight. I got it wrong.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.6e

Suddenly, the situation turns upside down. Pino starts saying, 'No, no, no, please no, OK, OK, call that shit [the newcomer] and let me talk to him. I need to explain to him how it works here'. In the meantime, all four officers have put their gloves on, either dark brown leather or light blue plastic disposal ones.

The tension is very high, and the officers show no patience anymore. Fortunately for Pino, I am there, and they do not trust me at all yet. Therefore, they have not started the intervention so far. I step backwards a couple of metres. One officer screams to me, 'Move backwards!' I step backwards towards the entrance/exit of the wing. Just a few seconds afterwards, the wing officer shows me, with a sign of his, that I am welcome again on the scene, and everything is all right again.

Giuseppe, the wing officer, tells me that 'Pino has surrendered' (*si è arreso*). I do not quite get the details of what's going on, yet the big picture is more or

less clear. The head of the squad is explaining to Pino that ‘*è finita bene*’ (eventually, it’s all right), and that he must be calm and talk to his new roommate. He then adds that they had already met him the previous year. They tell him that he is a quiet and clean boy, and there is nothing to be worried about. Pino answers that they (the officers) should be worried for his new roommate, not for him. By doing so, he displays his usual masculine attitude and thuggishness.

The head of the squad promises Pino he would put all efforts to try to relocate the new prisoner as soon as possible, possibly even the next day if, and only if, everything would be OK the following night.

If not, ‘you know what we are talking about’. Then, he asks his colleagues to bring the new prisoner. Pino meets him and accepts the bargain in exchange for the promise to be left alone as soon as possible and, eventually, to be moved to the open wing. Giorgio has no choice but to do what he is ordered to do, and consequently he enters the cell, leaving all his belongings outside.

The emergency squad left just now. Giorgio is together with his new cellmate in their cell. One of the agents is not happy with the floppy end of the intervention because, as he tells me later over a cup of coffee, he cannot stand that guy and his childish behaviour anymore. He tells me bluntly that today they have lost a good occasion to teach him something.

Giorgio’s trolley with his few belongings wrapped up in two white supermarket plastic bags is still outside the cell.

The situation is calm now. Pino is preparing a coffee with a *moka*<sup>12</sup> on his light blue butane camping stove. In Italian prisons, that’s one of the usual ways to welcome a fellow inmate into a new cell.

One hour later, Giorgio lies down on his bed and sleeps silently. Pino exercises in the cell as if he were alone and looks quite relaxed again. The situation is back to normal, yet hard coercion had almost been performed. However, coercion is clearly there. In fact, both of them are locked up together against their will in the same cage. You can either decide to call it a cell or a room.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

Eventually, on many occasions, negotiation and dialogue (Liebling and Tait 2006; Fassin 2015) would achieve the intended result and the situation de-escalated accordingly even at this (credible threatening) stage. Negotiations would often be considered the best option by officers; at least that is what I grasped while being on the wing with them. Yet, a few officers told me in interviews that ‘back then’, it was more common to consider negotiation negatively, preferring physical interventions instead.

The outcome of any particular credible threat was unpredictable. Any particular situation could produce one particular outcome or another, and this, just like in the previous phase of the construction of the critical event and the symbolic threat, would also depend on what I called *status magnet versus status shield* (see the previous section on the construction of a critical event). Fleshy human beings with their own emotions, cultures and idiosyncrasies would interact face-to-face, and efforts would be made on either side to come up with a solution or go head-on to a physical confrontation. Depending on the particular situation and the particular actors involved in it, more or less favourable conditions would be in the picture, turning the situation in one direction or another.

In other words, simply by accepting or refusing the scripts, and consequently wearing the gloves *versus* not wearing them, moving hands *versus* not moving hands, officers would be able to bodily coordinate and align their next move with each other and, concurrently, signal their intention to the prisoner, who would be urged to make the next move quickly. By responding in one way or another, also by their proxemics, prisoners would often have a stake in the situation. Eventually, the prisoners who were ready for action would follow the strategy decided by the head of the squad (while a few others might have stepped aside) and, considering the prisoner’s move, would decide either to continue to perform a credible threat, or quickly jump to the bodily use of force by opening the barred door and starting to fight ‘with no pity’, as one officer told me in an interview already quoted and commented on elsewhere (Gariglio 2016).

[[START SHADED BOX]]

### Vignette 6.7a

Today, Mario is agitated ‘for no reason’, a nurse tells me. Just now, he was not allowed to go to the yard with the other fellow prisoners of the wing because it was John’s turn, a Senegalese guy who cannot encounter Mario for the reasons stated above. Mario can go to the isolation yard alone, if he wishes, but he doesn’t.

This afternoon, Mario is allowed to go to exercise with his fellow prisoners and John must stay in the cell accordingly.

Only one officer escorts all seven very dangerous inmates to the yard with no handcuffs or any other restraining tools. Strangely enough, they cannot be used inside, but only in a few extraordinary situations prescribed by law. In fact, all prisoners who are outside of their cells must follow the rules and the officers’ orders. However, they are always allowed by law to move without any kind of mechanical restraint. Particularly dangerous prisoners might be escorted with a larger number of prisoners each time they are out of their cell, but the same rules apply (no mechanical restraint of any kind). Prisoners can never be handcuffed or mechanically restrained in their movement within the facility, although they can be handcuffed if they are escorted outside the facility (i.e. to the hospital or to court). If it became necessary, as much as 10 officers can come to physically block any particular prisoner to escort him to his destination (again, without using any mechanical restraint).

This is what seems to be prescribed in Italy by law; at least what they have told me and what I have seen time and again.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

By law, more officers should be escorting such a group of dangerous prisoners. It is clearly stated in the documents available to the officers escorting prisoners, yet personnel are missing and some officers show off their masculinity doing such dangerous duties alone, asking for authorisation from the security manager first. Depending on who the security manager is, they are more or less likely to be authorised to escort such a group alone (with me). Usually, officers would be in groups of two or three maximum. They will have neither baton, nor shields, or any protection to defend

themselves. In such a challenging situation, any confrontation is very likely to become a very violent one.

However, all those tools and weapons are forbidden inside the wall, and ‘can only be used in exceptional circumstances after the governor’s order to do so, at least theoretically’, one senior officer told me. Then, if any crisis arises, the emergency squad arrives accordingly. I will continue to narrate the previous episode again.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.7b

I am at the rear of the group of prisoners when the officer is escorting them to the yard. The officer is at the head of the group.

The officer lets the prisoners enter the yard, and he and I move into the officer’s room from where he is supposed to monitor the yard.

There are seven prisoners ‘out there’ in the yard. Two of them are sitting on one of the benches on the other side of the yard facing the glassed room in which we observe them.

Some prisoners are chatting with one another, while others are sitting alone or running. Afterwards, Mario and three others are walking clockwise circles around the perimeter of the yard, just like in any prison film’s scene of this kind. The last prisoner is running back and forth, following a straight line approximately at the centre of the yard. I am observing them, and I am trying to sketch their movements in the yard, sketching some kind of drawing of their movements on my small paper notebook with my pen, something I have been doing for some time.

Suddenly, I see Mario behaving strangely. He is smoking, and at the same time he is shouting to another guy in his group who is also behaving visibly abusively, apparently for no evident reason. Just a minute or so afterwards, the second prisoner unpredictably punches Mario repeatedly very strongly in the face. After three punches or so, Mario falls down on the floor and starts bleeding heavily but shows no reaction.

In the meantime, the officer continues to read *I ragazzi di Salò*, which has been there during the entire ethnography with a couple of weekly magazines.

Mario is on the floor with both his hands holding his own face. He is bleeding very intensively (at least to my understanding). The guy who punched him picks up Mario's cigarette from the floor and starts smoking it as if nothing has happened, finally looking relaxed, and is walking around.

After a moment, Mario is again on his feet, visibly traumatised. His nose and mouth are covered with blood. He is moving slowly towards us (the officer and me) on the other side of the bulletproof glass, screaming something we cannot not hear clearly because the bulletproof glass interrupts any audible sound, making communication almost impossible.

Reading his lips and simply seeing his face almost completely covered in blood, though, I clearly get that he is calling for us to help him. To me, the situation looks like an extremely severe one. However, there is neither a system of microphones nor video surveillance working over there. No doubt he is shocked and needs immediate help. Moreover, he needs medical care. I tell the officer that something is going on out there. Apparently annoyed by my interruption, the officer looks calmly to the scene and suddenly asks me if I had seen anything of what had occurred. I reply, telling him the scene I had observed. Now, he walks to the blue yard gate, asking, 'What's up? What's up? Who has started? Why can you not stay quiet and enjoy some fresh air?', and so on.

On the other side of the yard, one young blonde prisoner with a red and white Ajax T-shirt stops running and is now crying, sitting on the floor at one corner of the yard. He is a first-timer and is possibly not yet accustomed to these kinds of 'usual', yet shocking, situations. Or maybe he cannot get used to these situations and he is simply traumatised and psychologically damaged by all that.

The guy who just now punched Mario has long dark hair and seems to be emotionless. He is now walking around the yard with no clear direction. He severely watches anybody trying to approach him in any way. One older prisoner, a mafia convict with a life sentence who is usually well respected inside by his peers, tries to calm down the perpetrator as well, unsuccessfully this time.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

Fights occurring between prisoners on the wing or at the yard are not always likely to be labelled as critical events. As I already explained at the beginning of this chapter, it depends on a set of factors. However, blood is often a good reason to urge an intervention. Moreover, fights developing on the yard can develop rapidly and become difficult to control. On those occasions, shields and helmets can be authorised by the director or the commander, and the squad might arrive in full riot gear.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 6.7c

The situation continues to be critical because in the meantime two other prisoners are pushing each other about 15 metres away from us. The officer who had already asked for a colleague to intervene to escort the bleeding prisoner to the infirmary must now phone the security manager to ask the squad to come as soon as possible. He cannot do anything alone, so waits for the squad to arrive.

They are here in a moment and all of them already have their gloves on. By doing so, they are signalling to the prisoners they do not intend to joke. They ask the officer 'patrolling' the yards what happened. He answers that 'Aziz punched Mario'. They look through the glass, 'kind of' studying the situation for a short while. Mario is already nearby the barred gate to the yard, waiting for somebody to help him, crying out emotionally and in pain. The emergency team considers Mario's situation not serious enough and makes him wait. Some prisoners are in fact pushing one another; others are looking from a distance with anger. The guy who punched Mario is still nervous indeed and does not show any intention of going back to the wing before creating some new troubles.

The situation looks very serious, at least to me. The head of the squad does not seem to agree with me, though. The squad runs to the gate and stops just a moment before opening the barred gate and entering the yard. The head of the squad decides to



go head-on to a confrontation after initially showing a formal intention to try to open a dialogue with the recalcitrant violent prisoner. The guy who assaulted Mario for a cigarette that Mario did not intend to share with him takes out a rudimentary razor blade and displays it bluntly to the officers. Some officers become really nervous for what they read as a provocation, yet others are visibly urging their commander to allow them to ‘stop bullshitting’ and jump on him. A four-metre-high blue fence still separates the officers, who are as yet on one side of the fence – off the yard – from the prisoners who are locked within the yard. Officers are still outside the yard and the principal officer continues to look for a dialogue. The guy is furious and continues to yell, pretending to control the situation violently. Suddenly, the principal officer starts to move his fingers, continuously opening and closing both hands repeatedly. From that moment, it was clear both to me and everyone observing the scene that there wasn’t any time left for dialogue. The officers start to step on toes quasi-synchronously and continue to move their hands, watching with a threatening gaze the guy who seems to be indifferent both to the officers’ dialogue and threats. All other prisoners are kind of blocked and quite slowly move backward from the scene. No one else is moving anymore. Only the guy who hit his fellow prisoner continues wandering around.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

It is strange to feel the tension in the air in such circumstances. Collins (2008) explains it quite well in his book, yet facing it, it tastes different. It is almost impossible to remember, let alone describe. Moreover, what is emotional tension and fear? I felt it differently any time I happened to be there at the ‘right moment’. Is it a subjective feeling? Or is it a shared emotional condition? I can only speak from my privileged standpoint: the standpoint of an author whose problem now is only to translate his experience into a narrative, not the problem to cope with this kind of situation endlessly. My understanding would change significantly if I were an officer, I guess. Anyway, I will continue to use the interactionist vocabulary simply because I have not found anything better than writing vignettes to tell the stories I lived.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

### Vignette 6.7d

Suddenly, the head of the squad watches his fellow officers and, holding the key in his left hand, clearly displays that 'it is now time for action' by inserting the key in the lock. The tension is very high; even the prisoner who had been crying most of the time stops doing so. There is a strange silence there, and everybody is apparently minding his own business, showing either indifference or deference to the authorities.

As soon as the yard fence door is unlocked, all seven officers, a few of whom appear to be visibly nervous (perhaps also due to my presence), cross the fence door, running into the yard towards the guy who had punched Mario and who had been holding the rudimentary razor blade for at least 10 minutes or so, threatening the prisoners and the officers in front of him. He immediately throws the blade on the floor towards the officers. Then, screaming 'STOP!', he raises his hands in surrender, yet his face remains completely emotionless. The squad is ordered to stop its intervention and behave accordingly.

Two officers escort him upstairs to his room. Afterwards, all the other prisoners are escorted together upstairs to the wing, and then Mario is allowed to walk to the infirmary to be treated. The doctor diagnoses that Mario has lost two teeth in the aggression, and that his nose is broken, as well as having a few small wounds. In the doctor's words, 'nothing serious'. Afterwards, the security manager 'issues a ticket'. Mario did not sue the aggressor; he was too afraid to do it. Despite being a keen yard attendee, Mario stopped going to the yard for some time. Eventually, his aggressor was transferred and Mario started to attend the yard regularly again.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

Those officers' scripts observed on the field were seemingly comprehended by almost all prisoners, who normally changed their behaviour accordingly, if they intended to timely stop the escalation of the situation. At that stage, in fact, there was not so much time left for the prisoner to decide whether to stop the fight or accept the challenge and get ready for it. By accepting the fight, prisoners would oblige the squad to act physically. The situation would evolve quickly, minute by minute. It would be characterised by a very high tension (Collins 2008). If the prisoner would not respond

adequately to officers' threats (Popitz 1990), following officers' orders, the officers might decide to use force to avoid losing face (Goffman 1958, 1961b, 1967) and/or reputation (Popitz 1990). The escalation could also occur due to the growing tension and excitement escalating either among officers or prisoners. A very high level of tension would, more or less slowly, move towards a non-negotiable end: the decision to open the gate and use bodily force.

At that stage, the situation would be developing quickly and any act could easily produce unintended consequences on both sides of the barred door, particularly so with particular prisoners and/or officers. The use of force might enter the picture because the prisoner, interpreting 'the gloves' as an act of hostility toward him and his reputation or as a provocation, might start to insult, threaten and display the intention to punch the officers through the gate. Consequently, the barred door could be opened at any time afterwards, thereby starting the fight.

'Wearing gloves', 'putting them on theatrically', moving fingers or cracking them were the most common ways officers used to signal (and at the same time would time-mark) the quick escalation of the situation from the symbolic threat of the use of force to either the credible threat of it or the bodily use of force. The credible threat would usually turn to a de-escalation and would end with the emergency squad exiting the wing (the end time marker of the threatening process).

These scripts were invisible to me for months, yet they were clearly comprehended by almost all prisoners, who normally changed their behaviour accordingly as a response to the officers' signals if they intended to stop the escalation of the situation. At that stage, in fact, there was not much time left for the prisoner to decide whether or not to stop the fight, or accept the challenge and get ready for it. By accepting the fight, prisoners would oblige the squad to act accordingly. The situation would evolve quickly, minute by minute. It would be characterised by a very high tension (Collins 2008). If the prisoner neither respond adequately to officers' threats, nor followed their orders or showed any intention to negotiate his surrender, then the use of force would probably soon be triggered by the head of the emergency squad. Officers might feel obliged to behave accordingly so as not to lose their own reputation. Going towards real actions, even those officers who tried to resist the intervention would join the others; it's their duty, after all. Following Collins (2008) (see Chapter 2), the escalation could also occur due to the growing tension and excitement resulting

from such a potentially violent situation, as well as, concurrently, due to the capacity of prison officers to circumvent the confrontation tension/fear and use force.

At that stage, any act could also easily produce unintended consequences on both sides of the barred door, particularly with certain prisoners and/or officers who would be more likely than others to interpret each other's act as provocation, and move head-on to the confrontation.

On some occasions, the prison officers' use of force might enter into the picture because the prisoner interpreted the officers wearing the gloves as an act of hostility towards him and his reputation. Following that alleged provocation, the prisoner might start to insult, threaten and display the intention to punch the officers through the gate. On another occasion, as one put it to me during an intervention, 'patience is finished'. Consequently, the barred door could be opened at any time afterward, thereby starting the violent fight that would always end up in the prisoner's manual restraint, and would sometimes be followed by a prisoner and/or an officer receiving medical treatment. More frequently, however, de-escalation enters the picture without any need for the bodily use of force, despite what we are all used to seeing in prison movies.

## Notes

- {ensp}1 Here, I want to thank Federico Varese, who suggested that I use the term 'credible' (see also [Campana and Varese 2013](#)).
- {ensp}2 See also the prison literature on officers' (and prisoners') homophobia and racism ([Phillips 2012: 168–204](#); [Earle 2016](#)), as well as that on masculinities ([Sim 1994](#); [Sabo 2001](#); [Jewkes 2005](#); [Earle 2013, 2014, 2016](#); [Ricciardelli et al. 2015](#)).
- {ensp}3 Ethnographic research shows that police rarely treat all persons on the street in the same way.
- {ensp}4 There is a large and growing literature adopting an intersectionist approach in prison ethnography. It is possible to focus as to how gender/race/class work in the threat of using force ([Toch 1998](#); [Ricciardelli et al. 2015](#)), and I am planning to do it elsewhere. Here, I focus on two extreme cases to give the gist of the issue.
- {ensp}5 Writing vignette, I use the *ethnographic present* (without being a positivist) as a literary device to make the narration 'alive' for the reader. See Chapter 1 for further discussion.
- {ensp}6 [Fassin \(2015: 261\)](#) describes the *paradox of the prison officers' work* as the situation in which those charged by the political system and the criminal law system to enforce the

execution of the sentence in day-to-day critical conditions (without the necessary resources to do so) have the stigma of not treating the prisoners well in return.

- {ensp}7 Ethnography is also a practice embedded in everyday researchers' discretionary decisions.
- {ensp}8 A specialized prison officers unit (GOM, Gruppo Operativo Mobile) deals with prisoners sentenced for organised crime, who are restricted under a special regime (so-called 41-bis), which is characterised by an enhanced level of prisoners' surveillance and control. More than one prisoner has described alleged violent 'lessons' received in detention in one of those prisons.
- {ensp}9 It is a method of participant observation characterised by doing ethnography accompanying one person, trying to be his or her shadow during a number of hours a day (see any ethnographic methods handbook).
- 10 The emergency squad is constructed in practice when it has to intervene. Only a couple of officers are usually formally on duty as emergency squad. Others would leave their main duty in case of an emergency.
- 11 Most of the suicide attempts were described by officers as *mise en scène* by which prisoners called for attention. Yet, I knew at least one of those who would frequently just call for attention, and eventually he committed suicide in his cell at night.
- 12 A moka is the aluminium machine usually used by Italians to prepare coffee at home.

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7

## The use of force<sup>1</sup>

The lawful use of force is the focus of this chapter. However, I directly observed it only less than a couple dozen of times, in which I also occasionally saw prisoners manually constrained on the floor by a group of officers after an intervention of the emergency squad.

Taking into account the exceptional nature of the observation of the use of force, in order to produce a narrative account of it, this chapter will address the topic by strongly integrating such observations with a particular emphasis on the interview's transcripts to calibrate what I witnessed (*infra*, Chapter 9).<sup>2</sup>

Collins (2008) suggests that violent bodily interactions between actors are avoided either within or beyond the wall most of the time.<sup>3</sup> According to Popitz (1990), people would prefer to simply threaten each other implicitly, rather than risk their own reputation, forcing themselves into an unpredictable, difficult situation (*infra*, Chapter 2).

However, regarding the easiness and difficulty of using force, this research suggests that the situations inside and outside prison might be quite different from one another. My research experience clearly shows that violence, not limited to the use of

force, is frequent inside, and violence in some custodial institutions still remains a day-to-day occurrence (Sim 1990; Drake 2015).

However, in Italy, and not only there, prisoners' violence and officers' lawful (and unlawful) use of force are usually hidden from the public gaze outside the wall (Pratt 2002; Fassin 2015). Moreover, ethnographers tend not to report the already limited aspects that they are allowed to observe for one reason or another (Drake 2015), also due to self-censorship. My interpretation of the officers' lawful use of force is clearly one of the topics that would not easily emerge in the Italian public debates, nor abroad. Following Garland:

[i]n the development of manner and cultural rituals, a key feature which Elias identifies is the process of privatization whereby certain aspects of life disappear from the public arena to become hidden behind the scene of social life. Sex, violence, bodily functions, illness, suffering, and death gradually become a source of embarrassment and distaste and are more removed to various private domains. Such as the domesticated nuclear family, private lavatories and bedrooms, *prison cells and hospital wards*.

(Garland 1990: 222, emphasis added)

Officers' use of force is among the 'disturbing events' (Garland 1990: 222) that the penal justice system tries to hide from the public gaze as much as possible. '[T]he sight of violence, pain, or physical suffering has become highly disturbing and distasteful to modern sensibilities' (Garland 1990: 223). Becoming the monopoly of the state, violence can only be performed by those authorised to do so within the secrecy of the institutions (Cohen and Taylor 1976). Usually, in Reggio Emilia's custodial complex, crises would happen time and again in which violence would clearly be in the picture, as previous chapters timidly show. The most common type of violence would be self-harm, prisoner-to-prisoner violence and, to a lesser degree, assaults (see also Edgar *et al.* 2012).

The intervention of the emergency squad would be likely, more often than not, to de-escalate the conflict before a credible threat is performed. Whenever an interaction had already escalated to a credible threat, the situation would become quite



unpredictable to me and very heavy to cope with, in my capacity as a researcher. The reputation of the officers and prisoners involved (as well as supportive audience and bystanders) would be challenged on the wing. At that stage, any new officer's move could cause another new prisoner's one in return (at times, interpreted by one or the other as provocations). This is particularly dangerous in Italy, where prison officers receive little serious training on de-escalation techniques, if any at all. Not only were prison officers in the field unprepared in de-escalation techniques and human rights, but some of them enjoyed sports such as boxing, Thai boxing, karate, and so on, for recreational purposes, for getting rid of all the stress accumulated on duty, and 'to fight { . } with no pity' (see Vignette 7.2). On the other hand, a few officers told me that they had personally experienced some mental health problems, but did not dare to disclose them, being frightened to do so, to lose not only their reputation among their fellow officers, but also their job.

I was impressed by the officers' interest for boxing. Prison officers, using force, however, do not show the discipline and commitment brilliantly described by Wacquant (2004) in his ethnography *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, nor do they necessarily follow the moral commitment implied in that sport, in which, following Wacquant, '[t]he brutality of the exchanges between the ropes is a function of the balance of forces between partners (the more uneven this balance, the more limited the brutality' (Wacquant 2004: 82–3).

Prison officers' bodily interventions only slightly resemble boxing fights, because in those interventions there is not only a numerical disproportion between the parties while boxers fight one-to-one, but also because, according to Wacquant:

[d]uring a session [of sparring in a boxing training session], the level of violence fluctuates in cycles according to a dialectic of challenge and response, within moving limits set by the sense of equity that founds the original agreement between sparring partners – which is neither a norm nor a contract but what Erving Goffman calls a 'working consensus'. If one of the fighters picks up his pace and 'gets off', the other automatically reacts by immediately hardening his response; there follows a sudden burst of violence that can escalate to the point where the two partners are hitting each other full force, before they step

back and jointly agree { . } to resume their pugilistic dialogue a notch or two lower.

(Wacquant 2004: 83)

Officers control violence differently. In the ring, boxers use a ‘controlled violence’ governed by a principle of reciprocity (Wacquant 2004: 84). The level of violence in the ring dictates, particularly during training, that the stronger boxer ought not to take advantage from his superiority, nor that the weaker fighter ought to take undue advantage of his partner’s softer fighting techniques, which he adopts in order not to hurt the weaker fighter too much (Wacquant 2004: 84).

In the fieldwork I witnessed, however, bodily interventions were controlled and negotiated, in one way or another, by those involved in it most of the time. Yet, the power relationships between the parties was of a completely different type than the one occurring in any boxing ring. Boxers do fight with each other on the principle of reciprocity, but officers use force against inmates (in case of bodily intervention) on the ground of their dominant position and their monopoly of the lawful use of force or coercion. Officers’ use of force is often likely to be lawful (or to be considered legitimate by those exerting it). Prisoners’ use of force is much less likely to be lawful, and even much less likely to be considered legitimate (i.e. as self-defence) either by prison officers, or by the adjudication occurring at the disciplinary hearing, and often also in front of the judge.

Writing about the use of force – but it may apply to prison officers and violence as well – Collins argued, ‘[t]he inner culture of the police comes from the centrality of confrontation in their work’ (Collins 2008: 377). He then added that ‘[t]he most proactive police are not necessarily seeking violence, but they are seeking action, and they think positively about using violence [read the use of force] if it comes to that’ (Collins 2008: 379). This is surely not true for all officers I met, yet it describes quite well, at least partially, one among the crucial cultural traits emerging in the informal conversations I had with officers and in the formal interviews.

## The aftermath of the emergency squad’s credible threat

We return now to a situation escalated to a point in which the squad had performed a credible threat. At that stage, any action from either side could produce unintended consequences. Any further threat or any defensive reaction performed by a person on one side could be interpreted by the person on the other side as a provocation. As the previous chapter shows, the threatening phase, in particular the credible threat phase, would usually last a short time. Such an unstable situation would quickly evolve either to a sudden de-escalation or to a point of no return.

The reputation of credibility is crucially and publicly at stake when performing a new threat on the wing. Interventions are usually discussed and commented upon, both among prisoners and officers. More importantly, for this chapter, reputation is mainly linked to the enforcement of coercive violent practices rather than to the use of violent symbolic language and behaviour.

Collins writes:

[t]he most violent police receive good administrative reports; they are well-liked by other cops. This is not only because they are often high-energy extroverts (although that appears to be true too); they are the informal leaders of the police. This fits a basic principle of small-group research: the popular members of the group are those who most closely express its values and are best at what the group is attempting to do.

(Collins 2008: 376)

Using force is also interpreted as toughness, and can be read through the lens of hyper-masculinity. Yet, that is only one possible interpretation, and it will not be developed here thoroughly (but see Sim 1994; Toch 1998; Ricciardelli *et al.* 2015; Earle 2016). Not only was violence (including the use of force) a shared code for toughness appreciated by some people on both side of the barred door, but it was also resisted by many others on both sides. In my experience, the picture is much more fuzzy and diverse. There might well be some hegemonic masculine cultures inside, yet other officers' cultures (not necessarily feminine ones) are also in the picture, even among those working in the squad, as already shown in Chapter 6. Some officers and prisoners would express an 'us versus them' attitude. Others, however, would be much more sensible and open with one another.

## Prison officers turning a blind eye

Turning a blind eye was a common strategy used by officers to rule the wing and to avoid creating a critical event (see Chapter 6). It was also used to avoid the escalation of the critical event into a physical intervention. The topic of ‘turning a blind eye’ is not new at all in prison literature, even from its outset, nor is it in the sociology of work and organisation literatures more generally. Yet, this point has rarely been discussed concerning officers’ decisions of whether or not to use force ‘doing’ coercion in any particular occasion. This ethnography shows that turning a blind eye was a strategy adopted to a different degree, more or less frequently, by officers ruling the landing in quite critical situations. One officer put it in the following way:

Here, we only take into account really serious critical events. We do not pay too much attention to anyone lightly cutting himself, just to seek attention. That’s just normal and happens regularly here, so we do not bother too much about it. Nor do we bother if they fight with each other softly. They do it continuously anyway. We only need to rush if we see blood running on the pavements [with a sarcastic smile] or when life is *really* at risk {.}. If we took all critical events happening here seriously {.} we would also go crazy, wouldn’t we?

(field note)

Another officer said that:

The situations are only critical for us when we actually see with our eyes that they are critical indeed. We do not normally consider a situation critical any time they [the inmates] start fighting with each other or start screaming and yelling towards us calling for our attention. That’s just our routine in here.

(field note)

Yet another argued that they would only respond to really urgent needs, and that someone shouting to save his life uses a tone that is easily recognisable.

Those quotes are complex and should be interpreted accordingly. They surely imbue a rhetoric of toughness and cynical attitudes, yet they also disclose a very challenging working environment (as well unacceptable prisoners' conditions) based on the banalisation of evil, which might also reinforce as an unintended consequence the dominance of the powerful prisoner on his weaker peers. However, those were not the only comments on the topic. Participation showed different officers' attitudes and confirmed those versions only partially. As already stated, status (see above, 'status magnet versus status shield') and other subjects' characteristics, and not only 'the situation', would often influence the encounter dynamic. Reading those quotes between the lines, I also feel the officers' sense of impotence and resignation to the situation. I am impressed that those officers did not speak explicitly about the continuous efforts characterising their daily routine, already discussed in Chapter 3. Did officers hide their everyday, less tough dimension of the job in an effort to account for, and display, their toughness, indifference and powerfulness? Or do officers speak as they do in the quotes to simply show a consequence of their anaesthetisation caused by working within the walls with no hope for change? Does officers' low commitment to their job (Buffa 2013b) have a stake in that attitude? How could better procedures of accountability and better work conditions influence the picture?

It is worth remembering that a credible threat would frequently bring the situation to a new phase. It would be a move binding the officers and the prisoner of the threat together. Each one would be obliged to take seriously into account the other's next move before strategically deciding one's own accordingly.

Using force during an intervention (except during mechanical or manual restraint) would last a short time. Sooner or later, as a consequence of a confrontation, prisoners must follow the rules enforced by the custodial staff in one way or another. After the de-escalation phase following one particular critical event, a new fragile status quo would be reconstituted once again, to eventually be re-challenged once more.

## Officers using force

Usually, force would only be used as a last resort. In particular, it would emerge on a backdrop of negotiations and would normally be introduced by a stage in which coercion is threatened rather than performed. However, as I saw twice, *assault of an officer would directly lead to officers using bodily force*, rather than less tough

intervention, quite independently from the ways in which the prisoner would behave immediately after the assault.<sup>4</sup> ‘Critical events’ would occur in two different situations, which in turn would influence both the start and the dynamics of the emergency squad intervention. First, when the wing officer or any other officer is between prisoners when the critical event occurs, sharing the same physical space without any physical barrier between him and the others. Second, when prisoners are locked up alone or with fellow prisoners, and the officers are physically separated by a barred door, glass or a wall.

### Using force with prisoners moving around them

When prisoners and officers shared the same environment without any physical barrier between each other, any intervention of the emergency squad would be likely to escalate more quickly and easily than in the opposite situation to the use of force. Critical events occurring within spaces in which officers and prisoners would be co-present would be less likely to include self-harm and the destruction of furniture or other goods. Those kinds of events had never been observed by the researcher, nor have they been spoken about during ethnographic interviews. Prisoner-prisoner violence is unfortunately nothing new (Toch 1998; Edgar *et al.* 2012) in prison literature. Prisoner-prisoner violence would also likely occur in the facility under study, either in the prison wing, run with an open-cell regime, or a closed-cell one. It would occur both within the interior areas of the facility and in the exercise yard. Prisoner-prisoner violence was more likely to occur in some spaces than in others (i.e violence occurred particularly frequently at the yard).

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 7.1a

Charlie and eight of his fellow prisoners are at the yard. It’s very cold and wet outside and they do not seem to be enjoying exercising that much. I am with Mariano, the officer on duty there. We are talking with each other while we are both observing the prisoners through the bulletproof glass separating the officers’ observation ‘box’ from the prisoners’ exercise yard.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

Being an ethnographer in prison, I am puzzled by the Foucauldian issue of observation and surveillance (Foucault 1979, 1980a, 1980b). At that particular moment, I am there observing inmates to pursue my goal: doing research. The officer was also there observing them for his own goal: doing so as it is his duty. This kind of similarity between the researcher's job and the officer's job makes 'doing' observation in prison particularly problematic indeed (*infra*, Chapter 9). Moreover, working with prison officers, I started to develop a kind of sympathy with those in uniform, which is also problematic, just as being too sympathetic with the prisoners. However, I can hardly imagine having such access without having the privilege to develop such sympathetic relationships with participants. This sympathy was built on a ground of my honest and sincere interest in the prison officers' jobs and in their difficult working conditions. I tried to control my bias, being as honest as possible. Of course, my subjectivity and my embodied experience are clearly part of my toolbox, whether I like it or not. Others will have the task of evaluating my capacity to try taking distance while starting to feel sympathetic with prison officers.

I now continue the narration of the previous vignette.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 7.1b

Prisoners are now walking in circles, some of them clockwise, others in the opposite direction, moving in the empty and hostile grey concrete yard in which even a ball for playing football is forbidden. Two move back and forth, yet another rambles without apparently following any direction. There, prisoners play with a few empty plastic bottles instead, something that they, or others before them, had previously thrown out from a cell's window before being escorted there.

Two prisoners in the yard are calling the officer by waving their hands back and forth repeatedly. They are clearly trying to communicate with him, signalling that

they all intend to return to the wing now, more than 20 minutes early. The officer asks all the other prisoners collectively to confirm their free intention to go back to their rooms before recreation time is finished. One by one, they all confirm it by nodding. Therefore, the officer and I move to the blue high-barred gate in the yard. The officer asks once again if all prisoners voluntarily agree (and were not forced by a fellow prisoner) to 'go inside', and consequently opens the door.

All enter the corridor and wait in a row to be escorted to the wing upstairs. There is – once again – only one officer escorting the group, and as usual I remain at the rear of the group, holding my tripod in my hand, this time with my photographic camera in my black woollen jacket's pocket. The situation seems normal. I just had a very interesting and nice conversation for about an hour with the officer. He seems really relaxed to me. The prisoners look bored, a few almost sleepy.

The officer is escorting the group through the corridor. Then, he turns left to the stairs, walks upstairs for two floors, and stops in front of the closed barred door blocking the entrance to the wing from the stairway. The officer looks through the glass to ask his colleague to open the door without receiving any answer. In the meantime, he pulls out his keys from his right trouser pocket, turning his back to the prisoners and to me. He puts the key into the locker and looks backwards. *Suddenly and unpredictably, one young tall prisoner punches the officer's face.* I am totally astonished.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

Remembering that experience and reading the notes it is still a challenging experience. I had heard many stories about officers being assaulted before. That was, however, the first time I saw it with my own eyes and felt it with my body. It has been very difficult to cope with. I was shocked, worried, puzzled and I had no frame to situate all this in the experience I had so far. I was pretty sure of my toughness at that point. I felt completely inadequate to cope with it with the tools I have built on the field. I had always been told about it, but had never experienced it face-to-face. I felt a lot of fear. I even felt completely abandoned by the officers who were busy with the situation. They even complimented me afterwards for my behaviour. However, that experience touched me so much that one educator suggested that I leave the field for a few weeks.



He really understood the deepness of my traumatising experience. It was shocking to me! I was trembling but trying to keep calm, displaying my capacity to cope with the situation. I am sure that the officers did not help me straight away because they did not see any need to do so. Afterwards, one told me, ‘You see. Is it logic? Should we stay here and be beaten for no reason?’ I did not answer, and simply tried to display self-consciousness. The vignette continues as follows.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 7.1c

Mariano, the just assaulted officer, had just told me in the interview that he is so proud of being a quite senior officer and had never been assaulted yet. Well, I witnessed his ‘first time’ just now. The officer is not that tall and quite heavy, not too talkative, but not cold either. Yet, the punch – not such a strong one – forces Mariano to step back in order to not lose his balance. His nose is bleeding. He says, ‘Hey! You punched me! Did you?’ watching the prisoners before trying to constrain the offending prisoner. The prisoner looks very excited and somehow happy about his ‘strike’, and does not show any intention to surrender. He is very nervous and his body is shaking slightly. His face is turning red and he seems ready to start a fight. I step backwards, kind of traumatised and worried.

The situation is totally out of control in my understanding: there are eight prisoners, one officer and I (yet, officers described it as nothing special afterwards). The prisoner is smiling at me. I feel like a spectator and do not know what to do. The officer displays tension and his face also turns slightly red. He looks angry, with no fear in his face at all. There is no alarm being rung, nor enough officers escorting the prisoners. Only the prisoners’ self-discipline and understanding avoid what could easily have become something really serious and unmanageable, both for the officer and for me. The officer starts to scream, ‘*Collega! Collega!*’ (which is the way in which Italian prison officers call one another in order to keep their names hidden from the prisoners and defend their own privacy). In less than two minutes, in a response to the scream requesting some help, one prison officer arrives at the spot where the assault had just occurred. In an effort to shield the prisoner from the officer’s reaction (or vice versa),

one prisoner rushes from the end of the group of prisoners towards the front, literally, yet unwillingly, walking over my feet and pushing me to the floor. This is the first horrible experience I have during this ethnography. It was emotionally very daunting indeed (and I am working to write about it more in depth elsewhere now). I think someone wants to beat me, but I am totally wrong. The prisoner who passes me, in fact, simply wants to stop the confrontation from escalating. Suddenly, another officer arrives, a real tough and muscular one, an almost professional boxer. Once on the scene, he starts screaming, 'What the fuck have you done to my colleague? Bastard! Who the fuck do you think you are?'

The prisoner who hit the escorting officer is hiding behind the fellow inmate who is protecting him from the officer, who is trying to kick back the prisoner's legs with his boots. The officer arrives and first starts to open a dialogue, yet yelling, with the prisoner who had punched his fellow officer, eventually receiving a kick in his face in return.

He simply cannot imagine that someone like this young blonde prisoner, a thin little young man, could attack him the way he did. The officer is considered a well-known fighter, and his reputation is not that of a very relaxed officer either.

Yet, he also receives a punch on his face just now. Taking the chain of interaction (Collins 2004) into account, I am now quite unsure as to why two consecutive officers' assaults occurring directly after each other did not trigger any heavy reaction in return (in terms of the use of force) from the officers. Was it only the outcome of officers' professionalism? Or did my presence on the spot also influence the officers' reaction to such a degree as to stop them from reacting physically in this particular occasion?

The second officer takes the prisoner in between him and the guy who assaulted them with his hands and pushes him to the side, loudly screaming to the prisoner, 'Fuck off! Fuck off!' The prisoner is now in front of the two officers, who just give him some symbolic kicks with their boots, block him and take him forcefully to the wing, then literally throw him into his cell. The prisoner looks aloof and does not display any emotion, staring the escorting officers in their eyes. He displays pride and satisfaction.

The intervention of the squad is finished (for the officers) just now. We are all moving downstairs to report what happened to the security manager, who does not seem either to appreciate my presence or to be happy to write a report. As a consequence of the assault, one of the officers has a fairly serious injury and must be taken to the hospital. The other only goes with him to be checked and receive a day off duty. The first officer assaulted has some serious permanent consequences and will not show up for a while. One image shot just after another similar episode had been crucial for the photo-elicitation interview's phase, helping me to start unpacking what doing coercion is directly from participants' voices (*infra*, Chapter 9).

[[END SHADED BOX]]

Having been on the scene time and again, this overuse of force might be tentatively explained also in part by officers' fear of the situation and by the officers' necessity to stop the situation from escalating further. Of course, theoretically, they should have acted differently, simply blocking the prisoner and nothing more than that. However, being there with them and experiencing their emotion and fear (or at least my own) helped me not to be too judgemental and to try to comprehend the situation instead.

However, only one prisoner has ever intervened to help his fellow prisoner in the critical events observed. Usually, prisoners not directly involved would stay quiet, or would simply intervene verbally, thereby trying at the same time to save face with their own fellow prisoners, and concurrently avoiding further problems with officers afterwards.

Whenever an officer was assaulted, a critical event would always be open accordingly, by the officer(s) denouncing what happened to the security manager, who then opens a prosecution that will lead to at least a new disciplinary hearing.

In the case of a psychiatric patient assaulting an officer, instead the psychiatric power (Sim 1990) would enter the picture (see also Holmes and Jacob 2014). The psychiatrist, or in his absence a doctor, would have the authority to deal with him. The psychiatric ought to decide what to do and how to approach the crisis. In the beginning of my fieldwork, any such situation would easily lead to a mechanical

constraint on a bed. Afterwards, a medical constraint and a manual one would be in the picture instead. Force was also regularly used as a last resort to urge a prisoner to comply with the psychiatric compulsory treatment, just like the vignette above shows, or to save the life of a prisoner trying to commit suicide. Regarding this situation, one almost unbearable to me, I have collected no evidence, but officers told me some ‘war stories’ time and again.<sup>5</sup>

In the following vignette, I describe a possible version of the situation occurring after a prisoner with psychiatric issues assaulted a prison officer.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 7.2

Nando is a patient that has been escorted to the cell by the officers after their intervention. The psychiatrist says to the officers and his paramedic staff that he is ‘a bit decompensated and needs some medication’. Both the psychiatrist and the nurse try for half an hour to convince Nando to be injected with psychiatric medication, but not only does he refuse it, he also goes completely berserk. Eventually, they need to call the emergency squad again to help them treat him.

The squad arrives, but either he does not even see them or, decompensating into psychosis, he feels that his life is at risk, and does not negotiate at all, barricading himself into his cell instead. The squad must open the door. They open the barred door and enter the cell, fighting with him ‘with no pity’ to get him and block him. He does not scream, nor does he move much. He simply tries to resist officers blocking him by biting and spitting. After a short intervention, which I can only partially see (some officers are in front of me), prison officers are able to block him on the floor. He spits at them and they try blocking his head to avoid it. The others try to block him to avoid being punched. The situation is very tense, and officers implement a shift system where they take turns restraining the prisoner for 20 minutes. In fact, the prisoner seems particularly strong, and one of the officers can hardly block his left arm. Officers say it was a really physically heavy duty to perform. Eventually, the nurse is able to inject the

prisoner, and he slowly starts to calm down. The prisoner is left alone again in his cell. For the following few days, he ‘will not create any problems’.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

It has been daunting to see those kinds of interventions time and again. I often experiences contrasting emotions, which I am not sure whether or not to share here. I always felt sorry for any victims, either officers or prisoners. On the one hand, I experienced empathy with the officers working in such a hard and difficult environment. On the other, I was overwhelmed on a daily basis by the structural unfairness of both the situation faced by mental health patients (see [Rhodes 2004](#)) and the hypocrisy embedded in calling the forensic psychiatric hospital a hospital at all (see [Gariglio 2016](#)). Furthermore, I particularly agree here with [Fassin \(2013\)](#), writing on the police enforcing order in Paris. He argues:

One of the disturbing aspects of the various accounts and observations of [police] violence [{}.] is the emotions that accompany them. Enjoyment of hitting or humiliating a defenseless is both a characteristic of the officers involved (though obviously, not all are), and a fact that needs to be understood.

([Fassin 2013: 135](#))

I would not say such an attitude was a common trait of the prison officers I observed. On the contrary, it was really rare in my experience, yet completely denying its presence would simply be denying what was observable in the field.

Bodily intervention would usually last only a few seconds or at most a couple of minutes until over. Then, the following phase of restraint can be very short if the prisoner cooperates, or very long if he continues resisting, or if a psychiatric intervention is required. The longest manual restraint I observed lasted more than three hours. It was exhausting for all officers performing it.

Using force with prisoners locked in

Prisoners could be locked up in their own cells, walking freely on a wing with an open cell regime (with officers controlling it from the outside), or doing exercise at the recreation yard. In any of these situations, officers and prisoners would be physically separated from one another by a physical boundary such as a barred door, a fence or bulletproof glass. According to the ethnographic observation, each time officers and prisoners were physically separated from one another, 'doing' coercion would be more likely to develop slowly and imbued in negotiations. Usually, the use of force would be introduced by a long stage in which officers would only threaten force. It would be unlikely that the emergency squad would go directly head-on for a physical intervention. Any particular intervention would then vary depending on which particular officer or prisoner was in the picture, and their personal status.

'Critical events' occurring within a secured environment can be of different types. Within a closed cell, prisoners would self-harm, barricade in their cell, destroy the cell, have a violent interaction with a fellow inmate sharing the same cell, or threaten a custodial or medical staff member outside the cell with a blade or by throwing objects. At the recreation yard, in my experience, critical events would mainly happen involving two or more prisoners fighting violently with one another for any possible reason: from a refused request of sharing a cigarette to a forced request or resistance to a 'sexual service', as they told me. No self-harm, barricading or destructions would normally occur at the recreation yard during fieldwork.

Concluding this chapter, I now turn to the final vignette.

[[START SHADED BOX]]

#### Vignette 7.2

Emilio was an unpredictable and very violent prisoner. He was always creating 'troubles'. The fellow prisoner in his cell continues to behave strangely, throwing plastic bottles and even a camping stove gas can out of his cell towards nurses, officers and me. He had destroyed the cell time and again.

The officer starting his shift comments to the nurse that the situation is again getting critical. That officer seems really annoyed. He is no longer in the mood to accept being stressed by the 'stupid guy' anymore. Yet, he tries to negotiate an exit strategy with the prisoner.

Two hours after the officer has started his shift on the wing, a couple of heavy verbal exchanges had already happened between him and the prisoner. The officer, in fact, now refuses to go to the prisoner's cell each time the prisoner calls him 'for no reason'. The prisoner insists and reminds the officer that listening to prisoners' requests is what prison officers must do. The prisoner was right, but the prisoner was clearly calling provocatively to exacerbate the officer, who was neither in the mood to be comprehensive anymore, nor to turn a blind eye, even though I was there next to him (or maybe also because of my presence, which urged him to show me his 'proper' prison officer's face). The prisoner was nervous and he was moving back and forth in his cell, for as much I could see. Due to the situation, as in other episodes, I tried not to be too close to the situation to avoid, by doing so, stressing the prisoner with my presence. His situation, as well as that of the officer, seemed complicated enough.

The situation suddenly escalated. No communication was possible anymore. The prisoners, maybe due to the very nervous situation, started to fight with one another. Suddenly, Emilio pushes the other to the floor and jumps on him. Afterwards, yelling at his fellow inmate, he blocks him. The other prisoner is crying loudly and his body is trembling, he told me and the officer afterwards, commenting on his weakness. The officer walks towards Emilio's cell. Arriving in front of the cell, the officer starts screaming something to the inmate that I scribbled as, 'Now stop it. That is enough! Do you get it or not?' The prisoner looks aloof and shows no intention to stop abusing his victim, who offers no resistance at all and looks traumatised.

Emilio is not the only prisoner giving problems; others are banging the toilet doors of their cells, and a few are screaming. The situation is really unbearable. The officer walks back to his chair and calls the security manager. Knowing the prisoner all too well, the manager orders an intervention. When the squad arrive in front of the cell, the prisoners are still screaming to each other and Emilio is still very nervous. Notwithstanding the squad members looking at him, Emilio punches his fellow inmate in the face, then starts slapping him.

Eventually, the squad commander opens the cell and four of the seven officers enter the cell to separate Emilio from his victim. The intervention is very short, and as Emilio is blocked the other prisoner is escorted to the infirmary by one of the officers who waited outside the cell. Emilio will be called for a disciplinary audit the next day.

To avoid a repeat of the problem, the victim is put into another cell that host a much easier prisoner. The squad return downstairs, and the intervention is finished.

The wing officer goes to Emilio and tell him, 'That's enough for now. Just sleep! And don't call me! I won't come anyway'. Emilio remains quiet for a few hours, laying on his bed. Afterwards, he starts creating problems again.

[[END SHADED BOX]]

To conclude this chapter, it is worth saying that by using force to a higher or lower degree, the emergency squad would usually overcome any resistance more or less quickly. This would reinforce the officers' credibility of doing coercion effectively both to the prisoner(s) involved and to those prisoners nearby for the future. At the same time, the hard intervention would also enhance the squad's violent reputation on the wing. Yet, prisoners assaulting an officer would also enhance their own reputation, at least with some of their fellow inmates, but at the cost of officers' future discrimination, retaliation and even, albeit rarely, double jeopardy (Sarzotti 2012; Buffa 2013a).

## Notes

- 1 Here, I explicitly state that I have decided to tell the truth only partially. I acknowledge that I will not tell all the truth, hiding facts that I saw (or that I have been told) that I do not think to be relevant, appropriate or convenient to write about here. Reflexivity has long been considered a crucial feature of ethnography. Unfortunately, however, prison research has very rarely addressed the issue of self-censorship straightforwardly. And I do intend to do it here.
- 2 However, due to the thickness and sensible contents of those interviews, they will not be discussed here, but will be thoroughly analysed in a forthcoming publication.



- 3 Once again, following Collins, '[v]iolence is so difficult because it goes against our propensity to attune our nervous systems to those with whom we establish intersubjectivity. Quite literally, persons in a conflictual situation, who are close enough to send and receive *signals from each other's face and body*, feel the tension of simultaneously becoming highly attuned to each other, while trying to force the other to submit to one's will' (Collins 2012: 136, emphasis added).
- 4 This section will not only discuss what the ethnographer has observed on the wing, but will also disclose a few anecdotes from officers' video-recorded interviews in which they provide their descriptions and interpretations of 'doing' coercion bodily.
- 5 This situation is similar to the TSO (in Italian, *trattamento sanitario obbligatorio*) compulsory sanitary treatment that can be enforced to all free persons by a law enforcement agency officer following a medical prescription occurring only after softer forms of negotiation.

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[[TYPESETTER: SEE AUTHOR'S 'DUMMY LAYOUT' FILE FOR AN IDEA OF THE DESIRED LAYOUT OF THIS CHAPTER]]

8

Visual notes from my visual ethnographic diary

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1 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.1]]

2 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.2A]]

3 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.2B]]

4 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.2C]]

5 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.2D]]

6 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.3A]]

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8 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.4]]

9 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.5A]]

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21 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.6A]]

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26 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.9A]]

27 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.9B]]

28 [[INSERT FIGURE 8.10]]

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1. An external view from a field in the early morning. The external wall, the sentinel path and one end of the last floor of the psychiatric hospital's detention wing are visible.

2. Inside the prison officers' wing booth (or wing box). On the top of the photograph, a sacred Catholic image of Jesus hangs on the wall protecting those working inside the walls. Those kinds of images can be found in all wing booths, as well as in many prison officers' offices and other public spaces. Below Jesus' image, a handheld metal detector used to search inmates on the wing is hanging from the wall, ready to be used.

3. I shot this picture for Umberto in his cell. He asked me to do it and considered it a present from me. He knew that I was not allowed to give it to him, yet asked me to do it anyway. He dressed up for the picture with his better clothes. He even put the hat on. He wanted to be portrayed in his cell with the image of the Pope. He had written to 'Papa Francesco' and received an answer to his letter. He was very proud of it. He told me that from that moment onwards, he felt less alone. I took this picture for him and I publish it here just because I promised it to him. Yet, despite his written consent to be published in this book, I cannot show him behind a barred door. That's why he is unrecognisable. However, each time I look at this picture, I see him anyway.

4. The trolley of a newcomer yet to be allocated to a cell. He was allowed to take almost nothing with him. On top of the cardboard box are his new blanket and sheets.

5. Christmas time at the wing booth.

6. The newcomer is escorted to his cell. He must help himself. Behind the officers, the trolley can barely be seen.

7. Giovannino is controlling the prisoners at the concrete yard. Usually, he would read a book or a newspaper. For the occasion, he 'acted' for me 'to give a proper image of the prison officers', he told me.

8. The wing register on the wing booth's table.

9–20. Twelve cells are situated one next to the other, as the labels with the numbers above the barred doors show. Here, you can see cell numbers 11 to 1. Images of those cells were taken within seconds from one another, and are intended to give a quasi-synchronic image of one particular moment on the wing, focusing on those in custody and the place in which they live their lives. The pictures have been shot one after the other, after a previous informal request to the prisoners do so. Each and every prisoner signed the informed consent a couple of days before the shooting, agreeing on allowing me to shoot in any moment without previous notice. I shot the pictures one after the other, depicting only those who afterwards confirmed to me they were happy to be in the book. However, the page with all those images affected me. The prisoner identity was denied, and those faces only reinforced the 'spectacle of punishment', possibly suggesting that the reader adopts a voyeuristic gaze, which I resist. Eventually, I decided to pixelate all the prisoners' faces in these pictures, hoping, by doing so, not to displease those who showed their intention to participate. Showing their faces behind bars in this book became senseless for me. And I decided not to do it. I closed prisoners' doors if they did not wish to participate. Once again, I made all prisoners unrecognisable, as well as any names on the wall. I still recognise each and every one of them. The last picture timidly shows a CCTV camera.

21. Terenzio is signing the informal consent through the barred door, and I am holding the document to facilitate it. It was horrible to see such detached relationships going on and to be involved in it. It is even worse looking at that picture now. It is a picture showing only a version of a set of inhuman situations. It just shows an authentic description of one such inhuman reality, though. I see it as a kind of visual witness. In fact, not only would prisoners receive all kinds of medication and food in that way, but nurses would even administer injections of psychiatric medication or antibiotics through the barred door to make the job quicker and easier. It is challenging to see it now. It is the power of ethnographic photography emerging throughout the entire sequence of images. It is visual ethnography's capacity to visually quote from the reality, affecting, by doing so, the spectator. Images can affect the viewer. Good images sometimes do it.

**22.** An image of a cell. I am not authorized to show that cell; therefore I use pixelization. Photography and ethnography are constrained by censorship and self-censorship; there is a trade off between witnessing and denying. Despite their indexical nature, there is no production of images without a producer. This kind of image could easily be read as a technical reproduction of the reality. However, just like all other text in this book, Chapter 8 is my visually authentic description. It is a representation, a portrait of the reality depicted, but also a self-portrait.

**23.** This image shows the result of a prisoner's action afterwards constructed as a so-called 'critical event'. Now it feels very strange to see it, but then it was business as usual to me. It is necessary to remain alert and avoid anaesthetisation.

**24–25.** The emergency squad 'doing' coercion on the wing. The symbolic threat of force is displayed to the prisoner and his peers by their arrival. The use of force is in the air.

**26.** A prison officer, who asked for anonymity in the picture, busy doing paperwork in the aftermath of the 'critical event'. I photographed him from the outside of the booth, turning my back to the cells.

**27.** A prisoner in his cell in the aftermath of a physical violent confrontation with the emergency squad. Pixelisation was implemented to avoid the risk of spectacularisation. However, images are, to a certain extent, always spectacular. It also depends on the spectator's way of seeing them. However, I think that by showing disturbing realities, it is also possible to resist denial and mystification. I do not see any grand hotel lobby nor a suite in this picture. Can you see it? Mimmmo signed the form and asked me to publish his face (in colour) in a weekly magazine. He does not understand what doing research means. I told him I would publish it in a book, and I said I could not guarantee anything to him. He agreed but asked me again to send the image to the press. Not doing it might be interpreted as an act of betrayal. I decided to use pixelisation and to put his image in my book. I apologise to him.

**28.** The other side of the story. Suddenly, a punch in his face. Pain, anger, disillusion. The hospital. A few weeks later, despite all odds, he is again at 'the front line', very often with a friendly smile on his face. Thank you very much for allowing me to take this picture in such a difficult moment.

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## Methodological afterthoughts

Field research can, at bottom, be considered as an act of betrayal, no matter how well-intentioned or well integrated the researcher is. You make the private [of the participants] public and leave the locals [who took part in the research] to take the consequences.

(Miles *et al.* 2014: 297)

Over the last few years or so, I have mainly been busy writing and rewriting this book. Contrasting emotions and anxieties have been my companions most of the time. Not only because the field had much heavier consequences on me than I had predicted, but I am discovering with my body and psychological well-being that I am not as strong and cynical as I always thought I was. But also, more importantly, I feel very puzzled about the very process of doing ethnography on such a sensible issue, collaborating closely with some flesh-and-blood persons, and afterwards leaving the field and constructing my authentic representation (Liebling 2015). I have had the same feeling before doing my long-term photographic project on prisoners (Visser and Vroege 2007), which started in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

I agree with the epigraph above (Miles *et al.* 2014): doing field research can also be partially interpreted as an act of betrayal indeed. Some people might have perceived my experience with them in that way, and I want to apologise to them. That is a puzzling ethical problem for prison ethnographers. However, in my own experience, doing ethnography *with* the participants was much more than that. Cheating was absolutely not in the picture on my side, and I hope it has hardly ever been an intended consequence of my being there doing ethnography. Some participants still regularly call or write to me even after some time off the field, and that is also problematic methodologically in relation to the issue of 'going native'. Going native is the other side of being detached. Fieldwork is a practice that implies living with others, trying to find a balance between distance and personal involvement, yet what to do? Be hostile? Mean? Neutral? Is it really possible, as it appears to be in some accounts? In my

experience, relationships evolve gradually, either within or without the ethnographic field.

I frequently felt sympathy and empathy with officers, yet I always told them clearly that I would try neither to be biased against them nor to be in their favour. Friendly relationships have been partly an unintended consequence of sharing so much time and quite heavy situations working next to each other. Those relationships are part of my personal memory, and can hardly be communicated through a professional researcher's diary.

I am not an automaton, and that is what occurred. I have coped with those methodological issues by trying to control my standpoint reflexively, making it explicit both to participants on the field and to readers of my texts. Trying to comprehend a reality while living in it is the main characteristic of ethnography, and it impinges in knowledge production (it sounds like quite an old issue in the social sciences, doesn't it?).

Did I turn native? I am not sure, yet I do not think so. I can only say that I have always been reflexively aware of that risk and tried to balance it against being detached. Looking for a balance between those two extremes has been my effort from the beginning until the end of the fieldwork. However, a few questions remain unanswered: Why are a few prison officers still interested in me? Are they, indeed, or do they still expect anything in return? Was I clear enough with them? What was I able to give them, if anything at all, in return for their participation?

Being in the facility for so long was puzzling indeed. I frequently felt some forms of fear, occasionally tension. Yet, I always tried to display my self-confident face. Being confident, and occasionally showing toughness, was regarded as a shared code between officers. I adopted that code too, without too much difficulty, in order to be accepted by participants, and at the same time to be able to cope with the situation. I also occasionally felt anesthetized, feeling indifference to the tragedies I saw around me. On those occasions, I stopped participating for a couple of weeks or so in order to regain some distance from that wing life, thereby returning emotionally sensible to what occurred around me again.

I tried to be reflexive while working in the field, and to challenge my understanding afterwards, while writing this ethnography in an effort to build my

authentic description (Liebling 2015). Yet, by doing so, I felt inadequate to transform all those lived experiences into some kind of sophisticated knowledge grounded in sociology, and I decided to largely adopt the vignettes I wrote, rewriting and re-elaborating my fieldnotes to return, at least in part, to the emotions and complexities of the field through narration, and to leave interpretation open to audiences. I also edited a visual note that I constructed from my visual ethnographic diary (Margolis and Pauwels 2011; Harper 2012). Both verbal vignettes and the visual notes are quotes of a few particular significant episodes I embodied in interaction with the participants, which I intend to share with others in a seemingly direct literary form. They are examples of lived interactions within the walls that can help to understand what ‘doing’ coercion is in practice, as well as visualising it, for those flesh-and-blood human beings experiencing it.

Those issues puzzle me, and I would be very keen on getting the gist of what the participants think about my constructions of the experience we have shared in the field from their voice. Ethnography is, by definition, grounded in interaction and shared mundane life experiences and emotions, and implies theoretical thinking (at least to me), for better or for worse. It is embedded in the continuous intermittent and shifting cooperative and conflictive interactions between the participants, the researchers and the bystanders, in the light of theoretical thinking.

## Doing ethnography versus theoretical enquiry

Theoretical thinking can sometimes be detached (Bosworth 2014). It does not necessarily presuppose any close contact with the human being, which it aims to address. I grasped the difference between theoretical inquiry and personal experience many years ago, before even thinking about becoming an ethnographer. It occurred in the 1990s at the University of Turin (I). I was studying political science there. I participated in a few courses dealing, broadly speaking, with what we call prison sociology. At that time, I had been busy on my photographic project in European prisons for quite some years already. I had a rich, embodied, yet unsophisticated – or should I say un-theoretical – experience of what prison, punishment, control and trauma were for those I met inside, and with whom, usually, I had spent some time talking and listening about their stories (usually days) before taking a picture. I followed those lectures at the University of Turin; most of them were interesting and richly informed.

Surely, they were theoretically oriented. Yet, there was a troubling gap I experienced in those classes between those informed and very sophisticated detached academic accounts, and the mundane reality I had been experiencing with my senses (in Georg Simmel's terms) for some years within the walls, both in Italy and abroad.

I was puzzled, yet I had not been able to refrain from asking the lecturer something that sounded more or less like this: 'Excuse me professor, can I now know which prisons you have visited so far throughout your career? I mean, your lessons were very informative, but in which prisons have you been so far?'

The professor seemed a little embarrassed and surprised by such a direct and unexpected questions of mine, yet I remember his honest, straightforward reply: 'none'. I am not sure whether or not he understood what I meant. I am not sure whether or not he simply took it as a naïve question from a BA student not to take notice care of. I am not sure whether or not he replied honestly to my question. However, this episode came back to my mind reading *Inside Immigration Detention* (Bosworth 2014) in Oxford two years ago. Then, I copied the following quote:

Doubtless, theoretical inquiry can be rich. However, when nearly all the available scholarly debate is based on secondary materials, questions must arise, not only about accuracy, but also about interpretation. *Can we really grasp the nature of these institutions without going inside? What can an interior view contribute to our understanding? What might it lend to our critique? How might it challenge the theoretical framework we have come to rely on when talking about border control?*

(Bosworth 2014: 53, emphasis added)

Bosworth's account is challenging and illuminating at the same time. It interrogates the ethnographic practice as such. Another implicit question would be: Can we really grasp the multifaceted nature of these institutions going inside? Yes and no, or maybe we can contribute to create a set of authentic descriptions, or partial truths, trying to answer some questions. The answers should be grounded in the experience we gained and the empirical material we constructed inside through interactions, observation and simple conversations, while dealing interactively and reflexively with the participants and other bystanders. However, answering Bosworth's question '*Can we really grasp*

*the nature of these institutions without going inside?*’, my answer would tentatively be ‘I do not know’. Maybe not, if we are interested in seeking to comprehend the flesh-and-blood lives, stories or interactions of those working and living within the walls. Yet, others might be interested in other relevant aspects of the phenomenon.

Bosworth’s (1999) rich *oeuvre* on detention, gender and methodology offers a convincing call for ethnography grounded in humanity, empathy, curiosity (theory), and, most importantly, deep personal and emotional engagement. In her writing, she reflexively questions the reasons why to do research, as well as the responsibility of those of us researching custodial institutions professionally. She reminds us not to forget about the experiences of those who are in detention or working within the walls. In my interpretation, which is grounded on a quite different theoretical approach, her lesson resonates well with the challenge imbued in the opening quote in this chapter.

## The body as a shared code of toughness

Ethnography is an intensively performative bodily activity, just like documentary photography. Doing ethnography, I paid attention to people’s bodies and interactions with one another. This is something I was used to doing while working as a photographer to construct my visual and verbal representation of the prisoners around me. Being immersed in such a coercive and constraining ethnographic fieldwork, basically consisting of one wing and some other spaces contiguous to it, I realised that my own presence and my own body were playing a stake in the very possibility of conducting the ethnography on that particular topic, and in the particular way I was doing it. Not only my own toughness (some would call it masculinity), but also my ascribed body characteristics, such as height, weight and skin colour, influenced the ways in which I was perceived in such a violent environment. Being on the wing, looking at others, implied the possibility of being looked at, observed or, as one prisoner told me, ‘studied by us’. Being on the wing also meant often being physically in the same small places with one’s own body sharing the space with others’ bodies, interfering with the activities of one another.

Moreover, I was the only person on that wing who was clearly allowed to move freely at his own will and who was not compelled to follow any shift, and who could even decide to enter or exit the facility without any justification at any time. Officers were working in shifts instead, and were obliged to stay in one particular area

during their shift. Prisoners could always only be where they were required to be. I was still an outsider, to a certain extent, until the end. I was not constrained by the same rules shared either by prisoners or by officers. My autonomy clearly remarked for my researcher status. Moreover, my own body was something unusual to be seen there. It was interpreted discursively by officers. I heard officers talking about it using words such as ‘big’, ‘too big, almost annoying’, ‘muscular’, ‘floppy’, and in many other different ways. I realised that my body was communicating in one way or another to those in its proximity, whether I wanted it to or not. A few officers even told me that I was lucky enough to be that big and did not comment further. One officer told me that such a big body would keep me safe on the wing: ‘even the troublesome usually avoid those much bigger than them, and you are very big indeed. But do not trust yourself too much here’.

My own tall and not too weak body (not that big, in fact) was often seen as a sign of my maleness and was even occasionally sexualised, mainly in the context of jokes and banter, which occurred rarely. ‘Strong’ – meaning muscular and tall – bodies were often performed and displayed both by officers and inmates on the wing. The ‘muscular body’ was, I repeat, a kind of shared code of toughness between the (strong) keepers and the (strong) kept (and me). The ‘big guys’ would talk about their body performances in the gym, their body training, violent fights, and so on.

Being constrained by a uniform, officers showed their own bodies mainly through proxemics, postures and by their militaristic attitudes (which I found much stronger in other Italian prisons I have visited before). Inmates used proxemics as well, but they also exposed their own bodies literally through the selection of appropriate clothes, sometimes of locally trendy sports brands, or staying with shorts and no T-shirt at all, which is not technically allowed, but discretionally tolerated.

Weak prisoners, short prisoners and those prisoners with minor physical problems were likely to be occasionally ridiculed and publicly ‘othered’ in jokes and banter, not only by fellow prisoners, but occasionally by officers. Yet, extremely weak prisoners and those with disabilities were usually treated more or less fairly most of the time, at least in front of me. More often than not, in those extreme cases, such as a young inmate with no legs living on the wing, pity, empathy and even a friendly smile and helpful attitude were in the picture, on both sides of the gate.

I now turn to discuss my access to the field.

## About access and gatekeepers

The first informal contacts with those in charge of granting clearance to enter the custodial institution for research started in early 2011. I was allowed to enter the field for the first meeting to talk about the feasibility of the research with the governor about one year afterwards. Despite my previous clearances, which date back to the 1990s (see [Visser and Vroege 2007](#)), it took quite some time negotiating access for this research. I will disclose 'how entry was obtained'. Negotiating access with the gatekeepers, at different levels of the hierarchies, can be hard. Rarely is it addressed in ethnographic accounts ([Bosworth 2014](#)). Neglecting to account for it both obscures the difficulties and compromises necessary to obtain clearance, as well as, concurrently, hiding the debt we might owe to those gatekeepers who eventually let us do our jobs ([Bosworth 2014](#); [Fassin 2015](#)). Occasionally, it might also be a form of denial of institutional censorship, or a denial of self-censorship, which might also be in the picture in one way or another.

There were different reasons why my first informal appointment to talk about my research project with a civil servant was, unpredictably, a total failure. First of all, in Italy they still tended not to grant access to sociologists doing ethnography ([Sbraccia and Vianello 2016](#)). Second, the recent so-called 'OPG scandal' (see the section entitled 'The Italian alleged "institutional violence" and the scandalous custodial institutions' in Chapter 1) had created critical enough to be managed. In the area manager's opinion, to the best of my understanding, granting research access could only contribute to creating further problems and public attention on such issues. In the area manager's opinion, to the best of my understanding, granting research access could only contribute to creating further problems and public attention. Therefore, even during our second meeting, he simply cordially, but clearly, refused my informal proposal. After a few months, I asked for another appointment to at least have the chance to explain what (at the time) my research's goal was and to be allowed to answer his numerous questions. Unpredictably, the manager saw it as a feasible proposal to discuss further in the following weeks. He seemed to be honestly interested in my unusual (in the Italian context) approach. Furthermore, he seemed to appreciate and comprehend the gist of my prospective research.

Eventually, I got permission at the area manager level to enter the institution to discuss the issue in more detail with the governor, who became my next gatekeeper. The governor seemed to be unreachable, not only uninterested, but also quite contrary to

letting me in. He avoided answering me any time I called by simply not answering the phone. He simply tried to resist my arrival as much as he could. Having the official support of the department, I was allowed to continue to call the governor anyway. For a few weeks, he resisted. I kept on calling. I felt supported, since I was already formally authorised to do my research there by a ministerial authorisation. Eventually, an educator who answered the phone on behalf of the governor suggested trying to talk with the healthcare director. Maria, the psychiatrist directing the custodial complex's healthcare, answered the phone straight away and showed sincere interest from the first moment I talked to her. She has been supportive ever since.

Eventually, I was invited for an informal meeting with her, which lasted more than an hour, in which we discussed my proposal in some detail. I arrived at the facility one morning, about two months later. Maria organised on the spot my first access to the wing escorted by a prison officer and a psychiatrist's assistant. Nobody seemed to know anything about my arrival over there. Formal access had been achieved; informal access was yet to be negotiated on the field on an everyday basis. Access, both formal and informal, has been one stressor factor to me throughout the entire ethnography, even though I have experienced no access restrictions at all over the entire ethnography. I felt access to be very precarious, possibly more than it actually was. Surely, access could have been taken away quickly at any time for whatever reason. They allowed me in until I felt it was time to finish it. I am very thankful about that with all of them.

## Why in there? The justification of the field

This research, as it ended up, cannot be defined as a comparative research, nor was it ever intended to be one. Yet, the setting was selected because in one particular custodial institution, as already mentioned, two identical facilities could be found next to each other: a prison and a forensic psychiatric hospital (de facto working as a prison, for what concerns 'doing' coercion, at least in the wing in which I conducted my ethnography). I chose that context because it seemed to be adequate to explore power relations between custodial and non-custodial staff studying those two institutions.

I had decided to adopt 'purposive sampling' (Gobo 2004, 2008), which 'consists of detecting cases within extreme situations as for certain characteristics { . } in order to maximise variation' (p. 448). I thought of doing ethnography both in the



psychiatric forensic hospital and in a more rehabilitative-oriented institution ‘in order to maximise variation’ in terms of frequency and intensity of the use of force.

I mainly focused on one of the two institutions within the custodial institution under study. This was not planned in advance; it became the best option due to the development of the research’s natural history. In particular, the necessity to focus on one facility only (indeed, mainly in one wing of it) was the outcome of the unpredictable possibility to study prison officers’ ‘doing’ coercion in male custodial settings, and doing so by doing ethnography and even adopting visual methods.

Eventually, I decided to do my ethnographic observation mainly focusing on one of the two settings. Some time was needed to gain trust in order to be allowed to have *actual* and not only formal access to the wing’s day-to-day life, and even more to be allowed de facto to be a spectator to the emergency squad’s interventions. Trust was the result of the ongoing interactions with those particular officers working on one particular wing day in, day out, and had been built in many hours of working side by side. Slowly, the field became more and more familiar and open to me. For that reason, it seemed unfeasible to start all over again in the nearby facility. In other words, I was not yet quite satisfied with my understanding of the topic and decided to continue studying it thoroughly in one setting. Staying there over a longer period of time, I had the chance to witness more ‘critical events’. It also allowed me to collect more observation ‘data’, and to make sense of them by ethnographically eliciting new interpretations from participants, doing so by integrating into my narratives the participants’ subjective understanding of the situation. Over the final months, then, in the final stage of the ethnography, I was also able to collect 47 video-recorded photo-elicitation interviews (Gariglio 2016; see also Harper 2012) and 37 video-recorded semi-structured interviews with participants, as well as 14 open-ended interviews explicitly required by prisoners.<sup>2</sup> I was also allowed to collect photographic and video documentation to be used as stimulus during photo-elicitation (Gariglio 2016). Later, I was authorised to publish the sequence I decided to use in this book. The last phase of the research and the possibility to adopt visual methods helped me to deepen my understanding of the issues I observed. However, this book is mainly grounded on my field notes and my observation.

Interactions with prison officers, other staff and inmates slowly became a ‘normal’ occurrence in my day-to-day stay on the wing: deep and more reflexive

conversations were emerging spontaneously or were intentionally elicited by me. I also developed a higher degree of reflexivity writing my field notes and writing and rewriting this pages in interaction with many peers who generously helped me to challenge my understanding to a new level. Unfortunately, I have not yet had the courage, nor the possibility, to really engage with writing something collaboratively with participants (following [Bosworth et al. 2005](#)). Yet, I am thinking about trying to do it in the near future.

## On reflexivity

I consider the long participation in one wing and the interviews an adequate way of reflexively experiencing my topic in one specific organisation. Without participation and personal reciprocal trust, this book would simply not be here, at least not in this form. Reflexivity is a device ethnographers use to question their practice, thereby trying to enhance their persuasiveness ([Cardano 2009](#); [Hammersley 2015](#)). In qualitative methods, reflexivity is a crucial concept, yet sometimes a bit too fuzzy to be adopted clearly when doing research in the field. Here, [Hammersley's \(2015\)](#) version of reflexivity in prison ethnography will be used:

[Reflexivity is the] awareness on the part of the ethnographer of how her or his personal and social characteristics, feelings or emotions, and behaviour may not only facilitate and illuminate but also restrict and distort the data and the analysis { } [T]he ethnographer can never simply be an insider.

(p. 25)

Hammersley brilliantly points out some crucial problems of doing ethnography (see also [Earle 2013](#)), either epistemological or ethical ones, which have been at the centre of the ethnographic agenda for decades, particularly so after the so-called *writing culture* debate. Hammersley's critique of empiricism is relevant here. The way in which he directly challenges the heuristic value of 'inside' knowledge is noteworthy because it can challenge the very base of the approach adopted here. Participation, in other words, is more likely than not to enhance certain kinds of understanding. However, it *cannot* 'guarantee' it ([Hammersley 2015](#)). As a consequence, the author concludes by saying that neither ethnography, nor any other

methodological approach, such as qualitative interviews or quantitative methods, can claim any epistemic privilege.

There has been an interesting methodological and epistemological debate among ethnographers between, at one extreme of the continuum, those who have opted for the naturalist model and, at the other extreme, those who have opted for the constructionist model (Silverman 2011).<sup>3</sup> However, neither side can guarantee a 'better' knowledge than the other. Each approach can instead produce and justify one plausible comprehension of the phenomenon under study from a particular standpoint adopting a particular method. I agree that not only 'research can never be "theory free"' (Silverman 2011: 149), but also I would add, following Cardano (2009), that ethnography 'is [necessarily] "praxis" or "procedure laden"' (p. 1). This point was particularly relevant in this field. By doing ethnography, I had to decide every day and in every situation how to position myself, what to say, and what not to say. I had to take into account the ethical consequences of accounting, making visible, rather than denying, making invisible the realities I encountered. That is something we do in our everyday lives, but doing research in prison requires an enhanced level of awareness due to the particular conditions of the subjects under study. I wrote *my* 'authentic description', and I decided (I was not required to do so) to send the book to the department to ask their opinion before sending it to my editor. I received a thank you when I sent it, and no further comments afterwards.

I always moved away when I felt or imagined I could annoy any of the parties involved. It happened much more in the beginning than towards the end. During the last month, many officers, but also some prisoners, would ask me to talk about issues regarding what they interpreted to be my research topic. Those interactions have not often be very 'useful' as data. They have often been unforgettable experiences, though. The day-to-day praxis of the fieldwork imbued possibilities, challenges and constraints. It introduced layers of boredom, extreme anxiety and some exciting stories told on the wing. All mundane occurrences and dialogues strongly influenced the research path that I am now reconstructing ex post. This research is also a testimony to my experience of being there.

The implicit or explicit epistemological position of the researcher frames his or her own research strategy and practice accordingly, and vice versa. In other words, I agree with Hammersley (2015), when he writes, 'in ethnography, as in any kind of

research, we are never simply documenting what goes on 'inside', providing a picture or comprehensive account of it, we are always seeking to answer some particular set of question about it' (p. 27).

Even more importantly, 'the questions we address never exhaust the phenomena we are studying' (p. 27), and this is particularly true in this monograph highlighting one micro-sociological feature by trying to unpack what prison officers do in practice when 'doing' coercion lawfully. The corollary is that, of course, using another research question, or using the same question in another research context (or by a different researcher), would result in a different partial comprehension of the 'same' complex and multifaceted phenomena.

## A few basic facts of this fieldwork

I agree with Clifford (1986) when he challenges a positivist approach to ethnography. However, I follow him, not only when he famously stated 'Ethnography is a hybrid textual activity: it traverses genres and disciplines' (p. 26), but also, more importantly, and less often quoted, when he put it clearly that ethnography is not only, nor primarily, literature (p. 26).

The ethnography I present here is definitely not *only* literature. It is the textual result of my embodied experience of a lot of interactions, co-presence, observations, dialogues, banters, disputes, critical events, and so on, that occurred during fieldwork. This research was a strongly bodily experience to me, as well as a heavily psychological one. Finishing it left me filled with memories of fears, psychological distress and anxiety, which I experienced in there and still sometimes live with. Yet, as Crewe (2009) put it, eventually I exited the field and officers and prisoners continued to live their life there. I often continue to receive news from the participants, via WhatsApp, Facebook, SMS and phone calls. As already stated at the beginning of this chapter, I now question the relationship that emerged in the field. I remember the relationships I experienced with prison officers then, and my relationships with few of them now, and I ask myself whether or not I went too native. It is a puzzling question.

Doing ethnography in only one wing has been nothing like watching an exciting prison film. Of course, the result is a complex text. It is the translation of my

experience of doing ethnography in that particular field, deeply grounded in one particular time and geography.

Some ‘facts’ are noteworthy, though:

- 1 The fieldwork is the *Istituti Penitenziari di Reggio Emilia*. The facility Block-House gate was ‘open’ to me for almost three years, during which time, on no occasion (at any time) was I refused access.
- 2 I worked within the walls for no less than 1,400 hours, covering all shifts, usually for at least 12 hour a day, about 90 per cent of the time on the wing, 5 per cent in the yards, and the rest just hanging around. During the entire ethnography, I would work holding a small paper notebook and pen visibly in my hands. Later on, I would also sometimes work with a small digital camera that I would also use to record short videos and interviews.
- 3 Each single time I returned to my hotel room from the prison, I always spent at least two hours, sometimes up to four hours, rewriting the notes or commenting on them on my laptop. A few times, I spent my free time going out with prison officers. Once, I went to see a theatre piece in which a few inmates from ‘my wing’ were acting in a local theatre in the city of Reggio Emilia (a so-called rehabilitation project). I went to a prison officer’s birthday party and to a farewell party of a nurse who quit working. I refused some invitations not only to maintain some distance, but also to allow me enough time to rewrite and reflect on my notes day by day, and to relax.
- 4 I saw many interactions in which either prisoners would challenge officers, or officers would threaten or use force against prisoners. I saw prisoners assaulting officers in front of me, and so on.
- 5 I heard screaming, yelling and insulting all the time. I saw sexism, machismo, racism, Islamophobia (but not to such a different degree than in many other Italian social contexts, such as factories or schools I had previously visited). During the hot Italian summers, I smelled the worst smells that I could ever have imagined. I saw persons cutting their bellies with a razor blade, and afterwards I saw the doctor and nurse healing them. I witnessed an amazing amount of violence or bodily confrontation among prisoners. I also saw people resisting in different ways, or acting out.

- 6 Despite the puzzling and often psychologically unbearable fieldwork, I followed the experience of doing fieldwork, tried adapting it as much as possible, and slowly started to stay focused on what I now call ‘doing’ coercion. By working there, I also felt what a difficult working environment it is for prison staff.
- 7 I had a lot of dialogues and chat with the staff and some prisoners. Eventually, I conducted many interviews as well.
- 8 I started writing from the very outset of the ethnography. This text has been continuously changing during the entire ethnography. I witnessed all that with my body and my mind. I therefore dare to say that this book is absolutely *not* only literature, thereby agreeing with Clifford at least partially. Even the vignettes, the most ‘literary’ part of the ethnography, only contain what I lived as facts. Yet, some parts combine in creative ways to try to represent both the interactions and my shifting emotions, and, concurrently, to secure anonymity to my participants. Without all the time I lived there, those vignettes simply could not exist.

## Researching on the use of force appreciatively or critically: a third way?

Reading the literature that deals with the use of force and violence (both within the walls and beyond), one thing emerged clearly: in recent years, the debate over the prison has been strongly polarised (and politicised). This is not surprising, taking into account the settings in which this research is conducted, the political, electoral and public relevance of the issue, and, finally, the problem of access, already discussed, and that of financing bodies (Power 2003; Sim 2008; Drake 2015).<sup>4</sup> Here, it suffices to note that the international study of prison officers has traditionally been conducted mainly from two opposite standpoints: the first called appreciative inquiry, and the second instead tending to be very critical about prison officers, focusing on the illegal use of force and institutional violence (Berrington *et al.* 2003; Power 2003; Sim 2008).

*The Prison Officer* (Liebling and Price 2001; Liebling *et al.* 2011) is possibly the crucial extant text on prison officers, dealing in particular with the context

of England and Wales. In that book, Alison Liebling and colleagues explicitly adopt a method and approach grounded on *appreciative inquiry* (Liebling and Price 2001).<sup>5</sup>

They argue that: '[u]nlike traditional social science research, which tends to focus on problems and difficulties, [appreciative inquiry] tries to allow good practice to emerge' (p. 6). Then, they continue, it '*aims to understand what makes best practice possible*' (p. 6, emphasis added). Towards the end of the conclusion of their book, they wrote:

[w]hat can we conclude about the role of the prison officers in the late modern prison [in England and Wales]? [{}.] Prison officers are the human face of the prison service. As human beings, they are both special and fallible. The power they hold has the potential to corrupt, and the world they work in can be dangerous, difficult and always a challenge. Prison officers are perfectly able to challenge and help prisoners with their offending behaviour [{}.] There are myths and passions about who prison officers are. This book constitutes a first general attempt to consider the evidence.

(Liebling and Price 2001: 193)

In *The Prison Officer*, a lot of evidence was considered from an impressive amount of research the authors conducted throughout their careers, and it remains an invaluable source for anybody who intends to work on the topic in the UK and beyond. Eventually, after reading and rereading it and meeting Alison Liebling, that book clearly influenced me.

On the other side of the divide between appreciative and critical scholars that has characterised this field of research, along with associations and political campaigners, we can find many critical scholars studying or denouncing the 'use of force issue' straightforwardly focusing on officers' culture and practice and 'bad' violence.<sup>6</sup> Joe Sim (2008) addresses it straightforwardly (see Chapter 1). He argues about the 'prison officer's issue', that it is crucial to address:

[t]he question of prison officer culture and its negative impact on prisoners and those staff who show humane empathy towards them. The detrimental and mortifying dimensions underpinning

this culture still remains relatively marginal in prison literature. Instead a *theoretically sanitised penology has developed* in which this culture, occasionally disrupted by the shame-inducing behaviour of an atavistic ‘bad apple’, is regarded as functionally benevolent for offenders.

(Sim 2008: 189, emphasis added)

Sim then continues: ‘[t]his chapter takes a different position to this sanitised penology. It seeks to provide a critical [thus, the opposite of appreciative] analysis of prison officers’ (p. 189), taking distance from the consensus around prison officers expressed by liberal prison reform groups and academics.

## On doing prison ethnography and beyond

My epistemology here, already introduced above, draws from *critical realism*. My political attitude towards the participants was neither politically adverse to the police and prison officers, nor particularly sympathetic to inmates (in fact, those categories are very broad and include very different sets of people sharing a multitude of social positions, cultures, belongings, and so on). I have simply considered critical realism as the more adequate epistemology to adopt while doing observation on the use of force in prison because the use of force can be observed as such: it is not only literature.

Prisons are places of physical confrontations, harm, sorrow and poverty (Wacquant 2009, 2013; Buffa 2013a), and these are facts that can hardly be dismissed by anybody who has been inside for a sufficient period of time. Of course, the interpretations of those facts can be divergent and even contradictory, but that is another point altogether. Things occur in reality (not only in text), and flesh-and-blood persons interact with one another forcibly within the walls, being coerced to live within the same cell or wing. Things happen in reality that affect people more or less strongly, yet always in significant ways.

Violence towards one another and self-harm do occur regularly within Italian prisons, often leaving blood spots on the walls nearby the ‘critical event’, as well as some blood on the floor. Moreover, both violence towards one another and self-harm can produce, on the one hand, physical pain, visible scars, disability and death, and, on



the other, psychological problems, insomnia, distress, trauma and suicides. All this occurs whether or not any researcher is observing it. Of course, I am not saying that they are independent of the researcher's presence. On the contrary, I do not intend to downplay the researcher's effect, which is well known in the social science literature and is a feature of any ethnography.

## The ethnographer and the activist

A further question about my position would be: Am I engaged? Yes, definitely. I am engaged and challenged by the custodial institutions and by the lives and working experience of those working within them, as well as the persons in custody. I know that I am very critical indeed against the imprisonment of migrants and patients who are in custody, *de facto*, if not *de jure*, on the grounds of who they are rather than on the ground of what crime they have allegedly committed. I am not sure about prison abolitionism more in general, though. I am also engaged in what I study, in the process of studying and in how my personal life is affected by it, and, in turn, how the life I live doing research affects the person interacting with me.

I am also somewhat also an eyewitness, and I try to describe things visually too, yet I am definitely *not* a partisan; at least, I do not intend to be one. I am a researcher rather than a witness. Although the distinction between the two might be complicated (see Kaufman 2015), my duty is clear to me, and it is to work in an effort to look for some plausible partial truths. It implies, however, trying *to be as neutral as possible*.

Here, the issue of advocacy comes into the picture. I agree with Hammersley (2015), where he suggests that ethnographers do not necessarily need to be advocate of those they study (I am not). I agree that the ethnography can, or even ought to, 'produce knowledge of phenomena that are independent of it' (p. 32). I decided to study the lawful use of force there. Other positions on the issue could have been possible, feasible and legitimate as well.

## Bearing witness to knowledge or doing something for the participants?

I am not trained to be a social worker, nor do I want to be. Although there have been different reasons or occasions to actively intervene in the situation in order to reduce

sorrow or help someone to get out of a particularly difficult situation, this is not what an ethnographer is normally required (or capable) to do (Hammersley 2015). In many cases, simply having a talk or a cup of coffee has helped a lot. On other occasions, I felt I could not do anything better than leave (i.e. to avoid provoking embarrassment to, or annoying, anybody for whatever reason), and so I left. However, I am not a social worker; my duty is to seek to unpack the situation I studied, or at least to describe it as accurately as I can. I agree with Hammersley (2015), who, referring to a study of Ned Polsky, suggests:

that if someone wants to be a 'social worker', or for that matter a 'correctional officer' (or, we might add, a political activist), that is 'their privilege', but that they should not do this in the name of the social sciences.

(Hammersley 2015: 35)

Following Hammersley's critical stance to ethnography and his call for critical realism in qualitative research (which, as I already said, is my perspective as well), I slightly disagree, however, with his rigid normative position and hierarchy of values regarding which research approach is better or worse than any other. In particular, I slightly disagree with Hammersley when he openly writes that partisanship (so also feminist research, or convict criminology?) and participatory inquiry 'do not constitute research' (Hammersley 2015: 35). To the best of my knowledge, not only are those practices research, but they have also produced some of the most significant pieces of research in prison sociology. I think that a plurality of scholarships *do* enrich the ethnographic landscape, helping readers to get a better partial picture of the reality that all those particular ethnographies attempt (and alone hardly achieve) to represent in their challenging complexities. Moreover, particularly so in prison ethnography, how can anybody fail to recognise the very rich heuristic approaches used, and the insights offered, by those who attempt to do research differently in one way or another? I think, among many others, of outstanding research such as Bosworth (1999), Bosworth *et al.* (2005), Jewkes (2002, 2011), Phillips (2012) and Earle (2016).

Those works strongly influenced the practice of prison ethnography, and are widely considered to be very useful partial descriptions that must be considered by any researcher doing research inside. Each of them, and, more importantly, together, they offer a wider set of lenses than the one proscribed by Hammersley to try to comprehend

particular aspects that might otherwise be overseen or even denied by focusing only on one approach.

I would rather pursue (this is what I try doing) to follow a less radical and partisan approach to methodology, to find collaborative ways to pursue and share understanding embedding different perspectives, being open to new approaches, collaborations, mediums and methods.

### On writing and depicting an ethnography on ‘doing’ coercion

By trying to unpack the male prison officers’ practice of ‘doing’ coercion, this ethnography tried to reduce the complexity and multifaceted nature of each particular prisoner-officer encounter that can be framed as ‘doing’ coercion, highlighting the main traits and communalities imbued in many of those particular encounters.

In an effort to minimise the level of generalisation provided by the more detached and theoretical accounts of the different types of prison officers’ practices that I observed, I decided to provide the reader with some particular examples of the dynamic of a few particular encounters by publishing quite long vignettes and ethnographic photographs.

By doing so, I not only make an account of what I experienced on the wing, but I also try to unmask my presence and my situated comprehension in the narrative I constructed. The vignettes are the result of an exercise of writing ethnography that is grounded on synthesis and abstraction mainly grounded on my field notes and memories. My experiences that they aim to convey have been, of course, much more complex and multilayered than it might appear by reading those vignettes. I am puzzled by feeling too sketchy and providing superficial (yet still quite long and detailed) descriptions. In particular, I am challenged by the distance I feel between those descriptive accounts I wrote on paper and the lived experience I had with my body (in co-presence with other bodies) staying alongside flesh-and-blood prisoners and officers interacting with one another, both cooperatively and violently. Neither am I sure whether, or not, those verbal and visual accounts I constructed for this book will have any capacity to affect those reading and watching them in these pages; nor am I able to predict how any particular reader or spectator will make sense of those different

accounts constructed adopting different literary devices such as quotes, vignettes, photographs, prose, and so on.

## Why study the use of force after all?

Despite the reasons why *not* to study this topic, which mainly regard the consequences that the publication of the ethnography may have with the possibility of the researcher and fellow colleagues to continue doing research inside, and the particularly sensible topic that might also impinge with the vulnerability of the participants and the ethical issues, I prefer to say again why, instead, it is necessary to start studying the use of force empirically.

Despite good intentions and best practice, in fact, the crucial issue of coercion remains the characteristic feature of all enforcement agencies working either within or without custodial institutions in Italy, as well as abroad.

Officers' lawful practices impact strongly both on the person in uniform, whose duty it is to use force if ordered to do so, and, of course, possibly more, on the persons in custody. I tried not to be judgemental, even though doing so has not always been easy in dealing with issues that strongly impinge on human rights and people's life and death.

The issue is complex, and I do not pretend to offer any concluding remark here. 'Doing' coercion is in fact simply the first attempt in trying to do research on the use of force in prison ethnographically, and to describe the interactions observed and embodied by the researcher by both verbal and visual means.

## Notes

- 1 In Italy, I did the first independent large-scale photographic documentation, a small part of which was published in [Visser and Vroege \(2007\)](#). Yet, photojournalism has a long tradition. The first post-war prison documentary had been published in the weekly news magazine *Tempo* in 10 consecutive weeks in 1959 and 1960, in which old prisons were contrasted with emerging extant best practices.
- 2 I interviewed, by adopting photo-elicitation, 27 prison officers (mainly working at the 'rank and file' level of the hierarchy, but also the senior manager, the psychiatric hospital commander and the general commander of the custodial complex), 10 psychiatric staff (including five psychiatrists, the psychiatrist working as healthcare director, and

- nurses), one chaplain, the custodial complex director, the area manager (managing all the directors of the north-east Italian penal custodial institutions), and seven prisoners.
- 3 The methods and fields of inquiries adopted by ethnographers varies greatly between those extremes. A non-comprehensive list of ‘methods of collecting and analyzing empirical materials’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2013) includes: narrative inquiries; critical art-based inquiries; oral history; observations on observations (on this interesting point, see also the methodological notes in Phillips 2012); visual ethnography; performative autoethnography (Jewkes 2011); convict autoethnography (Newbold *et al.* 2014); collaborative ethnography (Bosworth *et al.* 2005); and so on.
- 4 At least two articles in prison sociology have directly focused on the issue raised by Becker on ‘what side are we on?’ (Liebling 2001; Sim 2003).
- 5 In its third edition, some more critical issues have been sharply addressed.
- 6 A large group of scholars that also studies these kinds of issues can be found at: [www.europeangroup.org/](http://www.europeangroup.org/).

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## Conclusion

### On prison officers and (good) violence

The role of prison officers is arguably the most important in a prison. The precise nature of that kind of role, and more importantly how it is performed on a daily basis, have been neglected in most studies of prisons until recently (Liebling *et al.* 2011: 204).

Over the last 20 years or so, the Cambridge Institute of Criminology has produced and stimulated a growing body of scholarship both critically and respectfully studying the prison officer's job. They opened a new path in the UK, offering a different picture than those produced by mainstream critical scholarships 'in which prison officers have [mainly] been stereotyped and labelled negatively' (Liebling *et al.* 2011: 204). Ever since, a continuing developing body of research has been produced, unpacking different aspects of the officers' lives, roles and cultures (to which I have referred throughout the book), which have contributed to building a new picture (see also Fassin 2015). Moreover, a team at the Oxford Centre for Criminology, where I

have been privileged to be a visiting fellow, have expanded, with a slightly different approach, a parallel strand of research studying both custodial staff and prisoners in immigration detention centres (Bosworth 2014).

By standing *On the Shoulders of [those] Giants* (Merton 1993), I tried to focus on one particular relevant, yet understudied and frequently overlooked, prison officers' duty: what I call 'doing' coercion, or, to put it simply, threatening and using force in so-called 'critical events'. I tried doing it pursuing my 'authentic description', both verbally and visually, by working critically and, as much as possible, respectfully. In order to do it, I tried looking for a balance between being detached and going native. I also tried being honest about my self-censorship, thereby avoid denial of alleged prison officers' wrongdoing.

I conducted my fieldwork in a custodial complex in Italy hosting both a psychiatric hospital and a prison. Accessing custodial institutions to do ethnography in Italy is really difficult (Ferreccio and Vianello 2014), and prisons' conditions at times unbearable both for prison officers and prisoners, as well as for researchers. Relationships with gatekeepers have also not been easy to forge due to their unfamiliarity with independent academic research. On the field, though, mutual trust between the staff and me grew spontaneously, also due to prison officers' openness, naiveté and curiosity about an unexpectedly academic interest in them. Eventually, I was even granted access with cameras, video cameras and an audio recording device, which allowed me to produce a large amount of audiovisual material (see Chapter 8).

## And so what?

Officer-prisoner relationships are complex and multifaceted, and vary greatly across jurisdictions and facilities in Italy and beyond. Not only are those relationships imbued in conflicts, disputes and 'us versus them' attitudes, as emerges clearly in critical criminology accounts, but they are also frequently based on cooperation with one another, and some forms of 'peacemaking' (Liebling *et al.* 2011).

In fact, even in such a heavy and difficult custodial complex, prison officers were absolutely not only, nor mainly, the brutal cops they are often depicted to be both in some critical accounts and in the media. More often than not, in my experience, prison officers are civil servants in uniform who go about their daily tasks by trying to



do their time decently, even in such a difficult work environment (Harkin 2015) as that under study. Usually, Italian prison officers discretionally underuse their power in order to ‘adjust’ the situation (in Italian, ‘*aggiustare la situazione*’ or ‘*mettere tutt’apposto*’). The experience-laden work they constantly do remains invisible, often denigrated (Fassin 2015). Their discretion is often intended as a device to negotiate feasible outcomes, even in desperate situations. It’s unfair to depict all officers’ performance as grounded in laxity and carelessness, even though not all officers work professionally at their best, and all would benefit from a larger public accountability, which was also a suggestion proposed by some of them.

Having superficial contact with them may suggest that they are usually anaesthetised or cynical, but that does not depict the hard reality they face on duty day in, day out. Working close by prison officers, I understood that, more often than not, officers do feel emotionally touched by the situation they live and embody day in, day out on the job (Chauvenet *et al.* 1994). They do pay the psychological cost of the effect of their working environment (Liebling and Maruna 2005), as well as the pain of imprisonment (Harkin 2015), even though they are usually reluctant to admit it publicly due not only to their professional role, but also to their masculinities.

Custodial institutions have long been criticised (Mathiesen 1990). This book looks at prison officers sympathetically, yet critically, in an effort to shed light on one crucial practice, ‘doing’ coercion. By doing so, this book intends to create new knowledge on such topics, as well as, concurrently, trying to help others to humanise prison (Buffa 2015), also enhancing accountability. In Italy, the abolition of prison seems to remain a utopia so far. Yet, abolitionist scholars, activists and the European Court of Human Rights have the merit to have tried, with more or less success, to put the prison and the prisoners in the agenda of the media, forcing a larger consideration for prisoners’ rights. Moreover, their contributions have been crucial in introducing the issues of prisoners’ human rights and to prison staff’s accountability in the Italian and European political debate over prison issues. It is worth noting that not only abolitionism, but also more pragmatic and feasible reformist agendas, are difficult to implement in practice in Italy, where institutions are quite reluctant to change and where more moderate efforts of humanisation are sometimes resisted strongly both from within and outside the institutions by particular staff members, governors, some staff unions (Buffa 2013b) and mainstream public opinion.

Despite the consensus regarding the difficulties in tackling the many criticalities impinging in the Italian prison system, which relate mainly to national economic and political factors, as well as more global phenomena, custodial institutions continue to exist and expand all over Europe and beyond. National and regional imprisonment rates keep on oscillating, as time and geography keep millions of people worldwide in custody in conditions that are not only often critical, but also too often hidden and denied by public authorities who deny access to researchers who are simply interested in studying them.

Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, in all of the Global North's jurisdictions, custodial institutions are still the extant main response not only to so-called serious crime, but also more frequently to petty crime, de facto punishing the poor (Wacquant 2009; Buffa 2013b). In other words, millions of flesh-and-blood human beings work and live in custody behind bars in more or less precarious conditions under very different incarceration and staffing rates.

Of course, I acknowledge the limitation of this study, in terms of the number of participants observed and other typical characteristics of ethnographic case study approach that do not allow for generalisation. However, what I have observed and described is relevant, not only because I have witnessed it ethnographically, but because a few lines on the issue are frequently hidden in much prison ethnography dealing with other topics. Unpacking the prison officers' duty of 'doing' coercion has already been attempted. Fortunately, in this ethnography, I have been granted full access to it.

## Five concluding remarks

In concluding, I would like to propose five concluding remarks. The first is a confirmation of extant international research output. I can safely say that '*prison officers are in no sense "mere turnkeys" [{}]* despite the centrality of security to their daily work' (Liebling *et al.* 2011: 2, *emphasis added*), and the demanding nature of their competing duties. I witnessed the complexities of prison officers' work, the prison officers' emotion and humanity, their fears and commitment, their sadness and banter, their delusions and rare satisfactions, and much more, and I tried to illustrate it. By working with prison officers on a daily basis without being (and/or being perceived as) their enemy nor their uncritical friend, a much more nuanced picture emerged than in the mythologies I have frequently read in normative accounts regarding their alleged

hyper-masculinity and their proneness to 'bad' violence. In my experience, prison officers unpredictably appeared much more diverse to one another than I had ever imagined before, while dealing with them only instrumentally while studying (or photographing) prisoners. In fact, working on such a heavy topic as the use of force, what struck me the most was the officers' shared intentions (and sometimes practical capacity) to do peacemaking (Liebling *et al.* 2011) effectively in situations, which I would read as impossible to deal with in that way. If those attitudes were also, or mainly, the outcome of me being there, this research clearly demonstrates that social science research (and public accountability) do indeed matter, and can contribute to improving the situation.

Second, it emerged throughout the research that prison officers dealing frequently with 'doing' coercion often experience quite serious side effects of prison work. Their duties are often daunting, and draining experiences that impinge not only on their professional performance, but also on their own well-being, psychological condition and family relationships, even though they are unlikely (nor authorized) to disclose them in public accounts. This is a topic that needs to be explored thoroughly, and should be taken seriously by the prison system. In fact, I was surprised by officers' comments on episodes they described to me as 'normal' routine – normal scenes they would see 'on duty' day in, day out – which would be really extraordinary, if not traumatising, for many of us working outside the walls.

Third, there are many officers' attitudes and 'cultures'. Officers adopt different strategies to cope with very difficult situations, disputes, emotions and so-called critical events with the evident goal, most of the time, to avoid the situation escalating. Unfortunately, according to almost all of the participants in this study, they have to do this without any formal training. They were avoiding confrontations not only because of their humanity towards prisoners, but because, as one put it, 'I am a normal person with a normal life'. This is by no means the only 'type' of approach that I witnessed, but the most common one, and hardly visible, if not clearly 'denied', in many available accounts about prisons. As I wrote in the previous chapter, without going into too many details, abuses and wrongdoings were also reported to me by officers, and I consider it both a sign of their trust and a request (or hope) for change. Abuses and wrongdoings cannot be depicted as the prison officers' mainstream way to do their job.

Fourth, In Italy there is clearly too little attention given to foreign prisoners. There is no diversity in prison officers' backgrounds in terms of their origin, race and ethnicity. 'Rank and file' officers are hardly ever able to speak any foreign language, nor do they know anything about cultural diversity. Practically all prison officers (data are not available) are white Italians from the south of Italy (Buffa 2013b). It is not rare to hear officers talking with one another in a dialect that cannot be understood by someone else coming from another Italian region. Taking into account the significant presence of foreign inmates in Italian custodial prisons (33.6 percent, data referring to 30 June 2016),<sup>1</sup> the detrimental effect on the prison population is paramount. In order to grant a more decent and humane time in prison, the prison service should start to tackle this significant deficiency as soon as possible, as they are trying to do in other jurisdictions (e.g. in the UK). Not responding to this basic need of communication can only give officers and prisoners more trouble in trying to make the relationship right.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, it clearly emerged what a challenging duty 'doing' coercion as a job might be. A 'dialectic of control' (Giddens 1984) frames most interactions occurring inside, and different resources are used by both the keepers and the kept to influence their 'chains of interactions'. Yet, any action on either side could produce unintended consequences. Threats worked most of the time to de-escalate the situation, as shown throughout the book, yet on some occasions they would be perceived as provocation causing, de facto, an unintended escalation of the 'critical event' to the use of force. Also, prisoners' acts have been occasionally misinterpreted. However, despite the different lens through which any particular regime can be read as predominantly coercive, remunerative, normative or fatalistic (Carrabine 2004), the nature of 'doing' coercion clearly emerged as a crucial component of any situation inside.

Prison research is emerging in different jurisdictions, and a growing body of scholars are entering prisons in different geographies. Yet, prison ethnography is still in its infancy if we consider the little amount of what we know in relation to what we do not know yet, in particular if we think of the limited geographic area in which prison ethnography is conducted regularly.

This book stands on the shoulders of the many researchers who have spent their entire lives trying to unpack, from very different positions and standpoints, what prison actually is and how it operates in different times, spaces and geographies in

practice. Without the influence, lessons and methodological insight of the international prison research community, this contribution would simply not exist. To conclude, I hope that by unpacking the interactions unfolding one after the other when some particular male Italian prison officers in one particular custodial institution go about managing critical events on the wing, I have offered a different view on a very important *duty*, thereby putting another brick on the slowly growing wall of prison research, as well as, concurrently, the challenging difficulties of doing prison ethnography.

I am aware of the limit of the final form of this book, which is of course only one particular version among the many (infinite) possible ones that might have been chosen. It might be criticised for some forms of reductionism (by contesting that I have focused only on some aspects in some detail), for being too anecdotal (vignettes in fact may seem too simple a way to tell one's argument academically), too much narrative, not enough linked to the relevant (for whom?) literature (which one?). Notwithstanding these foreseeable critiques, and having worked in different directions for some time, looking for a balance, I am not sure whether or not I am lost in translation (trying to translate lived experience into a text). Hopefully, the final form of this book, despite all odds, provides enough information and descriptive accounts to allow what Liebling calls an 'authentic description' (see also [Liebling 2015](#)), leaving space for audience interpretation.

## Post scriptum: beyond violence into violences<sup>3</sup>

Violence is present in different forms and at different levels of the social fabric, and it is difficult to be grasped as a whole ([Ray 2011](#)): violences might be a better word to describe its complexities and different forms. [Collins \(2008\)](#) describes more than 30 types of violences, including soldiers and police violence, sport violence and violence for fun. Moreover, he found some crucial ideas to address many commonalities of those different forms of violence at the level of the micro-interaction. He also made the distinction between 'bad' violence, which would be the commonsensical interpretation of violence, and 'good' violence, which includes the lawful use of violence (normally called force).

## On prison officers' 'good' violence

According to Collins' framework, this ethnography could probably be interpreted as a study on one particular type of 'good' violence: *prison officers' use of violence*. This work, in other words, focuses on prison officers' dynamic and interactive practice of using force (a form of violence), aiming at unpacking the complex, unstable and negotiable 'nature' of it, rather than providing moral judgements.

In order to study prison officers' 'good' violence ('doing' coercion), I followed the gist of Collins' theory of violence as a point of departure while doing ethnography within the walls. Collins' accounts and generalisations are illuminating. The relevance of emotions and body attunements in both cooperative and conflictive interactions (Collins 2004, 2008) can hardly be overestimated, even within the prisoner-officer interactions I observed on the wing.

### Three points on the sociology of violence

In closing this note on violence, I would like to propose three fine-tuning remarks on 'good' officers' violence in prison, referring to Collins' 'grand theory' of violence.

First, in order to study officers' 'doing' coercion, limiting the analysis at the level of the situation without taking into account other external 'background' factors (status magnet versus status shield) has not sufficed. Even at the preliminary stage of the construction of the 'critical event' (Chapter 6), which starts de facto the practice of 'doing' coercion, it is instead necessary to take into account the influence of the prisoners' (and officers') individual and group characteristics. It was clear, yet this aspect deserves much further research. The labelling process that informed the construction of a critical event made more or less likely the start of an emergency squad intervention, depending on the prisoners' status. However, this labelling practice cannot be simplistically interpreted as one form of 'attacking the weak' (Collins 2008). It does not deal only or mainly with the emotions at stake during the particular interaction, but also with the structure of prisoners' reputation and power. The particular prisoner's reputation functions as a shield for those with a higher status inside, shielding them from possible emergency squad interventions. On the contrary, status might work as a magnet (I developed the idea of *status magnet versus status shield* from Hochschild) for those with a very low reputation. All this would be in the picture quite independently of the particular interaction at stake and the emotional context within which it occurs. As already reported above, on the one hand, the emergency squad intervention never

occurred with any ‘mafia boss’ in custody on the wing. On the other, interventions seemed to be more likely to occur with those with a very low reputation, such as migrants, the travelling community and foreign nationals.

In other words, any particular dynamic of officers’ violence (‘doing’ coercion) could not simply be interpreted only adopting the lens of emotions and simply focusing on the particular interaction at stake. Both positive and negative discriminations had to be considered thoroughly, at least when interactions between officers and the few at the top and at the bottom of the reputation scale were in the picture. The existence of some kind of differential treatments for some particular group of prisoners was confirmed to me by Alison Liebling, referring to her ethnographic experience she and her team had conducted in many prisons in the UK.<sup>4</sup> However, most of the time, the treatment was less biased and discretion was used fairly.

Second, by observing closely enough the situation on one wing for quite a long time, I can state that *physical violence among prisoners on the wing was not rare at all (contra, Collins 2008)*. It was often bloody violence; certainly, it was not simply demonstrative violence most of the time. Confirming previous prison research, this ethnography shows clearly that *there are social contexts in which violence does occur frequently*, and not rarely. It is likely that this might also be the case at least in some other custodial institutions around the world, in which millions of people work or are in custody, which are characterised by a varying degree of detention, working conditions and respect for human rights.

Lastly, officers do perform physical ‘good’ violence (meaning lawful use of force) rarely, and this does support Collins’ theory indeed. Yet, violence is either implicitly present in the implicitly coercion embedded in the custodial facility (see Chapter 5) or threatened by the emergency squad when necessary. By only focusing on physical violence, as Collins does, one might perform a plausible heuristic choice since the boundaries of it can be easier defined than those defining symbolic violence. Yet, I am worried that it does not help in understanding the complexity of what violence is, nor how it operates in practice. However, I do not intend to reintroduce a normative account of the word violence here, implicitly talking about violence implying ‘bad’ violence. I simply want to suggest the unintended consequence that those officers’ lawful practice of ‘good’ violence might have on the most vulnerable prisoners and officers.

Studying violence as a social interaction without adopting any normative critical stance does not imply being blind to the consequences that any practice, and in particular those of lawful officers, might have on those in custody or wearing a uniform within the walls. Taking into account the actual symbolic and bodily interactions between flesh-and-blood human beings could be a first step in trying to investigate those practices differently.

## Notes

- 1 Ministry of Justice:  
[www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg\\_1\\_14\\_1.wp?previousPage=mg\\_1\\_14&contentId=SST165666](http://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_14_1.wp?previousPage=mg_1_14&contentId=SST165666).
- 2 I thank Alpa Parmer for suggesting that I make this point explicit.
- 3 I thank Roberta Sassatelli for suggesting me the idea of adopting the word 'violences'.
- 4 Personal communication.

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