

# Sociology of the Prison Classroom: Marginalized Identities and Sociological Imaginations behind Bars

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## Abstract

The authors use sociology of the college classroom to analyze their experiences as feminists teaching sociology courses in the “unconventional setting” of prison. Reflective writing was used to chronicle experiences in the classes. They apply the concepts of doing gender, interaction order, and emotion work to the prison classroom. Based on their analysis, the authors examine the challenges and opportunities for critical education in prison. They aimed to use their teaching efforts to reach out to marginalized students and develop students’ sociological imaginations to assist them through the challenges of confinement and reentry. The authors’ analysis has implications for both prison education and higher education more broadly. They conclude that the success of prison education is dependent on establishing democratic classrooms that can enable students to see themselves as something more than inmates.

## Keywords

sociology of the classroom, critical pedagogy, emotions and learning

## UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIOLOGY OF PRISON EDUCATION

We use the sociology of the college classroom (SoCC) framework (Atkinson, Buck, and Hunt 2009) to discuss our experiences as feminists teaching sociology courses in the “unconventional setting” of prison (Thomas 1983) or in a “total institution” (Davidson 1995; Goffman 1961). SoCC intersects with the sociology of education, higher education, and with the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) but moves the literature forward by urging teachers to examine their classrooms through a sociological lens (Atkinson et al. 2009). According to the authors, “The sociology of the college classroom is a sociologically informed teaching practice. It is the application of sociological theory and/or concepts to understand social phenomena that take place at the level of

the classroom and other sites of faculty–student interaction (e.g., advising appointments, informal mentoring)” (Atkinson et al. 2009:234). The authors argue that sociological theory can inform both teaching methods and student learning. As noted by the editors of the special issue of *Teaching Sociology* on the SoCC, “As sociologists we have the capacity to critically analyze and understand what goes on around us” (Macomber, Rusche, and Atkinson 2009:228). This is the goal of our article.

Using the concept of a total institution (Davidson 1995; Goffman 1961) and a symbolic

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interactionist framework (Blumer 1969), we analyze our teaching experiences in courses conducted at a men's and a women's prison. We apply the social psychological concepts of (1) doing gender, (2) interaction order, and (3) emotion work to evaluate systematically instructor-to-student and student-to-student interactions in our prison classrooms. We also analyze how these interactions were shaped by the total institution of a prison. Thus, our examination is informed by other sociological studies of teaching higher education in prison, the analytical concept of the total institution, and social psychological concepts. Through this analysis and evaluation, we extend the SoCC literature to a nontraditional setting (Atkinson et al. 2009). Additionally, our study contributes to the broader SoTL literature (Atkinson, Wills, and McClure 2006) while incorporating a public sociological aspect (Burway 2005).

## THE PRISON SETTING, PARTICIPANTS, AND DATA

Symbolic interactionists urge researchers to take the role of the actor in order to gain a better understanding of meanings attached (Blumer 1969). Thus, in order to understand how SoCC relates to prison education, we had to analyze our interactions within the prison environment. Interaction is a formative process of interpretation and definition that is constantly being developed. Throughout our courses, our interactions changed as our relationships with our students developed and our understanding of prison education advanced. This allowed us to adjust our pedagogy accordingly.

During two consecutive semesters, we had the opportunity to teach a sociology course in a local men's prison and a local women's prison, offered through a partnership with our university and the state's Department of Corrections. The first author, Kylie, taught a social psychology course at a minimum-security men's prison, while Gretchen taught introduction to sociology at a women's prison. The men's prison was a transition facility that trained men for reentry. The women's facility was a mixed security prison where the students who were enrolled had a wide range of scheduled released dates, from years away to during the semester. Also, the facility at the women's prison was a large, multiroom brick building with an in-house library and

computer laboratory. The men's prison had much more meager facilities, consisting of a small library and two small classrooms in a mobile building on the prison grounds. We faced several barriers in the "correctional institution," including no access to technology, hostile guards, and lockdowns. The combination of these factors and the variety of life experiences that the men and women have provided a ripe environment for them (and for us) to analyze with their developing sociological imaginations (Mills 1959).

At the beginning of the semester in the men's prison, there were 17 male students enrolled, but during the course of the semester several were transferred to different camps or were released, which left 9 remaining throughout the duration of the semester. Three students were black, 3 were Latino, and 3 were white. Additionally, 1 white student finished on the outside by taking his final exam after being released. The second author, Gretchen, taught an introduction to sociology course at a medium-security women's prison. At the beginning of the semester there were 14 students enrolled—8 black, 1 Latino, and 5 white. However, only 7 students completed the course—3 black, 1 Latino, and 3 white.

As critical feminist pedagogues (Freire 2000; hooks 1994) and researchers, our goal is to understand oppression and the reproduction of inequality and also the experiences of the people that live it (Kleinman 2007; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Our understanding of oppression stems not only from our theoretical knowledge but also from our shared experiences as marginalized women. This experiential and theoretical knowledge enabled us to engage our students from empathetic standpoints, which directly influenced our critical feminist pedagogical approach. This approach could be broadly defined as liberatory pedagogy that seeks to transform our teaching into "a location of possibility . . . to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress" (hooks 1994: 207). Of particular importance, we each have had or currently have relatives in prison, which enabled us to relate personally to the experiences of our students and their families. During the semester that she taught, Kylie consulted her male cousin who was recently released about strategies for connecting with students in prison. Additionally, both instructors had family members

or friends who had previously taught on the inside and were able to share their experiences. This enabled us to have a clearer understanding of what teaching behind bars would entail and served to facilitate our critical pedagogical approaches.

Participant observation of our setting allowed us to analyze sociologically our classrooms and to reflect upon our efforts to transform our students into sociologically mindful people. We took field notes on our teaching experiences, including our emotional reactions (Kleinman and Copp 1993) to how the class went, when we got home from teaching. We incorporated inquiry-guided learning techniques (Atkinson and Hunt 2008) in our classrooms and had students write reflective response papers to prompts or journal entries weekly (Kuhlmann 2006; Thomas 1983). Having students complete reflective writing assignments on the course material helped them to see that sociology is not just about what's going on "out there" but also about how all of us, as social beings, are connected to "out there." Our goal is for students to learn more than a set of facts about inequality and about how it is reproduced but also to see how they are connected to these inequalities and, by virtue of this understanding, rethink how they participate in the world. Our field notes on interactions in and out of the classroom, combined with our students' assignments, serve as our data for this exploration of the sociology of the prison classroom.

## TEACHING IN A TOTAL INSTITUTION

As noted by McCarty (2006:91), "Designing a college-level class for prisoners requires a different approach than in noncarceral institutions." Thomas (1983) outlines several problems that make teaching sociology effectively in prison difficult, including the discretionary behavior of prison staff, the social organization of prisons, and the course material. The subject matter of sociology courses can be seen as controversial, which can increase suspicion of administration and can make managing class discussions difficult because of underlying concerns for students' safety (Thomas 1983). Developing a relationship of trust between instructors and students is complicated by the inmates' attitudes toward people in positions of authority because of resentment toward prison guards (Marsh 1976; McCarty

2006; Thomas 1983) and because of prior negative experiences with formal education (Kuhlmann 2006; Quinn 2007). Prison administrators parlayed their exercise of power in the total institution setting into an encroachment on our academic freedom. Both of us were subjected to having our syllabi reviewed and content censored by prison administrators. Each of us was told that some subjects were off limits and could not be taught in our courses. For example, Gretchen was allowed to show only the class and gender segments of the documentary *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* because administrators deemed topics such as racism and sexism as too controversial. This was mandated by the educational director of the facility, who is a black woman. While some of this was framed in rhetoric to reflect the students' best interests, upon reflection it appears to have been content that would prevent conflict among the students by promoting critical inquiry.

We were both eager to be teaching behind bars because we viewed our work as an opportunity to practice engaged sociology. Thus, from the start, our goals were informed by our sociological understanding of the criminalization of minority populations, deviance within society, and the prison industrial complex (Davis 1998). We wanted to grow and deepen our own sociological imaginations (Mills 1959) along with those of our students. Therefore, in order to frame our study, we begin with an explanation of how each of our teaching experiences was conditioned by our sociological understanding of the prison context and our approaches as feminist teachers. For example, during the first day of class, Gretchen presented material on the prison industrial complex and the growth of incarceration rates for women as a way to help her students situate themselves within the larger institution of prison and society. This is also an example of how we attempted to develop sociological imaginations behind bars—by helping our students to situate their personal experiences within broader historical and social context (Mills 1959). We also explore how our interactions with the prison administrators further defined the situation, often by restraining our academic freedom, thereby affecting our interaction with students both in and out of the classroom.

Interactions outside of the classroom were uniquely challenged in the prison context. Examining the interactions between students,

instructors, and prison administrators outside of the classroom is important because this analysis can show how sociology further informs broader pedagogical processes that take place off the “main stage” of the classroom (Atkinson et al. 2009). For instance, prison administrators prohibited one-on-one student–instructor interactions before, during, and after class. Gretchen had two students who were transferred and one who was released, and she was never able to contact the transferred students, partially because this policy made communication outside of the classroom impossible. The student who was released did not finish the course despite being offered the opportunity to do so. Kylie also had difficulty establishing contact with students transferred out of the class. Administrators were uncooperative with her efforts to contact students after they were transferred or released. Student interaction with instructors after class was also prohibited. Once when meeting with a student individually, Gretchen was told by an administrator that doing so could put her at risk of being in violation of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (see McShane 2008). The administrator told Gretchen that should the student claim that she was making unwanted advances toward her, Gretchen could lose her job and be prosecuted. This was despite the fact that Gretchen was meeting with a student who had just joined the class to go over the syllabus and course requirements. Gretchen was told that future meetings with students would have to be in the presence of another employee of the prison. Kylie determined that one of her students had a learning disability, but after emailing the administration, she was told he did not have a “developmental disability.” She could not meet with him one-on-one to talk about his progress in her course and was worried that other students would stigmatize (or potentially victimize) him if she brought it up in class. These examples show how restricting the interaction between instructors and students compromised educational opportunities.

Therefore, as feminist teachers we approached teaching in the prisons as an opportunity to reach marginalized students. Being conscious of the stigma that convicts face (Goffman 1963; Pager 2003) and our desire to treat our students as similarly as possible to our university students, we aimed to create an alternative, and democratic, educational experience. It was our goal to develop our students’ sociological imaginations (Mills 1959) in

order to assist them through the challenges of confinement in prison and reentry to society. Coming from a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer 1969), we knew the importance of understanding the meanings created in our classrooms, including the power dynamics between the students and the instructors, and how the sociological concepts and theories we were teaching could inform our teaching and learning styles. In fact, a critical part of establishing a democratic environment was redefining the interaction order of our classrooms imposed by prison administrators. This included the negotiation of modes of communication, the arrangement of classroom furniture, and the ways in which students and teachers addressed one another. We elaborate on these negotiations in the upcoming sections.

## DOING GENDER, THE INTERACTION ORDER, AND EMOTION WORK IN OUR CLASSROOMS

We draw from the symbolic interactionist perspective for our analysis, specifically using the concepts of doing gender, interaction order, and emotion work. For each of our analyses, we draw out similarities and differences between the two institutional settings. We also point to how these analyses of our classrooms informed our teaching. Given that Gretchen taught first, at the women’s prison, she was able to relay her experiences to Kylie. Extended conversations between the two instructors explored first Gretchen’s experiences and then Kylie’s in applying feminist pedagogical principles in the prison context. Further analyses of our experiences emerged through students’ writing assignments and from our joint analyses and reflections.

### *Doing Gender*

The first social psychological concept that we use in our examination is doing gender. Social life is organized around the idea that a person is either male or female (Connell 1987; Howard 2000). From the interactionist perspective, gender is expressed, reflected, and accomplished through interaction (Goffman 1959, 1977; Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Fenstermaker 2002; West and Zimmerman 1987). Through self-reflection (Cooley 1902), children come to define

themselves as boys or girls, learn appropriate gender displays, and are held accountable for appropriate presentations (Goffman 1959; West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender expectations are learned through interaction, and they differ for boys and men and girls and women.

Because our classrooms were set in two different gendered spaces—an all men’s prison and all women’s prison—we each confronted different challenges associated with doing gender. Both of us were informed during Prison Rape Elimination Act training that we could not divulge any personal information about ourselves to our students. This meant that our intimate relationships and living relationships were technically off limits. However, we both negotiated disclosure of personal information differently based on the situation. For instance, Gretchen came to class wearing a wedding ring and used her identity as a mother to bridge the divide between her and her students, especially when discussing gender and sexuality. Because Kylie was teaching in a men’s prison, her sexuality and intimate relationships were “strictly off limits” per administrators’ directive. However, these same administrators fully contradicted themselves by marketing her class to the male population based on the fact that it was going to be taught by a woman. Although Kylie never felt sexualized by students in her class, the weekly ritual of walking across the prison yard left her feeling scrutinized by the “male gaze” (Bartky 1990). The course subjects differed so that the social psychological content of Kylie’s class more directly facilitated integrating concepts into learning exercises. Gretchen’s classroom and her observations were based more on subsequent interpretations of classroom dynamics.

Kylie’s students were outwardly homophobic and defensive while talking about sexuality and masculinity. As a woman in an all-male space, Kylie encountered difficulties discussing sexuality because the students’ masculine identities were dependent on being perceived as tough and “straight.” During the unit on gender and sexuality, it was difficult to get a class discussion going. Kylie thinks that part of this was due to being a female instructor in a class of male youth offenders (age 18-25). Above and beyond this being due to her gender salience in an all-male space, the overarching issue had to do with the need for men to engage in “manhood acts” (Schwalbe 2005) and, more specifically, the

subculture of masculinity in prison (Donaldson 2001; Kupers 2001; Messerschmidt 2001). Previous research has shown that derogatory comments about women are part of prison culture and that this is likely to be a survival technique where asserting masculinity shows strength and dominance (Kuhlmann 2006). This most likely translates into derogatory comments and attitudes about homosexuals and homosexuality. There was a lot of reluctance to participate, and some initial homophobic comments were made. Her offense at the homophobic comments and behaviors led the students to assume her sexuality as a lesbian. Kylie attempted to turn this into a teachable moment.

Instead of just shutting the conversation down, like she would on campus, her feminist pedagogical approach enabled her to understand where the students were coming from even though she did not agree with it. She had the men take out a sheet of paper and do a free write on doing gender, more specifically on how masculine presentations of self play a part in the prison culture, especially in “the yard.” The following three excerpts from their free writes illustrate the students’ understanding:

Since entering prison, I have observed that other inmates often attempt to create self images that project masculinity or toughness.

About 90% of guys in prison lie to each other about their life outside. Most men in here boast themselves up to be somebody they ain’t. . . . When you come in here to this system a lot of guys start pretending who they are because they don’t want to be junebugged, raped, taken as a pussy, etc.

They lift weights and play sports and talk about their physical exploits. They do this so people will respect them and to intimidate and avoid confrontation. They do this so people won’t think they are gay.

Kylie collected the free writes and used them to discuss “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) and how men are held accountable in the prison system for their masculine presentations (Messerschmidt 2001; Sabo 2001). It was an opportunity to discuss power relations, hierarchies, and social control in a way students could connect to their daily lives. Unfortunately, out of all of the classes during the semester, this was

the one where the students were the least involved. However, Kylie did not force participation, because of her awareness that the men could be victimized outside of class as a result of their comments in class (Kuhlmann 2006; Marsh 1976; Thomas 1983). She used her knowledge of sociological theory to inform this choice. Kylie handled the homophobic comments differently at the prison class than she would at her university class because of the students' need to posture for safety in the prison. Similarly, Gretchen was told by the prison educational administration that controversial subject matter, in her case racial inequality, would have to be handled with care because in-class discussions and disagreements can translate into violent conflict on prison grounds.

Gretchen's observations about her students, and their gendered presentations, were different. Often times, it was the common identity as women that served as a bridge, rather than a barrier, to interaction among students and with the instructor. In fact, Gretchen reflected in her journal that she often was able to connect with the women in her course through their common identity as mothers, since four out of the seven women in her class had children. Studies on female inmates have reported that one of the most distressing aspects of being in prison is leaving children outside, children who may have been born while the mothers were incarcerated (Bosworth 1999). In the class, a few of the women who were also mothers expressed their sadness at not getting to see their children during the holidays. This was particularly difficult for Gretchen, because as a mother she empathized with how heartbreaking this must be for the women in her class.

In addition to the common identity as women, discussing sexuality and gender inequality was one of the more productive and easily accessible units of Gretchen's course. Gretchen's students' attitudes toward homosexuality were not outwardly hostile. This is reflected through an interaction that they had during the first class while conducting an icebreaker activity. One of the inmates reported an interesting fact about herself: "I like to bulldog." This refers to oral sex between women and was, we think, interjected in the class as a means to test Gretchen on the first day. Others have reported similar student motives while teaching in prison (Kuhlmann 2006:245). Kuhlmann (2006:239) also refers to the use of slang in prison

and reported some success in encouraging her students to move beyond the stereotypical use of slang to understand the sociological meaning beneath the language. Seeing this as a teachable moment, Gretchen chose to let the student speak this out loud so that the class could then discuss gender inequality and sexuality. The student's use of slang was not met with derision or aggression but with laughter and nervousness. The other women were not as interested in the student maintaining a feminine presentation, because they were afraid that she would offend Gretchen or cause trouble. Although this was not the intended lesson for the first class session, Gretchen chose to engage directly in how the women's reactions to the challenge of authority of the instructor were conditioned by her gender and the subject content. In this way, students were able to discuss how men and women are treated differently in public settings and positions of authority. The class also discussed heterosexism and how this concept can enlighten the students' nervousness in response to the slang statement. Therefore, allowing this woman, who was further marginalized as a lesbian inmate, to have a voice on the first day of class enabled Gretchen to establish a safe place for the students to connect personal experiences to sociological material.

On the final day of class, after holding informal evaluations, both instructors hugged their students. Gretchen asked her students for permission to hug them goodbye, in an effort to not inappropriately exert her authority as an instructor. However, one of the students replied that of course she could hug them because "we do not have cooties." Therefore, Gretchen's attempt to be sensitive to their possible past experiences with sexual harassment and exploitation was interpreted much differently by the students. Quite the opposite, on the last day of Kylie's class students filed out the door and shook her hand to show their gratitude, and three students asked for permission to hug her. This demonstrates how these interactions are situationally dependent on actors' gender and positions of power.

### *Interaction Order*

Interactions in the classroom were frequently conditioned by the presence or absence of prison officials and proved to be a challenge to our critical pedagogical approach. Similar to symbolic



interactionism, the dramaturgical perspective (Goffman 1959, 1967) focuses on how meanings and identities emerge from interactions between people. Goffman's analysis summarizes interactions as ritualistic, where people utilize etiquette, morals, and rules in interaction. The interaction order (similar to the ceremonial order or interaction ritual) stems from these rituals and rules. People abide by rules to protect and maintain their self-images, and when rules of conduct are broken, identities can potentially be discredited. Impression management involves controlling the way in which other actors perceive and think of you, which is done through actions, verbal expressions, and appearance.

Kylie's course content directly dealt with the issue of interaction order as a social psychological concept, and her classroom analysis provides some useful insights into how inmate behavior is affected by the interaction order. While discussing Goffman's (1959, 1967) dramaturgical approach, the students were excited about comparing their social world of confinement to other social worlds. One student explained the interaction order in prison as being similar to that of school. He said,

To an extent, it parallels the interaction order in a public school, but with two main differences: One, instead of teachers there are officers who are quicker to enforce stringent rules with greater consequences and two, there is no backstage area of props present to help us prepare for our performances.

The student's attention to inmates' inability to access "props" for constructing their performances provided Kylie with a chance to introduce privilege and to elaborate on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical notions of front stages and back stages.

This connection spawned a lively discussion where another student dissected Cahill's (2007) article "The Interaction Order of Public Bathrooms." He explained to the class that "basically everything in prison is a front stage. We can't ever let down our front. Someone's always watchin'." Another student chimed in and explained the ritual of "dapsing."<sup>1</sup> He said, "Even what you do in the bathroom is watched. You don't want to dis' anyone, but you know who washes their hands and who don't." He was drawing on the "positive interaction rituals" that

Cahill referenced from Goffman and Durkheim. As a need to acknowledge another man in the bathroom (who one just saw did not wash his hands), one would "daps" the man instead of doing any handshake, where you would touch palms, to avoid germs or potentially disrespect the other person. Our discussion must have seemed rowdy because a guard barged in. The men's body language changed immediately and the laughter stopped. After the guard exited, Kylie used it as an opportunity to discuss obedience to authority and the need to show deference (Goffman 1967). Thomas (1983:235) notes, "Such opposition makes it difficult for students to act like students and creates tension between instructors and staff in that instructors must be extremely careful not to let their own actions serve as an opportunity for guards to harass students." Because prison guards are in a position of power over the inmates, the asymmetrical relationship requires the inmates to show respect in order to avoid consequences, such as being "thrown in the hole" (solitary confinement).

For Gretchen, the interaction order in her classroom was difficult to establish as being democratic because of the totalitarian nature of prison administration. Students were uncomfortable with speaking out of turn and insisted on raising hands, despite reassurances that speaking out was allowed. Thus, the interaction order that was established, and stringently maintained by prison officials, proved to be a significant obstacle in approaching education from a critical feminist perspective that attempts to break down traditional hierarchical relationships between teachers and students (hooks 1994). This also impeded our efforts, as instructors, to establish an identity of being unlike the prison officials and resistant of oppressive rules and regulations. We negotiated with each prison's administration to keep our classrooms secure but without the constant scrutiny of guards. These actions would be challenged by guards on occasion, who as monitors of the total institution were accustomed to, and felt entitled to, ignore our students' privacy. They would routinely interrupt classes to conduct head counts and to do fire drills and lockdowns. Their intrusions into our classrooms disrupted the interaction order and undermined our efforts to create a democratic classroom.

At the same time, we were acutely aware of wanting to establish legitimacy inside the classroom while transcending the boundaries between

our students and others commonly in authoritative positions. We wanted our students to respect us and the classroom environment, but we also wanted them to confront their own oppression from a non-authoritative stance. Our sociological training enabled us to have an awareness of how social inequalities are perpetuated through the prison industrial complex, especially by the labeling and stigmatization of our students as inmates. We were both informed during our training that we would need to address the students as "Inmate [last name]," but we wanted to avoid participating in the degradation rituals (Garfinkel 1956) and tried our best to treat our students at the prison as we would our students at the university.

The administrator stressed the importance of being authoritative with the men and even stayed in the classroom with Kylie for the first 20 minutes on the first night of class. We were both told that the students needed to address us by our last names, not our first. However, both of us go by our first names with our traditional, on-campus students. Because of this, by the second week of class we had established an agreement with our students to adhere to formal titles when in the presence of prison administration. While Gretchen was able to negotiate the formal title for students from "Inmate [last name]," to "Ms. [last name]," Kylie was told by the Youth Offender Program administrator that she had to adhere to the formal title of "Inmate [last name]" because of the need for her to establish authority over the men. By interrupting the interaction order and challenging the rules of the prison administration, we were able to gain the respect of our students while also humanizing them.

### Emotion Work

Social arrangements are dictated by feeling rules, which outline appropriate reactions or ways that people should or should not feel (Shott 1979). Hochschild (1979:561) defines emotion work as "the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling." People feel the need to do emotion work when they become aware that their resulting feelings are inconsistent with what the situation prescribes. The social psychological concept of emotion work often took center stage in our prison classrooms.

Kylie's observations revealed how prisoners are challenged on the inside and how this informs

their understanding of the concept of emotion work. In contrast, Gretchen's observations show how emotion work can be used to understand the conflict that feminist instructors may encounter when confronting emotional content and experiences in the classroom. Applying this reflexivity to our classrooms gave us unique insight into the experiences of oppression of our students. As a result, we were both sympathetic and empathetic to our students, and we wanted to resist modes of oppression wherever possible. For example, in Kylie's class, while discussing the "mark of a criminal record" (Pager 2003), one black man expressed his concerns of both being black and having a criminal record. In addition to being worried about job prospects after release, he expressed his fears of interacting with women. This concern was echoed by other students. Because of the empathic stance of the instructor, this topic was engaged and was seen as relevant to the discussion of stigma.

Another example of how the students applied sociological theories to their confined social worlds was during our unit on emotion work (Hochschild 1979, 1983). The male students read Smith and Kleinman's (2007) article on medical students and Arluke's (2007) article on volunteering in an animal shelter. The class discussion focused on the need of managing one's emotions while at work. Several of the students did work release during the day before class. In an essay, a black student shared an example of an interaction with a white guard from his job at the prison:

It was my second year in prison and I worked on the 16th floor of the high rise, which is segregation. One of the officers asked why can Black people said [*sic*] "Nigga?" The way he said it was mocking and hateful. He kept saying "Nigga" and then "Nigger" trying to act like he was trying to find a difference in the two words. I was pissed off and constantly thought about hitting him. Then I thought about getting jumped by the officers and getting a year in the hole for defending my race. I realized it wasn't worth it and when I got back to my block I called my Dad and talked to him about it.

The student shows a clear understanding of the interaction order (Goffman 1959) in prison and of the elevated necessity of doing emotion work



(Hochschild 1979, 1983). Although he was “pissed off” because of the white guard’s use of offensive language, he realized that he must stay calm and not act on his anger.

Because of the institutional restraints, emotion work within the classroom was particularly difficult at times for the instructors. In Gretchen’s class, a woman revealed that she had been sexually assaulted as a young woman, as is common among female inmates (Bosworth 1999; Talvi 2007). Gretchen later reflected, “Ordinarily, I would have offered a private ear and a hug if appropriate, but because this was inside the prison I couldn’t.” Gretchen had little to draw on by way of expressing her sympathy and managing the emotions of students in the classroom as a result. Part of the rules established to maintain order within the prison setting dehumanizes the inmates such that recognizing their feelings under the setting defined by the institution is not permitted. This is further complicated in a women’s facility, where because of the endemic sexual assault that has occurred in women’s prisons—many times by prison officials—interacting with students as feeling persons is not allowed. In fact, emotive behavior is largely prohibited according to the Prison Rape Elimination Act, and each instructor was required to attend an orientation about adhering to the guidelines of this act. Central to these guidelines is the prohibition of fraternizing with inmates, including no personal contact such as hugging or personal conversations.

## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

In this article, we have applied the SoCC framework to examine our experiences teaching in prison. As noted by Macomber et al. (2009:228), having sociological knowledge and applying our sociological theories to our understandings of our college classrooms can help us improve our effectiveness as teachers. “Sociology offers a rich toolbox of concepts, theories, and methods that are useful in illuminating the complexities of teaching and learning” (Albers 2009:269-70). Although our experiences took place in the confines of prison, the lessons learned within this context have broader implications. Teaching in a total institution makes the bureaucratic challenges of teaching readily apparent and bears some resemblance to Weber’s ([1904-1905] 1930) “iron cage.”

Bureaucratic culture in higher education, as it is reinforced by patterned interactions, defines college classrooms and establishes student expectations. Academic freedom in the classroom likely varies by bureaucratic organizations, and a useful example is provided by for-profit and distance educational institutions. Efforts to “McDonaldize” curriculums in for-profit and distance education institutions are implemented for quality assurance. However, these efforts can also undermine the needed flexibility to teach effectively in the classroom, especially when they are undergirded by rigid bureaucratic structures. In an attempt to make online education more technological friendly and effective, institutions may establish course templates with readily available materials. While these can facilitate online course development, the technological tools employed also need to be flexible enough to ensure instructor adaptability to classroom needs. These are but two examples of how bureaucratic structures condition college classrooms. More exploration of these connections outside of the prison context, where the total institution represents a hyperbolic bureaucracy, would be insightful. Furthermore, turning sociological analysis inward can enable educators to transcend the barriers of teaching in various educational institutions, including total institutions.

In addition to analyzing the role of bureaucracies in shaping our classrooms, the social psychological concepts brought to bear in our analysis are important. Understanding the role that doing gender, interaction orders, and emotion work all play in defining the prison classroom can equip instructors on the inside, and on the outside, with information on how to address common challenges, such as homophobia or sexual assault. Emotion work plays a different role in our traditional university classes. When Kylie was teaching in an applied agricultural science program, first-generation college students enrolled in the class were from rural areas and farms in North Carolina. Their concerns and struggles required different approaches and more sympathy and empathy than teaching higher level classes with mostly sociology majors. Another realm that needs to be considered is the sociology of the online classroom. When teaching our introductory sociology class online, we strived to set up a sense of community by using discussion boards. The basic norms of the interaction order of the classroom were not as relevant online. We did not

need to tell students not to interrupt one another, but we still needed to establish rules regarding respecting classmates and interaction between students on the discussion board. Because we did not have a constant presence in the asynchronous online course, the rules and regulations of interaction had to be established up front. We also found that these classes required less emotion work on our behalf because we were not establishing the same relationships with our students, and our experience in the online setting is that interaction is more formal and less spontaneous because interactions are not taking place in a traditional front-stage setting.

Along with emotion work and the interaction order, doing gender in traditional college classrooms is salient, especially in classes where teaching inequality is central. As young women, we are concerned about legitimacy and authority, both in prison and in the traditional classroom. In traditional college classrooms, instructors who do not represent the stereotypical model of professors (i.e., older white men)—such as graduate students, minorities, or women—may find themselves needing to construct legitimate presentations. For example, they may use professional dress and demeanor to thwart resistance. In other words, the inability to portray “older white man” often places instructors at a disadvantage and more open to student scrutiny and challenges. Students in college classrooms also engage in gendered presentations but for reasons different from those of students at the prisons. The men at the prison were especially aware of needing to put on a “tough guise” (Jhally et al. 1999) in order to not be victimized, but heterosexual men on college campuses are invested in these presentations of self to perform for women and to avoid gender policing.

The prison classroom illuminated the importance of approaching our students from an empathetic position. Because systems of oppression were obvious in our prison classrooms, we readily assumed this standpoint. However, in the traditional classroom many of these systems of oppression exist but may be less salient for our students and ourselves. Our experiences show us that we should work harder to empathize with our students’ experiences and positions in broader society to help them gain an appreciation of their social worlds. Such goals help students and teachers to see that “[t]he fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspective makes us see in

a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives” (Berger 1963:21). One way to help students understand their lives in a new light, regardless of the classroom location, is by employing reflective writing assignments. These are a valuable way to gauge student learning and to help instructors empathize with their students. Instructors can have students compile free writes and abstracts and then at the end of the semester have students reflect on how their sociological imaginations have developed. Furthermore, engaging students as active participants and giving them a voice inside the classroom is a critical pedagogical approach that can help them to understand their location in “the system” and simultaneously challenge practices that reproduce systems of oppression and privilege. This was especially true in our prison classrooms but also translates to more traditional settings.

The ethnographic methods we employ also can be used to assess teaching effectiveness and evaluate teaching strategies. Instead of focusing purely on student learning outcomes, instructors can use journaling to record observations and assess their effectiveness in classrooms. This can include taking notes on how a discussion went, evaluating a group activity, and identifying which readings to replace or what videos might help with understanding. By recording the students’ responsiveness, instructors are able to make adjustments that can improve their teaching in the future. Additionally, students often suggest examples or ideas from their social worlds relevant to the course that instructors can then integrate into their teaching, such as contemporary music videos. For example, one of Kylie’s students e-mailed her the Eminem and Rihanna video “Love the Way You Lie” for her review and included some observations in her e-mail. Kylie was able to integrate this material in her gender class while also using the student’s insights and questions to spawn discussion. Using ethnography in the classroom also can help instructors compile reflective material for their teaching portfolios and promotion and tenure review packets.

Overall, our study makes a unique contribution to the SoCC literature because we extend the framework to nontraditional college classrooms. Additionally, our analysis here provides insight into how SoTL can facilitate an empirical understanding of both the classroom and society while also engaging in public sociology (Buroway 2005). Leaving the ivory tower to educate

marginalized populations is an important step to raising critical awareness in society. Educators have recognized that critical thought and participation are crucial to the foundations of a democracy (Boyte and Kari 2000), so more efforts similar to ours are warranted.

Education of marginalized populations is largely thought to be a positive step toward rehabilitation. With regard to educating prisoners, it is said to reduce recidivism substantially, up to 50 percent (Tewksbury, Erickson, and Taylor 2000). However, when the interaction setting and rules governing behaviors are stringently enforced to maintain social control, facilitating a critical education becomes difficult to achieve. Beyond the mere rhetoric of educating prison populations to promote successful reentry, the prison industrial complex needs to redefine the role that education can fulfill. At its highest potential, a critical education not only can prepare inmates for reentry but may also restore their sense of self-worth and an understanding of the world around them, both of which are important for navigating reentry. In other words, a giant step toward realizing the potential of education on the inside (and outside) is the cultivation of a sociological imagination (Mills 1959).

According to Thomas (1983:246), "Effective education not only changes students and instructor, but also helps transform the social world." Teaching in the prisons made both of us more reflective about our teaching styles. For instance, we both teach at a traditional state university and use technology to create interactive class discussions. This was difficult in the prison setting because we did not have access to technology. We had to modify our examples and be conscious of how our students were marginalized both in society and in the prison environment. In many respects, we had to give up our autonomy and have our materials reviewed by prison administrators who were not familiar with sociology. We also had to participate in degradation rituals when administration was around. Teaching inside prison provided these limitations, but it also challenged us to be creative about how we engaged our students. Negotiating between the administrative structure and our pedagogical philosophies proved to be a challenge but was also an exercise that helped us to more clearly identify what it means to be a feminist teacher-scholar. This challenge also demonstrates how valuable it is to use our sociological knowledge to interpret our classrooms and inform our pedagogy.

We feel that our experiences teaching sociology courses were successful because the classes provided benefits both for us and for our students. We were able to engage in public sociology by reaching marginalized students. We were able to get the students to grasp sociological concepts and to advance their critical thinking skills by having the students actively analyze their social worlds. More specifically, we were able to develop sociological imaginations (Mills 1959) behind bars. One of Gretchen's students wrote,

The sociological imagination allows us to look beyond a limited understanding . . . to see the world through a broader lens. It may be as simple as understanding why a roommate prefers country music to hip-hop, or it may open up a [new] understanding of whole population.

This demonstrates how the student not only understood her social location but was able to relate that to the lives of others.

Students were reflective of the learning experience in our sociology classes. A male student said,

[This class] gave me the opportunity to get a better understanding about myself. I know this class was to learn about social interactions in general and why people get certain thoughts, but it helped me get a better understanding of myself.

In a letter to Kylie, a student wrote,

I miss you and your teaching. You brought a sense of normalcy to an abnormal environment for me and I appreciate that.

Finally, a female student noted, "You never treated us like inmates." McCarty (2006:93) argues that classes in prison give students "the opportunity to identify themselves as something other than criminals; they identify as students. They have the opportunity to interact with and be seen by people from the outside as something other than criminals as well." Thus, in the classrooms our students were able to interact with someone who viewed them as people and students, rather than simply inmates, for the three hours they were in class each week. We both think, and our students' comments reflect, that this is no small thing.

We aimed to transcend the *prisoner* label from the outset of our teaching inside experience. By setting this stage, we strived to create an atmosphere as close as possible to our university classrooms, where we freely engage in feminist pedagogical practices. Our efforts were in some ways successful and others not. Part of our success was moving beyond the stigma attached to labeling our students as prisoners, both inside and outside. Something seemingly so insignificant to the untrained observer can indeed make a considerable difference in conditioning interactions within the classroom and influencing student perceptions. In our interactions with colleagues at the university and our traditional classrooms, we were able to take these lessons to create more teachable moments when discussing prison populations, deviance, and the prison industrial complex. Reflecting on this enabled us to take what could have been an isolated effort to work with marginalized populations and turn it into a sociologically informed discourse about teaching, prison, and the unique insights garnered when the two meet. While teaching behind bars is accompanied by some obstacles, as we have noted, there are important ways in which we as sociologists can make a difference while learning about the social world and our craft. Cultivating sociological imaginations behind bars, and in traditional classrooms, is indeed a worthy exercise.

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1. Similar to a high-five, this is when the men greet each other by bumping closed fists.

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