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Sandpiles of Dignity: Labor Status and Boundary- Making in the Contemporary American Prison



MICHAEL GIBSON-LIGHT 

This study investigates discursive strategies through which prisoners seek dignity. In particular, it turns toward the role of penal labor in such pursuits. Drawing on eighty-two in-depth interviews and eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted within one U.S. men's prison, it details the role of job status in prisoner dignity claims. In the scramble to the top of a shifting sandpile of dignity, prisoner appeals to legitimacy rely on downward-facing symbolic boundaries erected to distinguish from lower-status others. Participants in the highest-status work sites made moral claims against others by self-identifying as professionals rather than inmates. At the bottom reaches of the labor hierarchy, workers emphasized lateral distances from other low-status prisoners. These competitive processes serve to reify penal labor structures, inequity, and control.

Keywords: prison, labor, dignity, symbolic boundaries

An emerging literature examines the relevance of dignity to developments in administrative and legislative approaches to prison operations (Demleitner 2014; Henry 2010; Simon 2011, 2017; Snacken 2015; Van Zyl Smit and Snacken 2009; Waldron 2012); yet dignity's role behind bars at the micro level has been less explored. To complement these top-down approaches, this article investigates strategies through which U.S. prisoners claim and assess dignity. In particular, it looks at the role of penal labor in such pursuits. Work is a core facet of punishment for most prisoners (Hatton 2018; Stephan 2008) and shapes "penal subjectivities" (Sexton 2015). That is, prisoners' experiences and un-

derstandings of work may affect the ways in which they orient to and make meaning of punishment and of self-worth more generally (Hatton 2018). For the prisoner, as for the free citizen, "life demands dignity and meaningful work is essential for dignity" (Hodson 2001, 3). Yet the penal institution is fraught with hurdles to its acquisition.

This study therefore asks about the discursive strategies prisoners use to assert, justify, or maintain self-worth behind bars. What role do perceptions tied to labor play in prisoners' understandings of their own and others' identities and worth? To address these questions, I draw on eighty-two in-depth interviews with

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prisoners and staffers in a medium security men's state prison unit. Ethnographic observations help contextualize findings.

Work status offers one arena to assert worth relative to others. However, rather than a fixed "career ladder" with clear pathways to advancement and consistent understandings of status, prisoners instead face "opportunity sandpiles" (Giuffre 1999), in which stability is not guaranteed and perceived self-worth is often reconstituted with shifts in relative position. The world of penal labor is precarious and at times unpredictable. Prisoners face mass firings, frequent expressions of arbitrary authority and mistreatment, sporadic intra- and inter-institutional relocations, and other forms of instability. Findings suggest that working prisoners draw on moral rhetorics related to job status to assert dignity in this unstable context. In the scramble to the top of this shifting sandpile of dignity, they make claims to legitimacy in part by erecting symbolic boundaries between themselves and those of lower status to justify and reinforce their own standing—a form of "secondary adjustment" (Goffman 1961). Seeking to establish moral footing on the faults of others, participants regularly challenged the dedication, motivations, and work ethics of those in less desirable jobs than their own.

Although they shared a relatively consistent vocabulary of dignity, participants' boundary-making strategies were in part shaped by their positions within a tiered penal employment status hierarchy. Through distinction processes tied to work status, incarcerated workers reify structures of carceral labor and control. Although other group distinctions, such as those drawn along the lines of race (Walker 2016), age (Kreager et al. 2017), or gang affiliation (Skarbek 2014), remain important in the penal context, qualitative findings suggest that these and other social barriers may be cross-cut by labor distinctions, illuminating new class lines behind bars.

DIGNITY AND PUNISHMENT

The definition of dignity has shifted both colloquially and legislatively over the years (Simon 2017). In assessing various usages throughout legal history, Leslie Henry (2010) identifies five key, overlapping components: institutional sta-

tus, equality, liberty, personal integrity, and collective virtue. In a more general sense, we may understand dignity as "the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others" (Hodson 2001, 3). It is a basic sense of value or belonging in the social world (Pugh 2009)—a sense that is confirmed when one's personhood is recognized (Fagan 2017, 317). In the penal context, human dignity is linked to personal identity (Liebling 2011). As Gresham Sykes (1958, 6) notes, "a man perpetually locked by himself in a cage is no longer a man at all; rather, he is a semi-human object, an organism with a number. The identity of the individual, both to himself and to others, is largely compounded of the web of symbolic communications by which he is linked to the external world," the stripping of which results in a decay of personality and worth. Likewise, Erving Goffman (1961, 21) highlights the "loss of identity equipment" upon incarceration, which may "prevent the individual from presenting his usual image of himself to others." The deprivation of identity expression coupled with the forced adoption of institutionally approved expressions actively "mortifies" the self. "In total institutions, such physical indignities abound" (Goffman 1961, 22). Thus "retaining an identity" is central to prisoner conceptions of dignity (Liebling 2011).

Nevertheless, the processes through which it is pursued in situ behind bars remain understudied. In the absence of equitable access to resources and outlets for expression, we may expect the nation's prisoners to turn instead to local "economies of dignity" (Pugh 2009)—that is, local meanings systems through which they may ascertain which characteristics are privileged, assert value, and maintain positive self-images. Dignity claims may be externally validated by incarcerated peers, staffers, or contacts on the outside.

Classical prison scholarship links prisoner identity to internal hierarchies. Twentieth-century accounts of prison social systems detail largely agreed-upon prisoner roles linked to the nature of the crime and, to a lesser extent, race, age, and masculinity (Sykes 1958). In this setting, dignity and respect were conferred to those who followed the "convict code" and filled particular roles. In later years, penal in-

stitutions grew more divided along ethnoracial and geographic lines. The value of outside criminal activity shifted as well, and noncareer criminals and drug users rose in the ranks of the social order (Irwin 1980). Through the 1960s and into the beginning of what became the era of mass incarceration, prisoner populations continued to develop a competitive “segmented order” (Irwin 1980, 127) in which gang affiliations outpace many strata.

Prison social order in the era of hyperincarceration continues to fractionalize, with ethnicity and criminal orientation intersecting in evolving ways. Status distinctions and assertions of worth today take various forms rather than reflect a single, unified “code” (Clemmer 1958; Sykes 1958). Following a gap in interest in prison social order (Simon 2000), recent research points to prison gang structures (Skarbek 2014), ethnoracial hierarchies (Walker 2016), and age distinctions (Kreager et al. 2017) as arenas of prisoner status struggles. And, although earlier prison research tended to discuss penal labor primarily in terms of its material benefit for the incarcerated (see, for example, Sykes 1958), contemporary scholarship notes that work is salient to how individuals today perceive their time and positions behind bars (Guilbaud 2010). Standing in prison labor systems represents an emergent source of identity and dignity behind bars (see, for example, Rhodes 2004, 109). In this manner, the retention or “remaking of identity” (Liebling 2011) through work is principal in prisoner dignity pursuits.

Boundary-Making in Dignity Pursuits

The ability to derive self-worth from work is shaped by the conditions of labor. Forms of control and supervision can have mortifying effects, limiting workers’ ability to find meaning or satisfaction (Hodson 1996). In such contexts, dignity (and indignity) is often perceived relationally as individuals assess and assert worth along the lines of occupational divisions and access to power or resources (Crowley 2014).

The erection of symbolic boundaries is often central to securing and maintaining dignity. To this end, barriers between status groups may be erected in part to justify imbalances in the

control of resources (Weber 1978). Such boundaries, according to Michele Lamont (1992, 11), “emerge when we try to define who we are: we constantly draw inferences concerning our similarities to, and differences from, others, indirectly producing typification systems,” through which we “signal our identity and develop a sense of security, dignity, and honor.” Moral positions, such as a strong work ethic, are central to workers’ conceptions of self. Erecting boundaries along these lines “helps workers to maintain a sense of self-worth, to affirm their dignity independently of their relatively low social status, and to locate themselves above others” (Lamont 2002, 19). Those perceived as lacking work ethic or discipline are frequent objects of scorn. Frustrations with the moral deficiencies of others in part represent a response to challenges of low-status labor, which is often physically and psychologically strenuous and underpaid (Lamont 2002).

Positions in market hierarchies offer ready-made lines along which to erect symbolic boundaries. In navigating perceptions surrounding employment in low-status jobs, for instance, fast-food workers erect boundaries between themselves and the unemployed (Newman 1999). Workers may also assert distinctions from coworkers of different status levels. Competition is a consistent feature of internal labor markets—especially across occupational or departmental lines up the career ladder (Burawoy 1979). Yet, in some contexts, status and trajectories may be less clearly delineated or less stable. These environments may be conceptualized as “opportunity sandpiles” (Giuffre 1999). Amid such volatility, relative positions between workers may be insecure, resulting in a structure in which “each career can only be evaluated in relationship to other actors” (Giuffre 1999, 830). Perceptions of self-worth may be regularly reconstituted or challenged with shifts in one’s or others’ standing.

The U.S. Penal Labor Context

In today’s state penitentiaries, approximately two-thirds of prisoners participate in work programs (Stephan 2008). They engage in textiles; data entry; and other light industry (Haney 2010); maintain and clean prison facilities (Hatton 2018; Solomon et al. 2004); are contracted

in public works projects, such as road and park maintenance, construction, and public lands upkeep; engage in agricultural work; work in call centers (Stephan 2008); and fight fires in the outside world (Goodman 2012). These are only some of the pervasive uses of penal labor (Pryor 2005).

Several factors distinguish the prison labor context from the free world sites in which other scholars have investigated boundary-making processes. First, the prison work environment is uniquely unstable and intensely competitive. Mass or unjustified firings are common; prisoners may be transferred to other jobs or facilities without notice; and wages may be reduced or seized with little oversight, generating uncertainty and ambiguity (Crewe 2011). Additionally, “The work [is] draining . . . and its very existence help[s] to stimulate intense competition for the better jobs among the inmates” (Jacobs 1977, 48). Second, the prison is more explicit in limiting the mobility of disadvantaged groups. The most valued assignments are often inequitably awarded along ethnoracial or gender lines (Crittenden, Koons-Witt, and Kaminiski 2018). Finally, prisons house a particularly narrow range of social class. Whereas the free world is fraught with conflict between middle-class managers and working-class employees (Burawoy 1979) or workers and the nonworking poor (Newman 1999), the prison population is largely made up of poor labor market under- or nonparticipants (Wakefield and Uggen 2010).

In this environment, self-discipline and dedication to “a hard day’s work” have emerged as central to how prisoners as well as prison staffers understand value (see Goodman 2012). Work is perceived as a disciplining or normalizing endeavor through which prisoners adopt new or renewed responsibilities (Simon 1993). By highlighting the importance of work ethic, contemporary prisoners not only signal virtue, but also inject meaning into their labors and hence their time behind bars. Shadd Maruna (2001) suggests that skilled or vocational work experiences may help bolster prisoners’ perceptions of self-worth and the reconstruction of

positive narratives about their lives. If, as Randy Hodson (2001) asserts, dignity is contingent on meaningful work, then dignity behind bars is hinged in part on the perceived relative worth of one’s work.

METHODS AND SITE

This article draws primarily on eighty-two in-depth interviews to investigate dignity pursuits on the inside. Sixty-nine were conducted with prisoners and thirteen with staff members at a medium security unit of a men’s state prison, which I refer to as Sunbelt State Penitentiary (SSP).¹ Prisoner participants were drawn from four penal labor programs where I conducted ethnographic observations. The nature of the prison and prisoners’ dominated schedules often made it difficult to secure time and space to conduct interviews. Because of this, they ranged from fifteen to eighty minutes. Questions inquired broadly into prisoners’ experiences of life and work, including personal employment history inside and outside prison, perceptions of work, the dynamics of navigating prison life, and future plans for release. Influenced by the racial politics of the institution—informal rules governing and limiting interactions between racial-ethnic cliques (Goodman 2014)—white prisoners were quicker to consent to recorded interviews in the early weeks of collection, increasing final participation rates. The reluctance of other groups eventually faded but resulted in fewer interviews overall.² No clear trends emerged along ethnic or racial lines in regard to the focus of this article.

Ethnographic field notes are drawn on for context and added detail. I conducted eighteen months of fieldwork across 2015 and 2016 at SSP. Following approval from the state Department of Corrections (DOC), I entered the field during daylight hours to observe and participate in penal labor tasks alongside prisoners of diverse ages, ethnic groups, and criminal histories. I explored many work programs but, to better focus observations on consistent processes and themes over time, I spent most days

1. All names, including that of the institution, are pseudonyms.

2. The final prisoner interview sample included twenty Latino (twelve Mexican American, eight foreign national), thirty-four white, fourteen black, and one Native American.

at one of four sites. These were selected on the basis of their divergent desirability to workers and included the “worst” prison job, one “decent” job, and the two “best” jobs, in the language of participants.

The site first was the food factory, a derided food prep warehouse in which approximately eighty men rolled bologna, wrapped sandwiches, and engaged in a range of other mostly deskilled tasks. The second was the fleet garage, a fully stocked auto garage at which a small crew of four to seven men performed regular maintenance on the institution’s vast vehicular fleet. The third was the call center, the highest paying and one of the two most lauded work programs onsite, in which a staff of approximately thirty prisoners made cold-call telemarketing sales to the outside world. The fourth and final work program was the sign shop, the second of the two “best” work programs, in which around thirty working prisoners produced street signs and other signage to fulfill state and rarer private orders. At times, I observed the comings and goings of nonworking prisoners on the prison yard—or “Idle Men” (Sykes 1958)—though I did not interview them. I also occasionally shadowed staff performing various duties within and beyond prison walls.

The site of this research, SSP, is located in the U.S. Sunbelt—defined as the region below the 36th parallel (Browning and Gesler 1979). Home to several thousand male prisoners, this institution is in the top quartile of U.S. prisons in terms of average daily population size (Stephan 2008).³ It is a state prison, meaning that it is managed by a state DOC. Administrative and security staffers are state employees; however, many civilian staff members are employed by private firms contracted to oversee services like food production or medical care, or manage certain work programs like the call center. As is typical of contemporary U.S. penal facilities, most SSP prisoners engage in some form of labor, whether in programs overseen by private firms or—most commonly—directly for the state in a facility support capacity (Stephan 2008).

WORK AT SUNBELT STATE PENITENTIARY

Approximately two-thirds of SSP prisoners worked in some form of labor program. Those participating in morning education programs (around 10 percent of prisoners) were exempted from mandatory labor, as were those deemed physically or mentally unfit. The institution housed an expansive list of work programs of different types and levels of appeal in the eyes of the incarcerated. The four sites on which observations were focused were selected purposively to allow insight into each tier of this hierarchical employment system. Early insights from working prisoners as well as facility staff helped me identify the selected sites.

The Hierarchical Penal Employment System

Work programs regarded as the best within the unit shared characteristics with “good jobs” (Kalleberg 2011) in the free world. These positions—the call center and sign shop—were classified by the institution as “skilled positions” and offered the highest wages, paying up to approximately \$1.00 per hour or higher. Further, good jobs also promised greater degrees of autonomy (allowing smoke breaks at prisoners’ leisure, for instance), relative stability (lower levels of turnover), and opportunities for internal mobility (allowing workers to move between stations within the work site). In addition, they were commonly less exposed to the institution’s security apparatus (for example, by not having correctional officers [COs] stationed onsite) and facilitated work experiences that reportedly felt “more like a real job,” where men could “escape prison in their mind.” I refer to these positions as top-tier prison jobs.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, positions regarded as “bad prison jobs” conferred lower pay, many offering less than \$0.20 hourly on average. These sites also offered deskilled tasks, little autonomy, pronounced instability, and few opportunities for internal mobility. Examples include scrubbing tiles on the floor crew, cleaning toilets as a porter, or collecting cigarette butts across facility grounds. These sites were often despotically managed—deemed

3. Specific information about the facility, such as particulars regarding its location and the size and characteristics of its prisoner population, have been minimized to help secure participant confidentiality.

prison-within-the-prison—and featured repressive oversight from the penal security system via constant CO surveillance, pervasive security cameras, or more regular police dog unit searches. The quintessential bad prison job was the food factory, which was overwhelmingly derided by participants. Workers often reported feeling “trapped” with little hope of advancement. One CO related that these jobs were “for troublemakers. It’s like an informal punishment.” I refer to them as bottom-tier prison jobs.

Finally, certain positions possessed a combination of desirable and undesirable characteristics, eliciting ambivalence from many. Examples included the outside highway cleanup crews, heavy equipment operators, or carpenters in the wood shop. As another example, working as a mechanic in the fleet auto garage offered the opportunity to engage in skilled labor with a higher degree of autonomy than many prison spaces; however, this site was also home to a permanently stationed CO, offered few opportunities for internal advancement, and offered only average prison pay. As such, it was often described simply as a “fine” or “decent” position. I refer to these as middle-tier prison jobs.

For the most part, jobs at SSP were plentiful and nearly everyone who was deemed able to work was slotted somewhere into the labor system. However, certain DOC policies limited the prospects of particular groups. For instance, coveted sites such as the call center and sign shop required a high school diploma or equivalent. Because approximately 70 percent of the nation’s incarcerated have no such certifications (Wakefield and Uggen 2010), most remained unable to secure the most lucrative positions. These jobs also formally excluded noncitizens, further restricting the pool of eligible workers. Such exclusions applied to work sites beyond prison walls as well, disqualifying foreign nationals and the less educated from working on the highway cleanup crews, for example. Some jobs featured other criteria for entrance—such as a clean disciplinary record over recent months—though these were at times more selectively enforced.

The vast majority of prisoners worked in the middle and bottom tiers of the labor hierarchy,

receiving between around \$0.05 and \$0.50 per hour. The mean wage was approximately \$0.20 per hour. At six- or eight-hour workdays, many might expect to earn \$4.00 to \$6.00 weekly before deductions for different fees and services. Such fees included charges for medical and dental visits, steadily rising charges for each minute of telephone use or letter mailed, commissary costs for food or hygiene products like toilet paper or denture cream, monthly utility fees for anyone possessing an electrical appliance like a radio, and other “pay-to-stay” expenses (Gipson and Pierce 1996; Gottschalk 2010; Levingston 2007; Von Zielbauer 2007). After all deductions were accounted, many reported quite meager earnings. Although the difference between \$0.20 and \$1.00 per hour might seem minimal to an outsider, prisoners and staffers alike attested that this gap could generate divergent carceral experiences as men relied on wages for necessary goods and services. As one man put it, “Some of these jobs pay fifteen cents [hourly], then they take out for gate fees, electrical, medical—in the end, you get a check for a dollar-twenty. A soda costs one-nineteen!”

Indignity and Instability at Sunbelt State Penitentiary

At SSP, workers scrambled for jobs in a frequently shifting opportunity sandpile. Officially, the job application and assignment process at SSP was straightforward. Prisoners had simply to fill out an application indicating their preferences and wait for an opening in their work site of choice. In practice, however, this process rarely if ever played out as described. Paper job applications were inexplicably difficult to locate. After applying, it could take weeks, months, or years to hear back from the preferred work program, if at all. The most desirable top-tier programs relied on additional steps to vet applicants. Being accepted into the prison sign shop required completing a short educational assessment. The onsite manager of the shop, Mr. Edwards, described this as a way to narrow down the applicant pool by assessing knowledge of “basic middle school things—shapes, colors, et cetera. Things that you and I could do with ease.” Those who passed the test were then interviewed regarding

their work history, skills, and general outlooks toward work. Similarly, applicants to the call center had to pass a computer test—demonstrating their ability to log in and dial a call using the automated system. On completing this, they then had to perform a mock sales call to be assessed by the call center manager, Dennis.

Race was intertwined with these processes in different ways. For instance, during the mock sales call portion of the call center application process, minority applicants were often penalized for “sounding ghetto” (in the words of one staffer) or exhibiting a non-American accent over the phone. For reasons such as these, ethnicity often directly limited one’s ability to secure desirable prison work (Crittenden, Koons-Witt, and Kaminski 2018; for a more extensive examination of the process and racial dynamics of getting a prison job, see Gibson-Light 2019).

Few managed to reach higher-status positions and many reported feeling “stuck” at the bottom reaches. The system was indeed competitive and at times chaotic. According to one staffer, “[We] don’t have to have a paper trail to fire somebody.” Many prisoners were fatalistic in the face of this precariousness. As one man said with a shrug, “We’re in prison. Things come and go.”

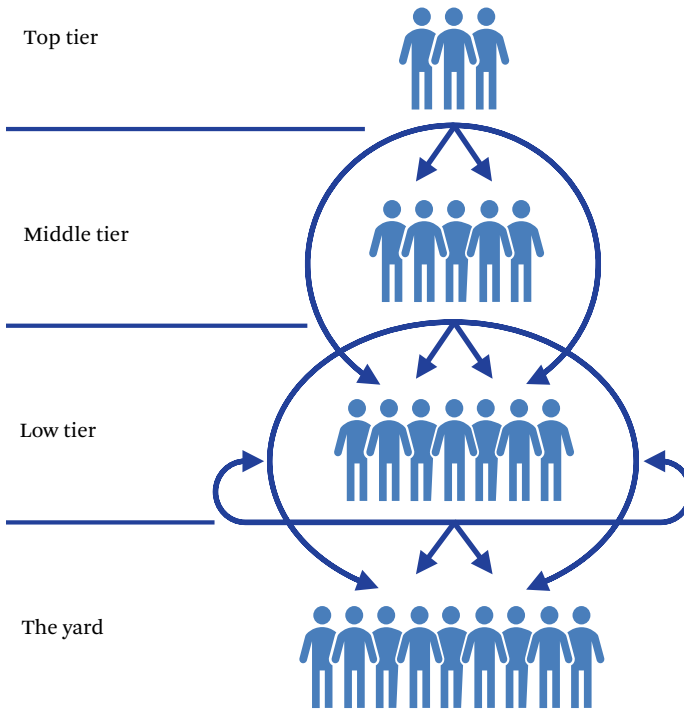
Although volatility was felt in all tiers of the work hierarchy, top-tier positions did promise a slight reduction in transfers between sites. Participants in these jobs were often placed on institutional hold, making it more difficult for administrators to transfer them, save for security or disciplinary interventions. As CO Bush, who oversaw work assignments, said, “You don’t want these guys moving from skilled jobs—the sign shop, call center. . . . So, I’ll place a work hold on the skilled workers. They [DOC] can still move them, but it won’t be part of daily movement. There better be a [good] reason.” Conversely, labor-force churn and instability typically increased in lower-status sites. The food factory, for example, reported a turnover rate as high as two workers daily. Demotions were also frequent, typically without explanation. When one participant was moved from the freezer section to meat prep, a derided entry-level position, he exclaimed, “That bitch [manager] fired me.” When asked why, he re-

sponded, “I dunno—she wouldn’t tell me. Fucking bullshit!”

Prisoners also had to cope with unreliable grievance systems. Such systems are often convoluted, slow, and outmoded, with prisoners reporting feelings of powerlessness and frustration at their inability to make their voices heard (Calavita and Jenness 2015). Responding to the suggestion that he approach his managers with concerns, one participant scoffed, “One of them? No way! . . . They don’t care about grievances unless it comes from the warden.” When asked whether appealing to the warden was effective, he shrugged: “Not that I’ve ever seen.” Writing a letter to the warden’s office was a slow process, removed from the actual workplace. Furthermore, it entailed risk as it required prisoners to link their name to institutional criticisms.

In addition to challenges within the workplace, the actual trek to work was also dehumanizing for many. Those who had to be transported to a secondary site away from the housing units had to pass through the strip shack before and after each workday. This plagued workers in a variety of jobs, ranging from the low-status food factory to the high-status sign shop. Here, they were stripped naked in groups and inspected for hidden contraband. Lemmy, from the sign shop, described the experience: “They strip you butt-ass naked, seven guys at a time. ‘Spread your cheeks, lift your sack’—that sort of thing. That’s for anybody that leaves the yard. Lotta guys don’t like leaving the yard and dealing with that. . . . It’s a pain in the ass. Sometimes literally.” The call center and other sites housed inside the fencing surrounding the housing units were exempted from such encounters.

These conditions culminated in a general sense of indignity for incarcerated laborers. One man exclaimed, “They’re just trying to punish us! They show authority instead of showing gratitude for us working here.” Another declared, “There’s no appreciation for what we do in here.” Many dreaded work. According to one man from the food factory, “I feel better as soon as I get home. But when I’m here I don’t feel well.” Shaking his head with a distressed expression, he added, “Ugh. It wears

Figure 1. Downward-Facing Boundary-Making in a Sandpile of Dignity

Source: Author's illustration.

me down.” Such sentiments are confirmed by the formerly incarcerated, who emphasize three distinctly punitive characteristics of prior prison work: “their lack of remuneration, their lack of autonomy in choosing whether to work and in negotiating the terms of their labor, and their mistreatment and degradation on the job” (Hatton 2018, 181). These concerns were compounded by the fact that DOC policy barred prisoners from freely quitting their work assignments. (On occasion, some willingly sought termination; however, this entailed risk because it necessarily involved receiving several disciplinary tickets, which typically brought additional sanctions.) What is more, most relied on their meager wages to purchase food, medical care, and other things necessary for survival (see, for example, Smoyer and Lopes 2017).

Staff members largely rejected worker assertions of legitimacy. Work, according to one CO, was important solely for managing the prison

population, “otherwise, they sit in the yard all day, getting in trouble.” James Jacobs (1977, 46–47) recounts similar outlooks in the mid-twentieth century, noting that officials relied on carceral labor to “coerce the inmate into a conformity that would ultimately produce a respect for the rules” as well as “reinforce control by keeping inmates busy rather than providing job training.” Penal labor has thus remained central to the management of the prisoner population.

Nevertheless, staffers and prisoners frequently drew on rhetorics valuing cultural narratives tied to work ethic and discipline when discussing captive laborers themselves. As the following sections will detail, prisoners at different tiers of the penal employment system sought to affirm their own identities in these terms. In the context of the opportunity sandpile of the prison, they often framed worth in contrast to others’ perceived failings along valued lines. As such, symbolic boundaries were

commonly erected downward as workers sought to distinguish themselves from their lower-status counterparts (see figure 1). At the bottom of the sandpile, challenges were also turned inward.

THE TOP TIER OF THE PRISON EMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

The sign shop and the call center shared the honor of being called the best jobs at SSP. Securing a seat in one of these coveted programs was, to many, a signal of superior skill and—vitality—morality. By discursively casting the larger prison body as less qualified and lacking a strong work ethic, these men asserted their worth. In the process, they sought to supplant dehumanizing labels of *inmate* or nameless DOC prisoner numbers with other, more dignified distinctions as *worker* and *professional*.

The actual workspaces of these programs helped make this possible. Neither was surveilled with institutional security cameras, for instance, and each was designed to look different from other cold prison spaces. The call center was lined with cubicles and plastered with posters. In addition to printouts of the sales script, prisoners adorned their desks with pictures of loved ones, uplifting slogans (“Never give up!”), or other decorations. Although their computers lacked open internet access and phones were restricted to business numbers preloaded into the computer, these connections nevertheless elevated prisoner experiences. Similarly, the sign shop was modeled after shops on the outside and managed by a man with decades of industry experience. Prisoners had access to tools, including sharp implements such as box cutters. This access—and the implied trust—was rare behind bars. Such features distanced workers from many other institutional indignities, save for unexpected reminders like the crackle of a staff radio. As one sign shop worker, Luther, put it, “You feel like you’re at a company, in society. Until you hear that radio! But it’s peaceful—not like on the yard.”

On rare occasions, workers in the two top-tier programs would cast dispersions at one another. One man working in the sign shop, for instance, once said of his counterparts in the

prison call center: “Buncha prima donnas over there.” He would add, “You ask me, they’re just a buncha phone salesmen. The bottom of the barrel.” Such claims were, however, uncommon. Instead, workers in both sites prioritized distinctions between themselves and prisoners of lower status in the labor hierarchy.

High-Status Workers Defined Against Other Workers

Participants at the top of the hierarchical prison employment system were able to assert self-worth in a way that most could not. This was in large part due to the nature of their work environment. As Ben, a prisoner who had worked in the sign shop for upward of two years, said of the site, “It’s like a real job. We come in, work our eight hours. If there’s down time, we take it. Our bosses are civilians—they’re cool, so that helps.” For Ben and his coworkers, work was far from a facet of carceral punishment; instead, it offered a form of escape. The sign shop was framed not as a prison job, but a “real job.” The overseers were not COs, but civilian bosses. As another shop worker, Jon, attested, “People forget—this ain’t no [typical prison] job. This is a business. If you don’t like somebody, you gotta set aside your differences. You gotta do that for the company.” That the sign shop shipped orders to customers in the free world further contributed to the image that it was a business in some way removed from the penal facility—enabling workers to distance themselves to an extent as well.

The call center, which was in fact managed by a private firm, evoked similar assertions from its workers. Jake would insist, “When we’re in here—[despite] wearing orange—working in a telemarketing place, we’re telemarketers in our mind.” According to another incarcerated salesman, Javi, the highlight of his job was that “It feels like a real job. You come in here and it’s a professional atmosphere. You’re on the phone and you’re talking to other people—you have to be on a professional level here. You’re representing your company.” These sites were deemed professional because they resembled work environments in the free world in some ways, distinct from the identity-

stripping, overtly punitive conditions of most prison sites. Affiliation with the call center helped provide a new, more dignified identity in this way. Javi attested that he operated not merely as a contracted prisoner, but also as a representative of the company. He added that the job “prepares you psychologically, mentally. And you wake up at a certain time because you have to be at work by six o’clock. You have to work your forty hours a week. So, you’ve got these obligations and you have to fulfill the obligations like a regular job.”

Dedication to fulfilling such duties was central to the identity of professional and associated relative perceptions of worth. Unlike lower-status workers, said Franklin of the sign shop, “We’re professional men. We appreciate our jobs.” Related to such claims was the assertion that others—the “unappreciative”—were merely lazy. According to Marino, “If you are just sitting around all day not doing anything and they need you in the kitchen, the food factory . . . they’re going to force you to work because no one wants to work that. So, it’s the lazy guys who get those bad jobs because they’re not putting forth the effort to look for the good jobs. And they get locked in the bad jobs.”

Receiving the highest hourly wage in the prison, workers in the call center were sometimes defensive about their status. Clay expressed this in reference to a middle-tier job site at SSP, the outside highway cleanup crew: “This ain’t a job like the highway crew, you know what I mean? They told us, ‘Well, [that crew] doesn’t make [as much as you]. And they’re outside. They’re getting dirty. They’re working hard. You guys are sitting in air conditioning at computers.’ While that job has no skill set. . . . The [people in the] best job are going to have hate from those people.” To Clay, the higher pay, perks, and resources from which top-tier workers benefited were deserved in part because the position demanded particular capabilities.

To these men, dedication to the “company” and possession of valued skills were central to “professional” identities. They embraced the institutional designation of skilled laborers to this end. Beyond erecting these identities through contrasts to other workers, they also

often cited nonworkers who spent their days on the prison yard as well.

High-Status Workers Defined Against Nonworkers on the Yard

To many penal laborers, those who did not work were seen as taking advantage of the system. Although some were legitimately unable to perform labor tasks, others reportedly exploited the system to evade assignment. Jake, a call center salesman, attested that “A lot of guys just don’t want to do nothin’,” he said. “They just want to sit at home, just like they are on the streets. They just—pshh—just stay home. Some of those guys can’t work for medical reasons, but most of them just avoid it. . . . A lot of guys don’t want to work, bud.” According to Marino, the DOC repeatedly failed to adequately reward those who did work hard. In particular, he contested the departmental policy that required the highest-paid (which in this unit only included sign shop and call center workers) to pay a room-and-board fee out of a percentage of their pay. “Here I am working,” Marino said, “and [they] charge me rent, when the dope fiend next to me—who does nothing all day but sleep all day and get high all day—doesn’t have to pay rent! . . . [While I’m] actually doing a grind and doing what’s supposed be done.”

This sentiment was common at the top reaches of the employment hierarchy. Many cited their willingness to work—to “do what’s supposed to be done”—as a source of pride. “There are some of us—the more mature men—we want to work,” said Franklin. “We don’t want the drama of the yard. It [work] gives you something to do, gives you integrity. That’s what we all strive for.” Hoke would also situate his own self-image along these lines. “You got a lot of guys [on the yard] sitting around. They don’t do nothing. They don’t even want a job.” Distancing himself from these lower-status men, he added, “Well, I’ve always supplied for myself. You know what I’m saying? I’ve always taken care of myself.”

Participants also related frustrations with how they believed nonworkers perceived them. “You got to understand a prison,” said Marino. “They hate on me, man. If somebody’s trying

to do good, they hate on it. If somebody's doing good, they going to hate on you because they don't want you doing as good as them." Jon recounted facing contempt for having secured his coveted position in the sign shop. The best strategy, he advised, was avoidance. "On that yard, with all those angry dudes, mad that they in prison? Starting fights? Uh-uh," he exclaimed, shaking his head. "It's no good. That's why this job is good—I go here, then straight to school after. So, then I only have three hours in the yard before I can sleep." Many associated the yard, in contrast to the workplace, and those who spent their days there with unstructured volatility—with idleness, drama, and potentially violence, which were best avoided through attending work.

THE MIDDLE TIER OF THE PRISON EMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

Like the call center and sign shop, the fleet auto garage resembled similar sites in the outside world in several ways, including being home to civilian bosses, Graham and Boyle. Yet other features of this site made it difficult for its workers to fully reframe it as a "business" beyond prison walls. For instance, it was home to a permanently stationed CO, Officer Peña, who patrolled the garage and closely surveilled tool use. Additionally, every corner of the site was monitored by visible security cameras. From time to time, some garage workers referenced "professionalism" similar to top-tier workers. Occupying more liminal positions, however, they instead typically focused on erecting boundaries between themselves and the (more limited supply of) lower-status workers in bottom-tier sites as well as nonworkers on the prison yard.

Mid-Status Workers Defined Against Low-Status Workers

Danny, an imprisoned mechanic who worked primarily on heavy equipment like tractors and buses, suggested that differences between skilled workers in the fleet garage and men working in low-tier work programs designated as unskilled by the institution were observable. To him, this was evident in the mechanics' dedication to approaching work earnestly and with positivity: "I think generally, I would say the

biggest thing is that most of the guys here are going to work hard every day [and] are probably a little bit more upbeat and happier." Many of Danny's opinions on the matter were formed early in his prison sentence when he was assigned to work on the general maintenance crew, a low-status work site at SSP. It was here that he said he encountered frequent issues he attributed to prisoners lacking dedication to the job:

DANNY: Usually it's somebody that just doesn't know what they're doing or somebody who just doesn't give a shit about their job. I mean . . . they're just making it harder for everybody else. Dragging their feet, or just causing some kind of issue that's making everybody else's job harder. That's usually what I think is the common problem.

INTERVIEWER: So, when that sort of thing happens, how does it get resolved?

DANNY: Usually they pretty much just stop coming to work. [laughter] You know what I mean?

Against these undedicated workers, Danny framed himself and his coworkers as men who "work hard every day." Additionally, they "give a shit" about work and remained "a little bit more upbeat" in the face of laboring in the prison context, signaling the importance of attitudinal performance in addition to commitment to task completion.

Another central characteristic that these mid-status workers highlighted was the skilled nature and designation of their tasks. Directly tied to this were participants' (or their assessments of others') work experiences, illustrating the relevance of pre-prison employment to dignity pursuits. According to Seth, the newest of the mechanics to be stationed in the garage following a stint in the low-status food factory, "a lot of them guys [in the food factory] never worked anywhere but McDonald's or Jack in the Box or some shit." Gael, a senior mechanic, insisted that many prisoners "don't know what they're doing" when it comes to work. Despite this, Gael said, many falsely claimed various skills. "That's one thing about being in prison," he told me, "is that you see these guys that say they know what they're doing, [but] they don't

have no idea. They just do it [lie about their skills] to try to get out of the yard or get into something they might have a little bit experience in.”

Beyond their level of skill (or lack of skill), other features distinguished low-status workers from the mid-status mechanics, according to Gael:

INTERVIEWER: So, do you think there’s a difference between [workers from] a skilled job and an unskilled job?

GAEL: Oh, yeah. You can tell when you’re over there at the food factory, you can tell the difference in a person’s demeanor. . . . The guys over there or other jobs like that, you’ll notice they aren’t able to stay focused on things a lot. And with these [skilled] jobs you have to stay focused, you have to have an understanding of professional relationships.

Workers in the food factory and other low-tier sites, according to Gael, lacked an understanding of “professional relationships” between peers or between workers and management. He later detailed the unwillingness of lower-status workers to build trusting working relationships with the staffers overseeing them: “The people who are less educated, they seem to really misinterpret things that are being presented to them. Like when [a staffer] says, ‘Oh, this is the way we’re going to implement these types of rules or regulations,’ and it’s going to be beneficial, they think that there’s something trying to go against them.”

Mid-Status Workers Defined Against Nonworkers

Fleet garage workers were also quick to define themselves in contrast to nonworking prisoners at SSP. As one mechanic said, “Most motherfuckers don’t want to work. They just want to sit on the yard all day. Fucking bums.” One man, Seth, was particularly adamant that his work ethic, which he learned at a young age, was what put him above these other men:

I think it was my dad instilling the work values into me. . . . He could tear apart a motor of a car and fix it. He could tear apart any-

thing, a fucking generator, whatever it was, man. He could fix it. I think the thing that I really took away from it was the work ethic. And I think I get a lot of that from him, because I’d like to think I’m a pretty good worker. . . . Without him, I would be like some of these jackasses that the only thing they got to look forward to is [unskilled work] or janitorial shit or whatever.

According to the mechanics, laboring in the garage each day offered an opportunity to actually escape interactions with nonworkers. After work, “I’ve got to go back to the yard and deal with a bunch of freaking idiots,” exclaimed one mechanic. “Just completely stupid people, you know what I mean? We don’t have to come out here [to work] and deal with that.” Another shop worker, Ethan, said he, too, sought to limit interactions: “I’m really doing my best in here and staying away from all the riff-raff.” Danny suggested that he and his coworkers were above the pursuits occupying the time of nonworkers on the yard. He also advised avoidance:

We’re tired when we get back. We can just go home and chill and relax. You know what I mean? Our minds are tired. Our bodies are tired. We just wore ourselves out. Not really worried about what else is going on in the yard. Don’t really give a shit. I just want to go to work the next day. We have a routine. You know what I mean? These guys are fucking nitpicking everything that’s going on. “Man, this sucks. This sucks.” We’re like, “Whatever, dude.” You know what I mean?

Defining themselves in opposition to the nonworkers on the yard, mechanics’ professed dedication to labor mapped on to a desire to avoid distractions. Despite—or perhaps motivated by—their liminal standing, they demarcated stark distance from those lower in the hierarchy.

THE BOTTOM TIER OF THE PRISON EMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

Prisoners confined to the bottom of the internal labor hierarchy of Sunbelt State faced magnified indignities of prison life. To them, work

was not an escape, but instead one more facet of punishment. The work environment of such sites reflected this. The food factory, for instance, was unmistakably a prison labor site. The walls were the same drab gray stone as the housing bays. An onsite CO, Byrne, made regular patrols of the large warehouse. Although a civilian crew oversaw most work tasks, they were often quite punitive and did not seek to recreate the atmosphere of outside workplaces like their counterparts in top- and mid-tier jobs. Overseers regularly referred to workers as *inmate* rather than by name. Work was regularly interrupted for “count time,” with prisoners ordered to line up and be accounted for.

On occasion, food factory workers referenced failed attempts to break into the top labor tier. Vin, for instance, related that he had once attempted to get a job in the prison call center but failed. With a shrug, he said, “Eh, but I don’t really want to sit there and do that all day long anyway.” More commonly, these participants drew on distinctions from prisoners who spent days on the yard—much like the working poor Katherine Newman (1999) studied, who asserted worth in opposition to nonworkers. Moreover, they also engaged in lateral distinctions, erecting boundaries between stations within their site in a manner much rarer at the mid and top tier.

Low-Status Workers Defined Against Nonworkers

Occupying the bottom of the worker hierarchy at SSP, the men of the food factory had few workers against whom to assert their relative value. Despite poor working conditions, participants often insisted that the job remained an improvement from the yard. According to one man, Dread, “I don’t really care what [job] I do. Anything is better than being stuck on that yard all day. . . . It’s just too much stuff going on there.” By “stuff,” Dread referred to the general perception of “drama” of day-to-day yard life, including gossiping and time spent dwelling on outside relationships or other concerns. Soto said,

I like leaving the yard because I don’t like all that drama. There’s a bunch of grown-ass men who are nosier than these teenagers out

there on the internet. Straight up, man. [If] something happens over here in Building 1, in about 15 minutes it’ll be known in Building 4. You know what I mean? So, I’m not trying to be a part of that. That’s why I want a job, because I don’t want to be in there.

Others lamented the violence that occurred outside of work. Pedro, for instance, claimed, “I’m always a respectful person, and just neutral. But I see a lot of people . . . since I’ve been here, and some people are just, like, real hard-headed. You know what I mean? They just want to fight every time or pick a fight with you.” When asked whether “hard-headed” individuals were often encountered at work, Pedro shook his head and said, “Usually it’s not at work. . . . They [workers] just try to stay busy.” He reiterated, “But in the yard it is [common].”

One food factory worker, Bobby, suggested that the men on the yard possessed entirely different values, lacking dedication to labor and instead emphasizing “appearances”:

BOBBY: I like to be around people that like to work. Sometimes the environment [at work] is kind of less stressful, less strange. We can laugh and joke. And you meet interesting people. People with the same kind of mindset that I have.

INTERVIEWER: More so than you do on the yard, you mean?

BOBBY: Yeah. Because it seems like on the yard, most people are just trying to put on appearances for their friends or whatever.

Men preoccupied with appearances and other distractions were sometimes called youngsters. In prison, both biological age and the length of sentence are important to social organization (Kreager et al. 2017). However, at Sunbelt State, to be labeled a youngster was often less tied to these criteria than to perceived maturity. Men who did not work, regardless of birth year or sentencing date, were seen as immature and therefore referred to with this moniker. Cliff, a worker in his twenties, made such a distinction:

I’ve told everybody, all the youngsters on the yard, I’m saying like, “Dude, get a job.” I’m

saying, “Your time will go like that [snapping his fingers].” Know what I’m saying? And they’re like, “Oh, well, da, da, da—.” I get it. I’ve gotten quite a few people in here a job. Know what I’m saying? But most people can’t [do it]. “Oh, I don’t want to wake up before seven in the morning.” And we wake up—I wake up at four-thirty. I go eat breakfast about—they open the yard about four-forty-five, four-fifty for workers to go eat early chow. And we go eat early chow, come back, and it’s probably like five-ten, five-twenty. I sleep for about another forty-five minutes, and I get up and come to work.

Cliff’s insistence that youngsters on the yard lacked the willingness or discipline to “get up and come to work” was not unique. Lonnie, for instance, referred to himself as a “high-quality worker.” When I followed up, asking, “Would you say there’s a lot of high-quality workers in prison?” he quickly responded,

LONNIE: No. No, sir.

INTERVIEWER: What makes you sure?

LONNIE: Three-fourths of these guys in here—and I mean this has been on every yard I’ve been on. Three-fourths of the people that come to prison, it’s a vacation for them. . . . Nobody can stand on their own two feet, man. But it’s just a fact of you got to—sometimes you just got to stand up and be grown. Get some sense. Get some morals about yourself.

Drawing such overtly moral boundaries between themselves and their nonworking counterparts enabled food factory workers to overcome low status by reframing themselves as principled men—dignified in their dedication to eschew violence and drama and to spend time working. To them, they may be prisoners, but at least they are workers; they may sit at the bottom of the employment hierarchy, but at least they are not sitting idly in their bunks.

Low-Status Workers and Lateral Distinctions

Some food factory workers also erected boundaries in opposition to others in the same low-status site. For instance, drawing on a rhetoric similar to that used to describe nonworkers,

Bobby insisted that many food factory workers lacked work ethic. With a chuckle he said,

BOBBY: Some people don’t like to work a lot. So, they try to find the jobs where you do the least amount. I like to work—whatever to keep me busy.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that’s common in here? That outlook of liking to work, I mean.

BOBBY: No. I think statistically—and this is just me—I think nine out of ten of the guys that actually come into work, they don’t really come in to [do] work. They just find it as a way to eat extra or play around with their friends or whatever.

Without dedication to hard work, Joe suggested, most food factory workers would not succeed in the free world: “I mean, they wouldn’t last long in the streets like that. Especially at a [decent] job. I mean, especially if I was the boss. If the production ain’t there, why keep them?”

These distinctions were most salient between workstations. In this site, where most labor was classified as unskilled, a few rare positions were deemed semi-skilled. The most prized of these was special diet cook. This station employed only three or four prisoners at a time and turnover was low. Diet cooks prepared special meals for prisoners with recognized dietary restrictions, including those with allergies, vegans, and men on dialysis. In a separate area, they also prepared kosher meals. When I asked one diet cook, Adam, how he managed to secure this competitive position, he attributed it to his dedication to work: “[The manager] saw drive in me. I stayed and cleaned while everyone else went outside to wait for the bus.” Alexey, the most senior of the diet cooks, made similar statements when asked about the process of moving from an entry-level food factory position to the diet cook station: “Well, first you got to start in the sandwich shop and work really hard in the sandwich shop without getting in any trouble. And then they deem you as a trustworthy and a good-enough worker to work in the kosher area, which is a privileged area to work in here at the food factory.”

Several cooks were explicit in distancing themselves from other food factory workers. According to one man, the cooks were “the guys who do something every day. We have an important job here. These guys?” he asked rhetorically, gesturing to a nearby cluster of prisoners wrapping sandwich ingredients, “[Their work] doesn’t matter. But we have an important task every day.” Alexey told me that most food factory workers “just want to bitch” about their work situations, suggesting that many were jealous of the special diet cooks. “I mean, to come to work [in prison] and expect to get a meaningful job?” he asked, laughing. “It ain’t going to happen. . . . But I think a lot of people just—[it’s a] misery-loves-company type of thing. They just want to sit around and bitch about it and yadda yadda.”

Most often, diet cooks kept to themselves, sometimes even working with their backs to the rest of the food factory crew. One cook, Josh, expressed that the attitudes of unskilled food factory workers made work more difficult for those in semi-skilled stations:

JOSH: You’re working with people that don’t want to work. Most of them don’t want to work. They’re just there to F around and steal stuff. And you’re trying to get the work done, and you got to make up where they’re messing it up. What they’re not doing, you got to do their stuff. It kind of sucks. . . . You can tell the ones that don’t want to work.

INTERVIEWER: How can you tell?

JOSH: Some of these guys, they take all day long when they roll the sandwiches, just one rack. They’ll just roll like [miming slow motion].

Workers at the bottom of the prison labor status hierarchy endured indignities from the institution, its staff, and higher-status carceral laborers. Unlike other workers, however, many also faced criticism from men working right alongside them. Crushed beneath the sandpile of dignity of the prison employment system, these workers were forced to erect “defensive shields” (Viggiani 2012) in every direction. Upward mobility, it seemed, may offer the only escape.

DIGNITY AMID REPOSITIONING IN THE SANDPILE

A key aspect of the instability characterizing the prison labor system is the regular churn of workers. The unpredictability of hiring, firing, and promotion practices was a source of regular frustration for the workforce, though its effects were somewhat less for those at the top. Nevertheless, even these workers remained aware that their prized positions could disappear. Reflecting on this, Lester, in the sign shop, noted, “You never know. Any of us could be gone any day. There’s no security—you think you’re secure, but . . . this is prison. They could roll any of us up at any moment.” Similarly, Jake from the call center once remarked, “I mean, this is the bottom line: we’re in prison. There’s nothin’ else to it but that. [I’ve] been lucky for as long as I been here, but it’s no surprise that that could change, you know?” Such changes—for example, when top-tier laborers lose their positions or when others move up the hierarchy—reveal the contours of how unpredictability influences prisoners’ senses of worth and dignity.

Although it was somewhat less common for top-tier workers to be fired (at least relative to those further down the hierarchy), it did occasionally happen. One such incident occurred in the sign shop during fieldwork. Alec, a man with a well-known “side hustle” drawing portraits, was fired after only a few months on the job. The pretext for his termination, by his account, was that he used the shop photocopier one too many times to scan his artwork. Rather than challenge the apparent arbitrariness of his firing—indeed, it was common for workers to use this equipment during slow periods—workers in the shop made sense of Alec’s forced departure using the same vocabulary with which they critiqued lower-status laborers. Suggesting that it had come as no surprise, one man said, “He simply doesn’t want to work. He has absolutely no ambition!” Lemmy, who had trained Alec when he first joined the crew, lamented, “If he paid half as much attention to this [the screen-printing supplies] as he does to his drawings, he’d be good.”

In enduring the sort of arbitrary authority and instability characteristic of lower-tier positions, Alec revealed parallels between the sign

shop and lesser positions in the occupational sandpile. The durability of the logics underlying prisoner dignity claims is highlighted in how his former coworkers pivoted to lump him in with the larger working prisoner body against whom they situated their self-worth. For his own part, Alec sought to decouple his sense of worth from his evidently unstable position in the shop. “To tell the truth,” he said, “I can be making more doing my portraits anyway.”

Rhetorics also shifted when workers moved up the sandpile, such as when Seth transitioned from the food factory, where he and I first met, to the fleet garage. Not long after this move, I asked whether he missed anything about his old job. “No,” he replied emphatically, “I hated it over there. That’s the worst job I ever had. They treat everyone like shit! I mean, a lot of them guys got it coming—lot of idiots in there. But still.” Along with gaining an improved work environment and other perks of the middle tier, Seth also quickly adopted the practice of erecting symbolic boundaries between his new job and the bottom tier. Although scorning the conditions that all faced in the food factory, he nevertheless distanced himself from his former coworkers after ascending the ranks, adapting to his new position in the sandpile.

As was true of Alec’s, Seth’s experiences reveal the durability of these logics of dignity as well as the apparent firmness with which they are linked to different tiers of the employment system. Although individual workers may be repositioned, the rhetorics that they adopt (and that others adopt in assessing them) map on to status levels in the labor hierarchy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

All prisoners, regardless of work status, are subject to the mortification processes of prison life (Goffman 1961; Sykes 1958). The despotic labor processes, deskilling, lower pay, heavy restrictions on movement, and other undesirable features of “bad” prison jobs magnified such challenges. “Good” jobs, on the other hand, offered greater autonomy and skilled, engaging tasks in environments that participants deemed more like the outside world. Where the latter better facilitated claims to dignity, the former often stifled them. Across tiers, participants

shared a common vocabulary of dignity—evoking “discipline” and “hard work” against “laziness” and “drama.” For workers generally, labor participation was a dignified endeavor, especially in contrast to the unstructured volatility that accompanied perceived idleness on the prison yard.

As noted, race and ethnicity influenced the job search process at SSP. Minority applicants faced added hurdles in ascending the labor hierarchy, disadvantaging them in terms of access to more desirable workplace environments and hence the identity reconstruction strategies that such positions enabled. As a result, the ability to assert the identity of worker—to contest the label of inmate—was racialized (see Crittenden, Koons-Witt, and Kaminski 2018; Gibson-Light 2019).

The relative rarity of upward-facing dignity projects—for example, lower-tier participants asserting that they deserve to move up the labor hierarchy—was initially unexpected. However, this appears consistent with other strategies of incarcerated men seeking legitimacy. For instance, prisoners erect downward-facing boundaries between their own criminal charges and those deemed more objectionable. Of his English prison field site, Nick de Viggiani (2012, 281) notes, “Some prisoners strove to legitimize their offence by contrasting it with what they viewed as more heinous or unacceptable offence types. . . . Drug-related offences were castigated by nondrug related offenders, and ‘petty theft’ that exploited vulnerable victims was viewed more negatively than that defined as ‘corporate theft.’” By shaming alleged inferiors, prisoners construct “defensive shields” to manage prison identities. Further, given the visible inequities of the prison job search (Crittenden, Koons-Witt, and Kaminski 2018), those lacking resources to succeed in this market may consciously avoid focusing attentions upwards, lest they risk embarrassment at immobility.

Some of the trends reported here parallel those in other, free-world labor settings. The shifting nature of dignity and status as well as the persistence of downward-facing legitimization processes, for instance, have been investigated in diverse sites (Giuffre 1999; Newman 1999). More important, however, is the observation that the carceral context amplifies many

negative outcomes of these and other features of labor stratification. Today's prisoners are already disproportionately "drawn from the lowest rungs in society" (Western and Pettit 2010, 8) and prisons overwhelmingly "house the jobless, the poor, the racial minority, and the uneducated, not the merely criminal" (Wakefield and Uggen 2010, 393). The discursive strategies that emerge here—in conjunction with their material bases—further stratify this already disadvantaged population. What is more, they may reinforce underlying conditions of captive labor.

In general, labor may promote prisoner competition (Jacobs 1977). When distance from other worker groups becomes a central focus (fueled by the thirst for dignity), it displaces competition between overseers and prisoners writ large (see Burawoy 1979). As the incarcerated scramble to maintain value via work status, carrying out the mandatory labor assignments upon which the institution relies—and doing so with enthusiasm—becomes framed as virtue. By moralizing dedication to penal labor, prisoners' "economy of dignity" (Pugh 2009) reproduces values benefiting this institution. As such, the rhetorics on which incarcerated participants drew often mirrored those espoused by staffers. For instance, CO Peña openly boasted that his auto garage workers "have more integrity. The guys here, they like to work." Of men in bottom-tier positions like the food factory, he said, "Those guys don't want to work. . . . Whereas these guys, they grew up working. They like coming here and working on cars." Some prisoners acknowledged the benefits of this agreement with staff. "If they [COs] see you want to work," said Franklin, "they treat you good." Similarly, many prisoners working in positions designated as skilled by the institution frequently cited skill level when making distinctions. Beyond merely keeping prisoners busy (Jacobs 1977), then, work is an arena of penal discipline that provides an opening to shape the very outlooks of carceral populations.

Future work should examine how the dynamics reported here shift on reentry. Erin Hatton's (2018) work advances an understanding of general patterns in ex-prisoner discourse relating to work; scholars should additionally ex-

plore how varying labor experiences on the inside may map on to divergent rhetorics post-release. For instance, how do top-tier prison laborers experience the transition back into the formal labor force as they, like others with criminal records, struggle to acquire good jobs in the free world (facing the bottom of a new labor hierarchy)?

Finally, this article has examined the discursive strategies of working prisoners pursuing dignity. Although in the minority, nonworkers deserve additional study along these lines. I had some access to nonworkers on the yard; however, my project design precluded me from investigating their experiences as systematically as was possible with their laboring counterparts. Such individuals often engage in informal labors, which may provide alternative sources of dignity. Recall Alec, who noted the value of his informal job drawing portraits. How might such prisoners' perceptions differ from workers in the formal penal labor market? What boundary-making patterns emerge among so-called Idle Men (Sykes 1958) as they navigate in and out of informal and formal work?

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