Games Prisoners Play:
Allocation of Social Roles in a Total Institution

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ABSTRACT
The variety of initiation rituals in many total institutions is explained by their usefulness for allocating of social roles. Such rituals help to uncover a new inmate’s personal characteristics, most notably toughness and cleverness. The process is frequently violent, especially when an inmate is assigned to a lower caste.
Nevertheless, initiation tests and games involve more skillful deception and tricks than pain and suffering. This fictitiousness creates a fundamental problem for all tests: an informed newcomer can simulate both toughness and smartness. Thus, an informed player cannot be distinguished from the one with the desired characteristics. This fact is well recognized by most skillful players and motivates them to search for new ideas. The result is a wide variety of competing tests and frequent changes of argot and the secret code of behavior. The understanding of the subculture’s linguistic and behavioral norms can make a critical difference for a prisoner’s well-being. An informed prisoner can often do better than a tough and physically strong one. Paradoxically, the determination to stay tough when necessary may lead to less physical damage than playing soft.

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1. Introduction

Initiation rituals welcome newcomers to most human communities. Entering a total institution with a strong subculture can be especially traumatic. A newcomer may face trials of his wit, tolerance for pain, self-confidence, alertness, physical strength and endurance, or sense of humor. After passing various tests, often humiliating or otherwise unpleasant, he is expected to learn local norms and customs quickly. When he carelessly abuses a norm, a mild or harsh punishment teaches him the proper behavior. Finally, the group assigns him a label that “compresses the variegated range of [the group’s] experience into a manageable framework” (Sykes 1958: 86). This learning process runs parallel to the training in the institution’s formal code and is tolerated, if not encouraged, by the personnel. The entire experience of rapid socialization to a new environment transforms a rookie into a fully adapted inmate.

Initiation tests and rituals provide old inmates with multiple benefits. Often affected by emotional and sensual deprivation, inmates enjoy tests immensely. They can take revenge on a rookie for their own humiliation or suffering. Clear-cut lines between “new” and “old” inmates elevate the latter to a higher strata in the local social structure. Although denying selfish reasons, the

1 Goffman (1961: xiii) defines a total institution as a “place of residence and work when a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.” Prisons and jails, P.O.W. and concentration camps, mental hospitals, leprosaria, boarding schools, orphanages, large plantations, military bases, submarines and ships, fraternities, or monasteries share many characteristics of a generic total institution.

2 A member of a total institution is called hereafter an inmate; first-timers are called rookies; inmates transferred from another unit or re-enter as recidivists are called newbies; the ruling inmate elite are called elders. Argot names introduced for the first time are italicized.
test designers may be motivated by valuable goods brought by the newcomer. Often, the one controlling the test results receives a portion of the rookie’s endowment. Finally, a condensed initiation experience helps the rookie to adjust mentally to the new environment. The accelerated prisonization limits the negative impact of a newcomer’s transitional mental status on his better adapted fellow-inmates.³

This paper argues that the list of benefits given above is incomplete. Many rituals aim at collecting detailed information about the rookie’s character or type and test designers are fully aware of this objective. Two primary characteristics of an inmate include toughness and cleverness. Old inmates who learn these characteristics form clearer expectations about the rookie’s future behavior. This allows them to optimally exploit the rookie’s skills and take advantage of his weaknesses. In addition, toughness serves as a proxy for the rookie’s expected loyalty in conflicts with the personnel.

The incentives to uncover a rookie’s true type are especially strong when cell blocks are isolated, when the personnel control is weak, and when inmates change cells frequently. Usually, it is in the rookie’s best interest to convince the old inmates that he is both tough and smart. Only occasionally, he may find a label of being unpredictable or broken more valuable.⁴

³ Clemmer (1940: 299) defines prisonization as “the taking on, in greater or lesser degree, of the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary.” He notes that strong local subculture speeds up prisonization.

⁴ Scenarios of prison movies often exploit unusual displays of toughness and/or cleverness. In Left-Handed Luke, a tough character played by Paul Newman skillfully used the impression of being broken in order to organize an escape. In The Bridge over the River Kwai, the character played by Alec Guinness, after passing a severe test of toughness, confuses everybody with a behavior attributable to a converted weakling. On the other hand, all “incredible-escape” movies employ the cleverness motif. “Cleverness” does not denote “wisdom” or “conversational skills”
Section 2 describes models and the data collection procedure. Section 3 takes the reader to Polish jail A.D. 1985, the world inhabited by grypsmen and other, lower-caste prisoners.\(^5\) Section 4 analyzes basic tests of toughness and cleverness that some rookies go through before advancing to the next step, called by grypsmen *fag-making* and *baptism*. Section 5 describes *little games* and *hidden tests* that virtually every candidate for a grypsman must face. Section 6 explains how the command of *secret argot*, rites of behavior, and *language games* helps to preserve a grypsman’s caste identity in a new cell or prison. Next, deviations from typical initiation scenarios are outlined. The last section concludes.

2. Methodology

The subculture of punitive total institutions is immensely difficult to penetrate. Inmates carefully protect information. They learn ingenious methods of cheating on one another, on guards, physicians, or psychologists. Frivolous release of precious information may prolong an inmate’s prison sentence, jeopardize his parole, lower his status among the comrades, decrease available resources, or reveal that sickness is simulated. Statistical data are meager and the numbers not reliable. This is a type of environment that “defends itself against research” (Moczydlowski 1992).

but rather the gift of a witty and quick reaction to an unusual situation. Miller (1958) identifies “autonomy,” in addition to toughness and smartness, as a third core value among delinquent adolescents and prisoners accepting norms of the thieves group in American prisons.

\(^5\) The word “grypsman” is derived from “gryps,” a secret message delivered within a prison or between a prison and freedom. Older synonyms of “grypsman” include “man” and “characterman.”
The empirical material is drawn on the author’s, then a sociology sophomore, experience as an anti-communist political prisoner in Poland in 1985. The data were collected over five months of imprisonment in thirteen cells of two jails for career criminals. The author assumed the role of an “observing participant” who impassively registers his own, randomly generated, experience (Kaminski 1988). Sources of information include a stream of thousands of strategic situations, about fifty informal in-depth interviews with fellow prisoners on all important matters of prison life, and a grypsmen secret night training that hands down secret knowledge to selected rookies. In stories, the author refers to himself by his prison nickname “Student.”

Inmates’ interactions are modeled as games or decision situations with hidden moves or actions that are equivalent to certain games with incomplete information. The goal of every model is to reconstruct the strategic backbone of a specific repeatable interaction that takes place during initiation. Quite often, the uncovered strategic structure is surprisingly simple. Variants of basic games, sensitivity of solutions to information, payoffs, etc. are also discussed.

Becker’s (1968) argument that criminals optimize sparked a wide body of literature on the economics of crime and optimal detention policy. However, little modeling work has been done on the interaction level to justify this general premise. That inmates constantly calculate and re-calculate payoffs in numerous gaming contexts is common knowledge in prison. Scarcity and deprivation make inmates particularly alert to the immediate effects of their actions and to resulting payoffs. The language of Polish grypsmen includes names surprisingly similar to that of game theory, and ascribes to them similar meanings. There are explicit

6 For an exception see Wantchekon and Healy (1999) on the game of torture. Prison games share some characteristics with relatively better understood con games, or deception and illusion-based tricks used by thieves (see, e.g., Irwin 1970: 13-15).
prison names for intra-cell coalitions, payoffs, dominated strategies played by uninformed players, or various types of players; little games denote well-defined decision situations, etc.

Prison games encompass more activities than the initiation rituals described in this paper. Examples include interrogation and frequent PD-like plea bargains, struggle for power and status within the highest caste, games political prisoners play, simulation of self-injury and illness, and the formation of coalitional structures at the level of cells, cell blocks, and prisons. All such games are motivated by the strategic opportunities that arise in prison.

3. Grypsing and other constraints of the Polish jail in 1985

The constraints of incarceration, “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes 1958), or “harsh social conditions” (Sykes and Messinger 1960), define relative availability and scarcity of goods, shape expectations, payoffs and, ultimately, frame games prisoners play. Three broad categories of constraints include (a) the physical constraints of time organization, space allocation, food quality, etc.; (b) the official rules of the incarceration institution and society’s human rights institutions; (c) the norms of inmates’ subculture.

Enter the dungeons of a Polish jail in late communism. They are inhabited by about a of the estimated total 100,000 prisoners. Frequent changes of cells and jails produce interactions that are short, nasty, and brutish. Cells in jails are overcrowded with about 1-1.5 m² per person. Inmates’ behavior reflects space scarcity. Strict rules govern body relocation and other moves. Activities that pollute air in the cell, like farting or defecating, are regulated and coordinated among its dwellers. The lack of fresh air causes permanent headaches. Only drugs dissolved generously in drinks and food save inmates from claustrophobia.

Meals quantify the cell’s time. Between them, there is plenty of time to kill. An inmate leaves his cell for a thirty-minute walk and returns there for the rest of day. His dream is to fall asleep one day and wake up half a year later.
Abundance of time creates a market for entertainment. Singing, tattooing, storytelling, drawing, playing cards or chess, and solving puzzles are highly valued skills. Reports on advances in hibernation make frequent winners in story-telling contests. Inmates who get depressed, or produce other negative psychical externalities, are beaten. Discreet onanism is allowed in beds only, after the “night alert” is announced. Little daily routines are celebrated.

Administrative control is relaxed. The shortage of prison personnel, equipment, food are no different from other shortages of “real socialism.” A guard takes inmates for a walk, monitors brief morning and evening musters, and assists with in-cell food distribution. Other kinds of interactions with a guard or other functionaries are casual. There is no effective human rights enforcement since all human rights activists are themselves imprisoned.

What is strong is the subculture.

The strength of prison subculture is correlated positively with weak administrative control (Kaminski and Gibbons, 1994). In Polish jail, norms of grypsing dictate to an inmate how to behave in almost all situations of his everyday life and resemble the subculture of Soviet prisons and gulags. In a slightly weaker version, grypsing is also present in prisons.

If rookies (first-timers) or a less numerous category of newbies (those who were just transferred from another prison, or recidivists who just re-entered prison) are excluded, inmates are self-sorted into three basic casts. Grypsmen, the highest caste, comprised according to the author’s estimates about 70-80% of all jail inhabitants. They speak secret language, adhere strictly to well-defined norms of behavior, and obey various language and behavioral taboos. The biggest blunder is to compare a grypsman to a woman or call him a communist.

Suckers, a less numerous and atomized group, occupy darker corners of the cell. Frightened and exploited by grypsmen, they clean the cell and perform some services for the higher caste. Suckers are considered potential informers.
Almost all non-grypsmen are suckers since the last group, fags, makes a small 1-2% of jail population.

A fag is a male prostitute who once agreed to please sexually a grypsmen or, less often, who was raped. Sometimes a fag is not active sexually anymore but his stigma is non-removable. He occupies the small territory around the throne, a primitive prison toilet. A grypsman assumes that every fag must be an informer. Thus, norms of grypsing forbid him virtually all interactions with a fag, except for one — to fuck him. A grypsman is allowed to assume the active role in a homosexual intercourse while a fag’s role must be passive.⁷

Strict rules govern vertical mobility among the casts. A grypsman who seriously violated the group’s norms becomes a sucker. Other grypsman ceremonially calls a curse down on him and makes him a sucker or, in very special cases, a fag. Going up in the hierarchy for a sucker is possible but difficult. In such a case, the necessary condition is that the curse-holder withdraws the curse. Often, a sucker waiting for a lift is encouraged to support his application with generous gifts. Becoming a fag is irreversible and typically follows a failed test of

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⁷ In American prisons, there are more well-defined social roles among prisoners. The argot names vary from prison to prison, there is no strong vertical relation among roles, and the boundaries are less sharp (Clemmer 1940, Sykes 1958, Schrag 1961, Heffernan 1972, Bowker 1977, Thomas and Petersen 1977). Moreover, the procedures of allocation are less formal since “these roles are allocated on the basis of inmates informally observing and assessing the behaviors and verbalizations of a given inmate to a variety of real and contrived situations” (Garabedian 1963: 144). In Polish prisons, passive observation is only a part of the allocation process, along with inmate-designed testing situations. Purely observation-based characterizations are much less important than the basic rigid grypsman-sucker-fag division. One can say that the strength of the latter division suppresses observation-based characterizations.
fag-making. Thus, the labels are “sticky” and it is very difficult or even impossible to upgrade to a higher caste (see Figure 1).

--- FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE ---

In various prisons, other ephemeral casts emerged, often incubated by the personnel. Among them, *fests* or *biedronas* exhibited the organization and norms similar to grypsmen while *Swiss* pretended to neutrality in inter-group conflicts. The existence of new casts, or the relative sizes of grypsmen and suckers casts, strongly influence inter-group social relations (Moczydlowski 1992).

The process of initial allocation among casts is complex. A newbie simply declares his previous caste membership and, when his declaration is confirmed, is assigned to the proper group. A rookie who is not a child molester, communist party member, former prison guard, policeman, prosecutor, etc., is eligible for grypsing candidacy. Rarely does one refuse this privilege. A rookie becomes a grypsman when he successfully completes a series of tests. If he flunks, he becomes a fag or a sucker burdened with a curse (see Figure 2).

--- FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE ---

The path from a rookie to a grypsman is typically a few weeks long and begins with a declaration of desire to join the caste. Two initial tests include fag-making and baptism and provide first screening for rookies who up front seem unfit for the caste membership. The stage of little games and hidden tests provides

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8 Conversely, in American prisons social mobility among roles is not excluded since the roles do not represent formal labels assigned by the strongest group but rather “alternative modes of adjustment to problems of prison life” (Garabedian 1963: 143).
a comprehensive assessment of a rookie’s potential strengths and weaknesses. When the performance is considered exceptionally strong, the rookie quickly advances to the final stage. Otherwise, new tests are continuously applied. The final stage provides a rookie with an intensive training in secret argot and language games, the code of behavior, and the meaning of various games from the previous stage. A masterful command of this body of knowledge is a prerequisite for the full caste membership.

The path of a newbie is much shorter and usually is completed within a few hours. Secret argot and little games check provide an initial evidence that a self-declared grypsman in fact received an appropriate secret training. At the stage of the reputation check, the newbie’s declaration is authenticated through in-depth interviews and background reports collected from other cells, cell blocks, or even remote prisons.

4. First screening: Fag-making and baptism

When a rookie, often called an American, enters prison for the first time, he may face various “first-screening” tests. A failure in such a test implies his overall failure to join the grypsmen caste. Depending on the magnitude of the failure, he is labeled a sucker or a fag.

Fag-making is a fundamental test of toughness. Victims of this test typically report violent rape (e.g., see a moving account by Tucker 1982: 58-79). The evidence collected by the author suggests that a violent rape happens rarely, and that many victims misreport what actually happened. According to the evidence, the “rape” often denotes a victim’s consent to perform passive homosexual service in exchange for protection and other benefits (this is often reported by those who avoided rape; see Geresz 1986: 26, Kaminski and Gibbons 1994: 112). The test is applied more frequently to young, physically and intellectually weak rookies with no previous prison record.
The test is preceded by intensive repressions. Farting in the nose, stealing, nudging, rationing food, and speculating on details of the rookie and his family’s sexual life fill the entire final day. The rookie is told that he must face oppressions for a long period of time before he can be admitted as a grypsman. Then, in the night, one of the executioners leans towards his bed with the offer, “You, you do not be afraid. I tell the boys, they leave you alone. You get your bed back and regain the right to defecate on the throne. But do something for me. Do suck my cock. Only once. They will not know. You do it and you are free forever.”

A rookie who accepts the offer becomes a fag, receives a female name, eats and lives near the throne. Sometimes he is periodically raped. More often, he gets used to the new role and performs sexual services voluntarily.

The strategic context of the test explains differences in accounts of actual and potential victims, in addition to different incentives for both categories to present what actually happened. Those who fail will hardly learn that they did not have to accept the offer since, as fags, they will be informationally isolated in a cell. Conversely, those who pass the test will soon learn that fag-making is a test and that there are standard procedures for conducting such a test. Moreover, the decision to submit to pressure always follows a mental representation of feasibility and desirability of further resistance: it may be thought as “impossible” and “life-threatening” or one can decide to “fight till death.” One of these two representations appears in virtually all descriptions of attempted prison rape. In fact, the test’s presumed objective is precisely to create an artificial situation in which the subject forms such a mental representation, and to separate weak (those who surrender) from tough subjects (those who decide to fight).

Baptism is common in large cells, called stables. Those who fail become suckers, not fags. In forty-something large stables, there is a constant inflow of five to ten new inmates per month. Once every week or two, a “painful” and “bloody” ritual is prepared by the elders to examine the rookies’ immunity to pain.
Cruel tales of rookies losing their limbs or life fill the waiting period. Never mind the pain, say the elders, every true tough grypsman must pass the test. Those who fail do not deserve the privilege of joining the caste.

Deep in the night, in the light of torches made of butter and sheets, rookies are blindfolded and spread on the stools. The executioner prepares a special wet towel that is supposed to break your bones and yet not leave external signs of beating. Surrounded by a circle of blood-thirsty half-naked inmates, the rookie awaits mortal blows. Just before the slaughter begins, he is offered an option out of the ceremony in exchange for a privilege of joining the grypsmen. Those who accept, frightened by the performance, immediately get cursed and beaten by the executioner, and become suckers.

The actual blows are symbolic. Again, for an informed rookie, baptism is a harmless spectacle. Since with more than one rookie the test is conducted sequentially, one rookie at a time, the decision of a particular rookie to face the test reveals the truth to the ones waiting in the line. This creates clear inequity among rookies: if a rookie fails, then all his successors preserve the chance of passing; if he passes, then all his successors pass. This property of the test motivates the elders to manipulate the waiting line. Experienced elders often begin with the rookies who are most likely to fail or otherwise arrange the line according to their interests, i.e., placing their favorite rookies at the end.

The games of fag-making and baptism exploit fundamental knowledge asymmetries between old inmates and rookies about basic prison customs, norms, and argot. The structure of both tests is similar. The rookie faces a simple binary decision: he may accept an offer by an elder (A), or reject it (R). The decision problem is constructed as a choice between performing some humiliating activity or cowardly defection versus ritualized beating or other repressions that are supposed to open the gates to the grypsmen caste. If a rookie chooses A, he expects that his honor suffers; if he chooses R, he expects physical and psychic suffering (see Fig. 3).
The declared goal behind this test is to distinguish between tough and soft rookies. A soft rookie does not care enough about his honor and prefers A, accepting an offer, to R, a painful rejection of an offer. A tough rookie is supposed to “value his honor above life” and prefer R to A. Thus, the rookie’s choice reveals his type.

However, the catch in the game is that a rookie is misled by the elders. He overestimates the value of the term $p_E$, accounting for future physical pain from choosing R, compared to the payoffs related to the loss of honor. The actual value of $p_E$, which is the elders’ private knowledge, is null and makes the rejection a better choice for both types. Misrepresenting $p_E$ rather than performing the test as expected decreases the amount of violent interactions in a cell and the subsequent elders’ exposure to punishment from the personnel.

Both tests suffer from a serious flaw. Student, who was the subject of fag-making in the version described earlier, did not even have to know his own type to choose the better option. He was able to figure out that he faced a toughness test and that refusal dominated acceptance regardless of his type. The declared purpose of the test, to check whether he was tough or soft, remained unfulfilled.

The flaw is that the tests work for an uninformed rookie, i.e., a rookie who is unaware of the punishment factor. For an informed rookie, the test is inconclusive since refusal is a better choice for both types (see Figure 4).

Games from Figures 3 and 4 can be combined into a larger four-type game, i.e., a game with an informed-uninformed dimension in addition to a tough-soft dimension. It is clear that in such a game the test designer can identify an
uninformed soft rookie but is unable to distinguish between a rookie who is tough or soft but informed. Moreover, the player may be informed because he is “smart” or because he got a hint from somebody else. Although consequences of distributing such hints can be painful, such indiscretions happen and nullify the type-revealing value of the test.

A test designer may be himself a guinea pig in a larger game. After a while spent in jail, Student learned that his potential oppressor was himself subject to a test. The task assigned to him was to make a fag of a rookie. He flunked the test though his punishment was merely not advancing his status among the other inmates.

5. Hidden tests and little games

Once a rookie is accepted as a candidate for grypsing, he is subjected to a series of lighter and more sophisticated tests that primarily target his cleverness and, less frequently, toughness. The interim period of observation and tests conduction is called America and takes between a few weeks and a few months. The name “America” reflects both the traumatic experience of Polish immigrants in a new society and the wry sense of prison humor providing a counterfactual assessment of a rookie’s well-being. America in Polish prisons is a more important component of prisonization than the personnel-enforced socialization to the new environment.

The games or decision situations are carefully arranged, analyzed, and evaluated by the cell’s elders. The prison fitness score estimated by the cell’s elders on the spot after each interaction motivates their decisions whether to let the rookie join the grypsmen, make him a sucker, or keep testing. A candidate may be unaware that the game is being played. In little games, the fact that a ritual game is being played is common knowledge or, at the least, a typical rookie can figure it out during the decision-making process. In everyday life hidden games, which
fulfill similar functions, a rookie is kept unaware of the ritual character of the interaction and its consequences for his prison fitness.

Many little games are simple decision problems similar to the Hidden Strategy Game (Figure 5). The framing of such a game implicitly suggests to a rookie some set of available strategies. The actual strategy set is larger and includes a “correct” answer or expected reaction. A dumb rookie chooses A or B, a strategy from an implicitly suggested set, while a smart rookie picks the expected C. Again, an informed rookie passes the test effortlessly.

— FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE —

Other little games have a structure of Generic Screening or Fake Chicken (Figures 3 and 6).

5.1 Little games

Little games take place in late evening, or at night, after the cell is closed. All grypsmen secretly prepare the scene and/or coordinate their efforts. The accessories include dish-towels, mugs, stools, blankets and other cell’s equipment. Typically, more skillful grypsmen keep low-profiles that, in a case of an accident, guarantee them safety.

Prison legends say that little games evolved from final comprehensive exams of Polish and Russian pre-war underground thief universities. One can find many little games-like examples in Soviet gulags (Bukowski 1984: 218, Herling Grudzinski 1989: 31). Payoffs reward toughness, alertness, the readiness to act and disregard irrelevant facts. If a rookie does especially well, his America may be shortened and he becomes a grypsman quickly. Poor scores in initial trials result in a prolonged testing period and tougher, more violent tests.
Little games resemble both social psychology experiments and artificial decision situations of experimental game theory. The declared objective is to sort the rookies into types. Other, non-declared benefits, play an important role in providing motivation for the elders to design and implement the games. Playing games and commenting on outcomes of past games is a favorite topic in a cell. The designer is often rewarded for his role in the game in prestige and valuable prison goods that he can more or less violently extract from a rookie. All these payoffs make designing skills a valuable asset of every grypsman.  

A short catalog presented below lists a small subset of actively played little games. Many variants exist that bear different names.

*Bicycle:* A piece of newspaper is put among a sleeping rookie’s toes and lighted. A rookie involuntarily starts “bicycling” with his legs and next wakes up. Expectation: alertness and loyalty.

*Blindman’s Bluff:* An inmate-volunteer, blindfolded with a dish towel, tries to catch and identify one of the others. They shove and nudge him. In fact, the inmate sees through the especially tied dish towel. When the rookie is caught, he is easily identified and gets blindfolded himself. Next, he takes a serious anonymous beating. Expectation: the rookie guesses the designer’s intentions and oversees tying up the dish towel.

*Boeing Pilot:* A rookie is blindfolded with a dish towel and placed on a stool. He is told that he will be lifted to the ceiling by two grypsman. In fact, the grypsmen only shake the stool at the floor level which creates an impression of lifting. At some point, they enlarge the amplitude of shakes

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9 Various little games are described in the literature but they are commonly misunderstood. Dictionaries of secret argot usually define little games as “a game that prisoners enjoy to play for fun” (Michalski and Morawski 1971, Stepniak 1993: 157).
and the rookie falls on a blanket-covered floor. His reaction is carefully watched.

Bolek and Lolek (named after two characters in a popular children’s cartoon): An arbiter immobilizes a rookie's knees between his own. He shows his right fist, this is Bolek, then his left fist, this is Lolek. Next, he hits the rookie right above the knee, a very painful spot, and asks “Who hit you?” Answer “Bolek” or “Lolek” leads to another blow and repetition of the question. Game ends when the expected answer, "you," is provided.

Cable Car: A rookie, who is lying on the upper plank-bed level is suddenly asked by a lower-level grypsman: “Do you have a ticket?” Answer “yes” is expected. Any other answers results in the line “So you’re a free-rider? Get out of my cable car” and a strong kick from downside which throws him out of the bed on the floor.

Cell Leader: A rookie picks a match with his mouth. If he picks a long match, he is supposed to become a new cell leader; if he picks a short match, he loses. The rookie is blindfolded with a dishtowel. Then, some inmate instantly takes his pants down, fixes the matches in his naked buttocks, and places it under the rookie’s lips. A dumb rookie kisses the ass; a smart rookie checks the objects with a hand or loosens the dishtowel discreetly in order to monitor the course of action.

Diver: A rookie stands on the bed and has to “dive” head on into a small mug with water placed on the floor. While he is being blindfolded, other inmates quickly spread a protective blanket, so in reality, the diver is safe. Toughness in face of danger is expected.

Prison Fiat (named after the most popular car maker in Poland): The rookie is thrown under the bed while two prisoners press him to the wall with stools. The designer commands “Get him in first gear—second—third,” causing increasing pressure. Expected reaction is, “Put it in neutral.”
Smells: Blindfolded with a dishtowel, a rookie has to guess from the smells of things stuck under his nose, the identity of those items. He recognizes bread and margarine, and when he is ready to inhale again, someone squeezes toothpaste under his nose. Expectation: be cautious when inhaling.

Storm: A rookie, often sleeping, is bundled in a blanket and immobilized by a few grypsmen. The designer tells his story: “The storm is gathering—first thunder strikes—it started raining—thunder storm begins.” The grypsmen strike him once with an aluminum mug, water him, next give him a series of strikes, etc. The expected reaction is to declare “nice weather.”

Views: A rookie stands in front of a window so he can see a bit of the outside world. He must describe what he sees. An answer like “car,” “man,” “tree,” etc. results in a wet-towel blow. Expected answer is “I see freedom.”

In the Bicycle, Boeing Pilot, or Diver games, a rookie’s reaction to a danger or an unusual situation is watched. These games have a structure similar to Generic Screening. Unusual toughness brings extra rewards. Student’s buddy, who jumped on the floor before the signal was given and the blanket was placed, hurt his neck. He reported to the doctor that he “fell from bed” and this demonstration of loyalty immediately ended his America with a positive result.

Other games have a structure similar to Hidden Strategy. In Bolek and Lolek, Cable Car, Prison Fiat, Storm, or Views, the torture ends when the rookie shouts out a magical formula that can be somehow figured out from the context. Finally, games like Blindman’s Bluff, Cell Leader, or Smells test for smart and cautious reactions. The rookie’s best outcome happens when he figures out an ingenious strategy that reverses the roles and makes fun out of the fun-maker. In Cell Leader, an informed rookie may hide secretly a needle in his mouth and prick
the ass painfully. Such impressive demonstration of skills ends the testing period immediately (Stwora 1967).

5.2 **Hidden everyday-life tests.** A rookie is often tested though he does not know that his behavior is carefully scrutinized. Fag-making was the first example of such a test. Other tests are arranged around typical situations of everyday life. In such situations, an aggressive grypsman may bully the rookie and ask him to choose between imitating a dog or a cat for everybody’s fun. Somebody farts in the rookie’s nose. When the narrow corridor between multi-floor bunks is temporarily occupied by other inmates, the rookie who wants to get to the window is asked to use the under-the-bed detour. The tests have a simple structure and simple solutions. The optimal reaction is to refuse any humiliating activity and stay tough against aggression. Again, a smart reaction, like singing an anti-communist song when a song is requested, may be extra rewarded.

Many confrontation games arise around attempts to re-distribute simple prison goods. A rookie brings in a bunch of valuable stuff like new pants, shoes, shirts, socks, vitamins, toothpaste, food, or money. Some of these goods can be discreetly stolen and immediately transferred to another cell via the grypsmen’s network. Other goods, like pants or shoes, can be extracted only via ingenious night stealing or a forced “exchange” for some prison junk cloth. An elder may try the rookie’s prison boots on and declare that they fit him perfectly. Stealing, a forced exchange, or pushing a rookie to perform unpleasant, or even humiliating, services sparks a confrontation. Almost all rookies face such a confrontation in various forms many times. Those who choose correctly, score well and, as a bonus, retain their property and dignity.

Almost all games of confrontation between an old inmate and a rookie fit one clear pattern that resembles the classical game of *Chicken*. In *Chicken*, players simultaneously choose between two actions, fight (F) or surrender (S). The player’s most preferred outcome is winning, which is better than mutual
surrendering than losing by surrendering than a destructive duel, i.e., for player I, \( F_I S_{II} > S_I S_{II} > S_I F_{II} > F_I F_{II} \). In prison, such preferences are attributed to soft guys who fear a physical injury and would defect against a tough opponent. Defection damages one’s reputation. The prison code places a great value on being tough under all circumstances. Thus, for a tough guy, the ordering over the two last outcomes is reversed, i.e., for player I, \( F_I S_{II} > S_I S_{II} > F_I F_{II} > S_I F_{II} \).

In a Fake Chicken game, Bully makes the first move and waits for the Rookie’s reaction (Figure 6).

— FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE —

Rookie in this game is unaware that Bully has an extra move (see Figure 7) and attributes to Bully standard “tough” preferences, i.e., substitutes \( \Gamma_T \) with a payoff of \((1,1)\) and \( \Gamma_S \) with a payoff of \((1,0)\). Again, his reaction depends on his type. When Bully initiates fight, a soft rookie surrenders while a tough rookie fights. When Rookie fights, Bully can continue fighting or withdraw from the confrontation, i.e., he can announce that Rookie passed the test. At that stage, action A dominates C for Bully. Thus, the game ends with a soft rookie surrendering or Bully announcing that a tough rookie passed the test. Both players have the following dominant strategies in their respective games:

Bully: \( F; A \) after Rookie’s \( F \);

Rookie: soft – \( S \) after Bully’s \( F \); \( F \) after Bully’s \( S \); tough – always \( F \).

— FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE —

Again, information problems obscure the diagnostic value of Fake Chicken. When Rookie is informed, i.e., when \( \Gamma_T \) and \( \Gamma_S \) are common knowledge, there exists a trivial equilibrium in dominant strategies, i.e.,
In American prisons, inmates who often initiate violent interactions in order to appropriate some goods are labeled gorillas. The Fake Chicken model represents interactions with a gorilla well. As Sykes notes “in many cases the actual use of force is unnecessary for the gorilla, for the mere threat of it in the background is sufficient to gain his ends.” Moreover, what sets the gorilla off from other inmates is “this blatant readiness for the instrumental use of violence ... rather than his strength, size, or constant use of force” (Sykes 1958: 91).
6. Secret argot, code of behavior, and language games

The advancement to this stage of a game means that the rookie has been accepted as a would-be grypsman and allowed to enter a secret training, called bajera, or prison university. In late night courses of bajera, a rotating team of instructors conveys to the candidates details of the argot, the meaning of tests, and norms of behavior. Questions are repeated until all mistakes have been eliminated. One may be awakened by an instructor in the night and is expected to answer his question correctly. The secret knowledge is a grypsman’s insurance policy when he is transferred to a new environment of a different prison. For a rookie, it is a strong barrier that prevents him from entering the world of grypsmen without proper training and peer approval.

The pressure on the rookie to learn all the details and the spirit of secret knowledge is very strong. A typical bajera consists of between fifty and one hundred hours of lectures and exams. The subject matter is vast and the initial training is supposed to cover the fundamentals only. Polishing secret language skills throughout the sentence is not sufficient to master the code perfectly. Even towards the end of his tenure a grypsman can be exposed to a new term. Below, a brief description of most salient aspects of the secret knowledge is provided.

All objects of the prisoner’s world, parts of an inmate’s body, and typical prison situations have their own names. The most basic names are used universally in a cell by grypsmen and suckers, others are reserved for the grypsmen only. Most important are language taboos. A comparison of a grypsman to a woman, calling him a communist, or a verbal suggestion of passive homosexual activity is strictly forbidden. Breaking the taboo by a grypsman may move him to a lower caste. If a sucker or a fag breaks a taboo, he must be

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11 The word “bajera” has numerous meanings in addition to “prison university”: it is often used to denote the prison language itself, long prison storytelling, or the ability to talk in an engaging manner.
punished, but the reason for the punishment must not be explained to him, except for very basic mistakes. One of the fundamental principles of grypsmen is that no explanation that compromises the secret character of their knowledge can be given to a non-grypsman.

*Principles* of behavior include a set of guiding rules: keeping a grypsman’s word, solidarity (with other grypsmen against other inmates and adversities of fortune), loyalty (with other inmates against guards), secrecy, personal hygiene. *Behaviors or situations* denote case studies of interactions where a strong norm dictates the proper course of action. For instance, a handshake is generally prohibited unless the partner is known to be a grypsman. Exceptions from such rules flourish and the extensive discussion of exceptions resembles the study of legal precedents.

Many behaviors regulate a grypsman’s interactions with various categories of prison objects. *Objects* of the prison world are hierarchically divided into *pure*, *dirty*, and *untouchable*. The food of a grypsman may be in contact only with pure objects; such objects can be also touched. Dirty objects can be touched. Untouchable objects cannot be touched. A typical bajera exam yes-no question is: What kind of object is a fag’s asshole? The correct answer is that – surprisingly – it is a dirty object since it can be touched with a grypsman’s penis. It is the fag’s penis that is untouchable.

*Language games* are verbal equivalents of little games. Some of the games are actual language games or puzzles. Others refer implicitly to various principles and behaviors. The game starts with the first question facing a newcomer entering a cell: are you a grypsman? While it is expected that the a rookie declares clearly his desire, or a lack of such, to join the caste, a member of the caste cannot simply answer “yes” or “no.” His line should be: “ask other grypsmen.” This appeal to reputation indicates that the inmate’s caste membership is widely known and that it can be easily authenticated.
The secret knowledge defends itself against a curious eye and ear of a researcher surprisingly well. The smart alertness of his fellow-grypsmen led to Student being deciphered twice as an undercover sociologist – even though he was in fact a regular inmate. The mechanisms for uncovering one’s true identity in prison are sophisticated. Though there exist dictionaries of prison argot, they become slightly inadequate just in the moment of, or a short while after, publication. It is instructive to compare the original grypsmen language against an account of a veteran sucker. The latter contains frequent mistakes that a grypsman is strictly and explicitly forbidden to commit. Such mistakes provide a clear indication that the sucker did not go through a regular night bajera. Similar mistakes are typically committed by guards and researchers.

Various mechanisms prevent the revelation of secrets by insiders. The punishment for such an offense is severe and may include a mass rape of a traitor. Thus, even former grypsmen excluded from the caste lack incentives to reveal the secrets they learned. Another mechanism is the ever-changing character of the prison language. With an amazing degree of coordination among grypsmen in various prisons, every several years, some key elements of the prison language or symbolic taboos are exchanged or transformed. A typical indicator of confusion is a frequent interchangeable use in the literature and among prison staff of two seemingly identical words: “grypsman” and “grypser.” Both words had identical meanings before the 1970's. Later, the second word became used to denote a former grypsman who had been downgraded to a sucker, but tried cheating on other grypsmen in a new prison. There is no such confusion in relations of political prisoners who went through the regular night bajera training (Geresz 1986:20, Kaminski and Gibbons 1994).

7. Breaking the rules
Games prisoners play are not imposed externally but designed by prisoners themselves. Physical conditions, external institutional rules, and even the norms of grypsmen subculture impose much weaker constraints than those of a specific game or a decision-making situation. This allows for a variety of modifications of basic patterns. A skillful inmate can often take advantage of this fact and impose his own game. A beautiful case of using the rules of grypsmen game to one’s own advantage is illustrated with the following short story.

»The guard shoved Prince deeper inside the cell and closed the gate. A few bully figures instantly turned up around the new inmate. “Are you ...” — Prince interrupted the ritual question. “No, I am not a grypsman.” The guys approached him closely. Prince took a blade out of his cuff and shouted crazily. “I am a sucker, sucker-madman! Paragraph twenty-five. Leave me alone or — ” he looked at the calm faces “I will slice you into pieces.” Nobody moved. Prince quickly cut the skin on his left hand. Drops of blood marked the floor red. The guys stepped back slowly. One of them made a decision. “OK, you are a sucker but you are a tough-boy. You are kind, we are kind. Now, clean it.”«

When Student met him in prison, Prince showed a few five-centimeter long scars on his forearm and explained. “You have to be careful not to cut a vein.” As a junkie, Prince was doomed to be a sucker with no prospects for a lift to grypsman. On his entrance, he sent a credible signal that he was tough and that he could easily withstand pain. In a new prison, one badly needs a reputation for toughness. The signal was so strong that it blocked potential repressions.

The norms and rules can be relaxed. It happens most often with unusual cases of political prisoners, psychos, serial killers, famous bandits or in unusual places, like prisons with a relatively large proportion of suckers, or prison hospitals. The relaxation comes either as a decision of the elders, or is a simple consequence of the lack of strength of local grypsmen to enforce their code. The grypsmen language classifies the rules under such circumstances as loose rigor.
The sets of taboos, forbidden expressions and behaviors shrink when the rigor gets looser. On the other hand, in cell blocks for young offenders, or under a grypsmen-declared red rigor alert that may follow some unusual events in a prison, more rigid norms are in play.

8. Conclusion

Harsh life and a strong relationship between their personal welfare and everyday decisions in prison produces clever, alert players. “One of the most astonishing and captivating phenomena [in prisons] is an extraordinary sense of observation of every experienced prisoner” (Herling-Grudziński, 1989: 20). Similarly, Bukowski (1984: 219) “was repeatedly astonished how [prisoners] instantly identify [a rookie’s] character, uncover his weaknesses, and can always predict his future role.” Those skillful players design complex games and tests that a bystander hardly notices or can understand correctly. Strategies and outcomes in such games seem cruel and inhuman. Payoffs are measured in years reduced from a sentence, prestige, or a seemingly worthless commodity like packets of tea. Rituals, language, and symbolic behavior that accompany games prisoners play look bizarre and difficult to comprehend by an external uninformed observer.

The most precious commodity in prison games is information. It circulates via secret messages, pipes, holes in walls and floors, ingenious window mechanisms, or with the help of guards and family members. Its media are a variety of secret languages, including the bajera, the specialized thieves’ kmina, positional hand language, and a version of Morse code. However, the most valuable is the information about another fellow-inmate in the same cell.

This paper advances three points.

(1) The variety and persistence of many initiation rituals, however bizarre they look to an outside observer, can be explained by their usefulness for
extracting information about a new inmate. The most unknown characteristics of a rookie are his toughness and cleverness. Various norms of a prison subculture help to maintain a clear division between those who already passed the tests and the others.

(2) Initiation rituals involve more skillful deception and persuasion than actual pain and suffering. Deceiving a rookie instead of performing the test as he expects decreases the amount of violent interactions in a cell and the subsequent elders’ exposure to punishment from the personnel. However, severe punishment is not an illusion. It appears frequently when the objective is to downgrade a particular inmate to a lower caste. With no actual violence, the credibility of caste borders would be undermined.

(3) The fictitious character of a typical test creates a fundamental problem: an informed prisoner can simulate both toughness and smartness. The difficulty of separating an informed player from the one with desired characteristics plagues all prison games. The problem is well recognized by most skillful players and motivates their search for new, more ingenious tests. Additional incentives are provided with extra benefits obtained through participating in tests. What results is a wide variety of competing tests and frequent changes of prison argot or secret rites of behavior.

The understanding of the subculture’s norms and language can make a decisive difference for a prisoner’s well-being. An informed prisoner can do much better than a tough and strong one. Paradoxically, the determination to stay tough when necessary may often lead to fewer physical damages than playing soft. This is most important single piece of advice that can be offered to a rookie inmate.
Figure 1: Relative size, vertical relations and the direction of possible social mobility among major casts in Polish jail.

Notes: the width of boxes represents approximate relative casts sizes at Bialoleka and Rakowiecka jails.
Figure 2: Stage diagram for the allocation of new inmates among casts in Polish jail.

Notes: A rookie is subject both to testing and learning. A newbie is subject only to a verification of his initial declaration.
Figure 3: Generic Screening Game

Notes: A - accept; R - reject.
Term $p_E$ is the adjustment for the expected pain; Rookie’s estimate is $p_E = -2$; Test designer’s private knowledge: $p_E = 0$. When $p_E = -2$, a tough rookie chooses R while a soft rookie chooses A.
Figure 4: Generic Screening Game with an Informed Rookie

Notes: A - accept; R - reject.
The rookie knows that there is no pain adjustment affecting his payoffs. R is a dominant strategy both for soft and tough rookie.
Notes: \{A,B\} - the set of apparently all answers or actions; C - correct (expected) answer or action. A dumb rookie chooses A or B while a smart rookie chooses C.
Notes: F - fight, S - surrender.
Rookie’s private knowledge: his type, soft or tough.
Bully’s private knowledge: $\Gamma_T$ and $\Gamma_S$, i.e., one extra move.
Rookie believes that $\Gamma_T$ and $\Gamma_S$ are terminal nodes of the game and estimates that the payoffs are equal $E_\delta(\Gamma_T) = (1,1)$ and $E_\delta(\Gamma_S) = (1,0)$. 
Figure 7: Bully’s Hidden Move

Notes: C - continue fighting, A - announce that Rookie passed the test. Action A dominates C.
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