

Dining in: The Symbolic Power of Food in Prison

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Abstract: Just as food plays an important symbolic role in greater society, eating inside a prison is imbued with a great amount of power and significance. Consumption is a constantly recurring aspect of institutional life and, therefore, by examining this ubiquitous act, a researcher can access a subtle, nuanced account of how power operates within the prison apparatus. By drawing on examples from interviews with prisoners about the prison food experience, this article will work to make visible the centrality of prisoner resistance to these power dynamics. In addition, this examination of prison food will support current analyses in the criminological literature by developing an increased understanding of the prisoner as both agent and subject, while highlighting the moral dimensions of penal practice.

Sometimes I close my eyes and just remember, remember being in ____ [name of place] and then it was just (pause) sit at the table, and I got a lot of brothers and sisters, you know. My dad's there and I just sit at the table and it's like, eat and laugh and talk and drink and enjoy with my family... There's very few feelings like that in the world and a person can experience that through food. (Participant 5)

Eating is not something that just happens to us; on the contrary, all of us 'do' food in some way or another. Consumptive acts are a set of practices, rituals, and behaviours that each individual, in conjunction with others, regularly performs. It is through these performances that we infuse food with meaning. The foods we eat, how and where we eat them, and under what circumstances we consume are based on a political, cultural and familial heritage that extends far beyond our biological need for fuel (Iggers 1996; Tisdale 2000; Visser 1991).

The aim of this article is to describe and explore food-based resistance as an important theme in prisoners' stories about institutional food. Except for some commentary about the symbolic function of the prison diet (see Pratt 2002), the role that food plays in the daily routine of penal institutions has not been a focus of criminological research. Exploring food-based resistance in prison is valuable because it provides insight into how prisoners use consumptive spaces to negotiate and contest the power inequalities resulting from the prison's highly regulated environment.

The food-based resistance narratives on which this article is based were shared during 16 semi-structured interviews that were conducted with male prisoners confined in Canadian penal institutions. Although these interviews were focused on the prisoners' daily experience of food, I did not ask specific questions about power or resistance. Nevertheless, through prisoners' narratives about consumption and confinement, the struggle between the process of institutional objectification and of prisoners' efforts to resist institutionalisation became visible, revealing how individuals had an impact on prison power dynamics. These interview findings will be considered within the context of current prison research that views prisoners as subjects who possess agency. This approach discourages the view of prisoner as 'other' and highlights the moral and ethical dimensions of incarceration (Bosworth 1999; Carlen 2001; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1996).

Power Politics and the Consumption of Prison Food

Manifestations of institutional power and prisoner insubordination are multi-dimensional and operate on a variety of interacting levels that influence one another. Architecture, rules and regulations, decisions, reactions and punishment ideologies are all 'elements of the apparatus' – overt and covert factors that combine to form the lived reality of the penal institution (Clemmer 1958; Cohen and Taylor 1979 [1972]; Foucault 1977a). Food inside prison is one of these elements that acts as a site of contention where struggles over power, and identity (de)construction and maintenance can be played out (Smith 2002).

These struggles repeatedly occur inside the prison, so much so that they become a customary part of the prison experience. Therefore, in order to render observable the power of the institution, and the mechanisms that prisoners invoke to challenge this power, it is crucial to examine the repetitive, daily aspects of institutional life (Cohen and Taylor 1979 [1972]; Mathiesen 2000; Sykes 1958). Eating is a recurring and necessary part of survival that becomes a key element of the regular prison routine. Furthermore, because of the symbolic power that food possesses, it is a form of communication through which expressions of domination and resistance can be made. Consumptive habits allow institutional authorities and prisoners to develop and express an understanding of their situation and of themselves. Smith (2002) explores these notions in her study 'Punishment and pleasure':

The findings indicate that, in prison, where control is taken away, as the prisoner and her body become the objects of external forces, food is experienced not only as part of the disciplinary machinery, but also as a powerful source of pleasure, resistance and rebellion. (p.197)

Traditionally, prison research has focused on prison authorities, but an emerging movement in contemporary prison studies has also begun to examine the role and influence of prisoners on the dynamics and operation of penal institutions. This approach emphasises the concept of

prisoner agency and resistance within an environment that is dominated by immense power inequalities (Bosworth 1999; Carlen 2001; Hannah-Moffat 2001; Liebling 2000; Pratt 2002; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1996). Among others, Mary Bosworth has written about the need to recognise the prisoner as an agent *and* as a subject (Bosworth 1999; Bosworth and Carrabine 2001). An agent can take action and thus, is able to influence how the prison operates. However, to view the prisoner as a subject, the researcher must go beyond simply identifying acts of resistance. Recognising the prisoner as a subject demands that the researcher acknowledges the identities of prisoners – identities that have been created through past experiences and are grounded in an individual's race, class and gender (Bosworth 1999; Bosworth and Carrabine 2001). Thus, how a prisoner chooses to react to the restrictions and deprivations of institutional life is not only based upon the structure of the institution but also upon his or her own unique character and sense of self (Bosworth 1999).

This scholarship has guided criminological research towards recognising the subjectivities of different prisoners and to developing an understanding that places prisoners' acts of resistance within the wider social, political and economic context of society:

Prisons confine a collection of individuals who have been convicted of an assortment of crimes and who are incarcerated for differing lengths of time. Prisoners vary in terms of their race and ethnicity, their age, their mental and physical health, their intellectual capability and education, their nationality, their class, and of course, their sex. Yet general policy statements rarely distinguish among inmates. (Bosworth 1999, p.37)

In response to Bosworth's comments, this article presents the 'prison food experience' as an opportunity to work towards a view of the prisoner as both agent *and* subject. It will provide empirical evidence to support and reinforce the notion that prisoners' personal identities influence the way they react to prison structure and to prison authority, leading to a diverse set of acts that can be labelled as 'resistance'. Recognising prisoners as subjects also pushes society to acknowledge the moral and ethical dimensions of imprisonment. The individuals we confine are not monstrous others but people with personal histories. Why and how society chooses to punish these individuals are inherently moral questions that demand attention (Carlen 2001).

Methodology

The research process I undertook afforded prisoners – a controlled and marginalised population – with an opportunity to have their voices heard. To accomplish this goal, I spoke directly with prisoners, listened to their descriptions of imprisonment and recorded participants' self-stories and personal experience narratives to use as my primary source of data (Denzin 1989).¹

I completed 16 semi-structured interviews with prisoners. The selection of participants was based on their willingness to speak to an 'outsider' and

to participate in a research study. Correctional staff initially made recommendations of possible participants. I then requested a meeting with each individual, at which time I described the study and explained informed consent. Among those who agreed to participate, the average age was 39 years; the youngest was aged 28 years and the eldest was aged 47 years. Interviewees were not required to reveal the charge for which they had been convicted; however, eight individuals chose to share this information, and these charges ranged from drug offences to first-degree murder. Participants were asked to speak about their incarceration history to provide a sense of the number and variety of institutions in which they had lived. Due to previous sentences, prison transfers and ‘cascading’ both up and down to different levels of security, a number of the participants were able to share stories based on their experiences in a variety of prison settings, including maximum-security institutions. When asked to use their own words to describe their cultural heritage, seven participants used the term white or Caucasian and three self-identified as First Nations. The remaining men identified themselves as Asian, Persian, ‘of Indian descent’, Islamic and Scots-Irish.

Interviews lasted from half an hour to two hours. The participants lived in two medium-security institutions and one minimum-security institution in the province of British Columbia (BC), Canada. All three of these BC prisons are men-only² institutions and are operated by the Canadian federal government. In all three institutions, I was given a private interview room located in the psychological testing area of the prison, which allowed me to conduct the interviews in a confidential setting.

Daily Rations of Bread, Water and Institutional Control

Prisoners’ narratives revealed that the inability to make decisions about their daily routine was a great source of frustration and anxiety for them. Simple everyday choices about when they would eat, where they consumed their food and what they could wear during meal times were constant, recurrent reminders of the lack of control the participants had over their lives (Cohen and Taylor 1979 [1972]; Foucault 1977b; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1996; Sykes 1958). Many of their stories focused on the overt and covert food-related techniques that the institution used to express power over the prisoner population. Perhaps the most significant demonstration of this authority was conveyed in a tale about the institution feeding prisoners cow’s tongue without informing them what kind of meat was being served. However, these extreme tales were rare. The majority of narratives focused on the monotonous and repetitive nature of the food and the inability to access ethnic dishes. In addition to the kind of food that was served, participants often discussed the cooking methods used to prepare the meals. They commented that the inability to direct how their food was cooked (for example, baking *versus* deep-frying) reflected their inability to make beneficial consumptive choices and thus, they could not be in full control of their own health.

Consequently, spaces in which prisoners were afforded an opportunity to engage with the politics of food and identity construction were significantly limited (Bosworth 1999). Almost every small detail of the daily food routine was controlled by the prison authority. As Foucault (1975) remarked: '... [this is] the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourse, learning processes and everyday lives' (p.39).

Consumptive Resistance

Even though opportunities are limited, prisoners do resist. Within the prison context, resistance has typically been characterised as explicitly disobedient and violent actions that bring about harsh and negative responses from authorities (Bosworth and Carrabine 2001). This depiction assumes that acts of resistance must be visible to authorities and that these acts are in direct defiance to the rules and regulations of the institution (Goffman 1961; Sykes 1958). Although some resistant acts possess these characteristics, Bosworth and Carrabine (2001) have argued to expand the definition of 'resistance' to include everyday routine actions, whether these are visible or invisible to others: '... taking identity as a site of the negotiation of power requires a smaller-scale approach to questions of inequality, and, perhaps most significantly, places the voices and experiences of individuals at the center of analysis' (p.511).

Adopting this approach, I use the concept of 'resistance' to refer to a variety of methods and techniques that prisoners use to confront the daily pressures of their confinement. My analysis draws out subtle and explicit patterns of food-based prisoner resistance embedded in everyday prison life. I have divided these acts of resistance into two major categories: individual and group forms of defiance. Each of these two main categories are then further subdivided for a total of four distinct types of resistance: (i) individual adaptations and adjustments; (ii) individual displays of opposition; (iii) legitimate group activities; and (iv) illegitimate group activities. Specific examples from the prisoners' narratives about food and food-related rituals inside prison are provided as illustrations of these concepts.³

Individual Adaptations and Adjustments

Once incarcerated, participants found they employed new techniques to manage their experience of confinement. These changes in behaviour were usually conscious decisions to act or think in a particular way to alleviate the personal pains of imprisonment. According to what was important to them as individuals, prisoners developed adaptations and adjustments that helped them cope with their loss of freedom (Bosworth 1998; Smith 2002).

A specific example is the 'cognitive tricks' that individual prisoners played on themselves to prevent the distress that was created by the memory of foods and food-related rituals that they used to engage in.

Several of these tricks involved the avoidance of cues, such as coupon books and television commercials that reminded participants of food choices that were not available to them inside the prison:

That's actually one thing that I've come to try to avoid, is a lot of these food flyers. Because it's kind of dangling a carrot in front of a starving horse, right? You know, it's like 'it would be so nice to have that', you know? So you just kind of try to be satisfied with what we do have. (Participant 7)

In talking about his avoidance of food flyers, Participant 7 speaks about losing a freedom that most of us take for granted. Prisoners must eat what they are served; they do not have the ability to take a trip to the grocery store and purchase the foods that they crave. Similarly, Participant 8 said: 'It's like sometimes this would be good right now. But knowing I can't get the stuff to do it, I turn it off. If I was on the outside I would probably get up and go shopping and get what I need'. 'Turning off' these thoughts and focusing on being satisfied with what is available helps prisoners 'do their time' by diminishing their desire to make decisions about consumptive choices that are important to them.

Cognitive tricks were also employed to avoid memories of how food had been linked to important occasions in their life, such as family holidays and special dinners:

... but this isn't the place, you know, to mentally start preparing candle light dinners and things like that. That's just about non-existent in a place like this, you know what I mean? ... Yeah, out there, you know, take somebody to dinner or whatever, right? But it just doesn't happen in here. (Participant 14)

No longer able to use the opportunity of a dinner to express affection, Participant 14 points to differences between societal and prison norms. He talks about how prison can place pressure on prisoners to change how they communicate and consequently, change their sense of self. Although Participant 14 may have considered himself a romantic while outside institutional walls, once incarcerated he had to adapt his sense of self to fit with prison norms.

Individual Displays of Opposition

In addition to these adaptations and adjustments, interviewees shared stories that demonstrated a variety of individual 'displays of opposition'. An action was categorised as such if the individual explicitly and visibly behaved in a defiant manner towards authorities. The most frequent display was a one-to-one exchange between a prisoner and an authority figure, primarily kitchen stewards or prison guards.⁴ When asked directly about the types of conflicts that occurred in the dining area, verbal altercations were identified as the most common method of confrontation:

There's lots of conflicts between inmates and kitchen staff over the food – verbal conflicts. Sometimes they relate in a charge from the kitchen staff to the inmate. So, yeah, lots of times there is frustration and, I guess, you know, the inmate expresses it verbally. (Participant 4)

Although not as frequent, prisoners' narratives also described physical displays of defiance: 'Oh, I remember years ago, I haven't seen it lately, but years ago there were instances where stewards would have plates thrown at them and stuff like that' (Participant 12). One-to-one conflicts, especially verbal quarrels, seemed to occur so often that one participant felt prisoners were deterred from going down to the cafeteria for meals:

... because it's just, for them, it's just added stress. Why get into a confrontation with a guard if (pause) 'cause we do have a canteen here and a lot of guys live off the canteen because they don't want to come down and eat. It's to avoid confrontation with guards so they just eat in their house. (Participant 15)

Although one-to-one conflicts were used as resistance strategies, other less prevalent but perhaps more powerful methods were also employed. For example, rumours about the contamination of food demonstrate how prison power dynamics remain in constant flux and how easily power can shift from institutional authorities to prisoners. During the time of the interviews, prisoners employed in the kitchens of some maximum- and medium-security institutions across Canada were responsible for preparing and cooking the food for both the prisoner and the staff cafeterias. From time to time, rumours circulated about prisoners tampering with the guards' food. The fear of contamination was so intense that these rumours subverted the regular arrangement of power, resulting in a role reversal. The idea that prisoners could have been polluting the guards' food created the perception (regardless of the reality) that the prisoners were now in control and able to make decisions about something that was vital to the guards' health and well-being.

Interviewer: Is there a difference between the inmates' meals and the guards' meals?

Participant: There's far less urine in the cons' juice than there is in the guards'. (laughter)

Interviewer: So do the inmates cook the meals for the guards?

Participant: Sometimes that's an on and off type thing.

Interviewer: How so? Who else would cook them?

Participant: Well, the guards don't like working so normally they don't do the cooking but when the rumours come around that the cons are usually urinating or spitting in the guards' food then you have the guards go back to cooking for a while and then the committee [inmate committee] goes down and assures everybody everything is fine for the next two months. Then we go through the whole thing again. (Participant 11)

Other participants spoke about the measures taken to prevent 'contamination', such as cooking all of the food at the same time and then separating the meal into two batches, one for the prisoners and another for the guards, right before it was served. But these adjustments could not address the psychological impact of the rumours themselves, for ultimately it was the mere potential for contamination that allowed for the reversal of power to occur.

As is evidenced by the above examples, all individual forms of resistance, whether adaptation, adjustment or overt display of defiance, were opportunities that prisoners created to challenge institutional dominance. Whether or not these forms of individual prisoner opposition lead to systemic changes, they provide evidence of prisoners' refusal to just be obedient and their rejection of the process of institutionalisation (Bosworth and Carrabine 2001). Their challenges to institutional power, which are reflective of their subjectivity, also opened up spaces for prisoners to exercise some influence over prison operations (Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1996; Smith 2002).

Legitimate Group Activities

Group forms of resistance referred to as 'legitimate' activities include practices that are sanctioned and supported by institutional authorities and the mission statement and policies of Correctional Services Canada (CSC) more generally. These food-based struggles are characterised by the fact that more than one individual is involved. These challenges also require some level of group organisation. In fact, participants said that the attainment of food was frequently the inspiration and 'organising principle' for such group activities.

One of the key legitimate group activities was to form ethnic-based groups that received the approval of the institution to co-ordinate monthly orders of culturally appropriate foods. Margaret Visser (1991) argues that the desire to consume cultural foods, a habit usually developed in childhood, is one of the most powerful and potent forms of identity. The inability to use food as an expression of ethnic identity was frequently addressed during the prison interviews. For example, four participants referred to the food in the cafeteria as 'Canadian', pointing out that what was served was not culturally sensitive: 'Now is it fair in the sense of – for people of colour, people of ethnicity, people of different ethnic backgrounds. Is that fair? No' (Participant 5). Special diets, required because of religious or health reasons, used to be one of the only ways prisoners could regularly receive any type of culturally appropriate food. Although a number of participants believed that CSC's efforts to provide religiously-based diets were commendable, overall participants felt that their ability to access cultural foods was severely restricted because they could not 'prove' either a religious or health-related need.⁵

As a challenge to the limitations of these special diets, prisoners began to organise 'food groups'. Interview participants listed a number of different culturally based food groups including East Indian, Black Inmates and Friends Association, Latino, Asian and Native Brotherhood. Group members could either come together to cook an ethnic meal in the kitchen or prepare the food individually in their own units (unless the prison authorities deemed that the security risks were too high). These institutionally sanctioned groups allowed individuals to access foods that were not normally available on the inside, to prepare the food as they desired and to have the opportunity for a social meal outside of the regular dining area. The opportunity to consume such specialised foods in prison,

even under the close surveillance of prison authorities, provided opportunities for prisoners to engage with the construction and maintenance of their identities (Bosworth 1999; Smith 2002; Tisdale 2000; Visser 1991).

Illegitimate Group Activities

In addition to these legitimate activities, the participants referred to a number of 'illegitimate' group activities. Illegitimate activities included behaviour that was not endorsed, or approved of, by institutional authorities. These actions were closest to what Goffman (1961) called 'secondary adjustments' – practices that indirectly confront institutional authority because they are forbidden by that authority.⁶ Prisoners talked primarily about the stealing of institutional food by prisoners who worked as kitchen employees:

But cons don't work in the kitchen over there [a specific institution] so the food is great and the reason for that is because most of the food gets stolen out of here to feed the guys that don't come down. I mean they pay guys in the kitchen to steal food out of there so they can eat up in the units rather than going down there. (Participant 15)

Stolen food holds value because it is an item that can be used to barter for other goods in the underground economy:

It's [food] a commodity. In prison anything is a commodity, right? Supply and demand – whatever is a rarity has its price. Steaks are a rarity, they have a price. Filet mignon is rarer than steaks, costs more than a steak does. (Participant 11)

When discussing the difficulty of controlling the bootlegged food market, participants argued that employing prisoners in the kitchens continued to perpetuate the problem of stolen food because of the easy access these individuals had to the prison food source. Participant 15 stated: '... I don't know, it's (pause) food is a necessity but a lot of guys don't eat because they don't want to get up and walk all the way down there and eat, so they get guys to steal it. So there ain't enough for everybody ...'. He went on to express anger towards the individuals who were willing to sell kitchen food because of the effect this practice had upon the quantity and quality of food being served in the cafeteria. This illustrates how food is also symbolic of the ways that prisoners can exert power over other prisoners (Bosworth and Carrabine 2001; Smith 2002).

The dining room also served as an important area for displays of power between prisoners. As a result, the choice of a seat was a difficult decision:

A big thing for every inmate, and even for me, is when you come to an institution, like my first fear is where I sit in the dining room and I'd say that's everyone's concern. Not a fear, just concern, but just from doing time and coming to different institutions you (pause) there's always someone you know and you ask 'where's there an open spot?' ... Within time you can start at one spot and later on move to another spot and it just makes it easier to sit with people you know and have conversations with them. (Participant 4)

Taking a seat that had already been occupied by another prisoner was a sign of disrespect. To maintain esteem within the minds of his counterparts, the individual who had previously claimed the seat had to demonstrate his authority in an overt manner: 'Seating arrangements, you know, marking your territory. That's the chair you sit in every day, somebody sits in your chair, they're moving in on your space so you have to take initiative over that' (Participant 2). These demonstrations of power repeatedly occurred in the public space of the dining room so that other inmates could witness the display: '... that's the one place [the dining room] that everybody gets together so you want to make a name for yourself, you want to do whatever, you'll do it there so everybody can see' (Participant 5).

Five participants also spoke about the unique atmosphere of the dining area, which was prone to potentially violent clashes between prisoners and prison authorities, as well as riotous situations. They argued that because a large number of individuals were in a small space and because people became easily angered by food-related problems, the cafeteria-style dining rooms in Canadian institutions often led to precarious situations:

We've sort of been told 'if you guys are going to have a problem then have it outside the dining room' because potentially it's such a volatile area 'cause you've got how many guys in there at one shot? One hundred guys minimum at one shot. One starts here, one starts there. That's their worst nightmare 'cause then they have an uncontrolled crowd of inmates who are pissed off about something. (Participant 1)

The participants believed that CSC was well aware of the danger and focused on preventing destructive displays of hostility or aggression within this space:

CSC staff are trained there because most riots, throughout the history of riots straight across (pause) well around the world, start in the kitchen, start in the cafeteria. Most riots start there. So they've been trained and told that if you know you have a problem with a person, you want to deal with any type of situation, unless a person is acting out violently towards another person, you get them out of the kitchen and then you deal with them because you don't want to be the catalyst to start a riot, sort of thing. So what will happen is they'll say '___ [name] come here for a minute' or they'll wait 'til you finish eating and then they'll get you outside ... Like CSC is smart, they know don't start trouble in the kitchen because, you know, that's where everybody is and, as well, most people don't like to be bothered when they're eating. (Participant 5)

As exemplified by these quotations, the dining area can be a site of contention where prisoners confront the institution and other prisoners in a battle to regain authority over their lives. This opportunity is partially due to the fact that the large number of people gathered in one area provides prisoners with the chance to outnumber authority figures. But it also presents itself because, as Participant 5 observed, the dining room is a consumptive area that allows individuals to engage in personally-defined eating rituals – rituals that express their individual identities and represent their capacity to control their lives.

Food for Thought

As illustrated by both the individual and group forms of defiance, prisoners employ a diversity of ways to locate and create consumptive spaces of resistance within the confines of the institution. The participants considered some of the food-related techniques of prisoner resistance quite successful and other methods appeared to incite severe responses from authorities. However, regardless of the consequences, the participants frequently characterised their defiance as an empowering process. These occasions provided prisoners with an opportunity to challenge the dominance of prison authorities as well as the overwhelming process of institutionalisation (Bosworth 1999; Foucault 1977b; Goffman 1961; Sykes 1958). In confronting the forms of power that are imposed upon them, prisoners access the symbolic power of food to structure, develop and maintain their individual identities – ones that are separate from the institutional designation of ‘inmate’ and the societal label of ‘criminal’ (Smith 2002).

Inspired by the symbolic power of food and consumptive rituals, my study has concentrated on assembling narratives about the prison food experience in order to access the daily reality of prison life. By placing the prisoner’s voice at the centre of my work, this research complements a growing body of literature that continues to recognise and legitimise prisoner accounts of incarceration (Gaucher 2002; Pratt 2002). This process also gave me the opportunity to briefly penetrate the otherwise opaque institutional barriers to catch a glimpse of how prisoners *do* participate as subjective agents in prison power dynamics (Bosworth 1999; Bosworth and Carrabine 2001; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1996).

The decision to focus on the symbolic rather than pragmatic aspects of the prison food experience reflects a fundamental belief in the intrinsic moral nature of penal governance (Bosworth 1999; Carlen 2001; Mathiesen 2000; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1996). To recognise the moral foundations of prison involves moving from the safety of a scientific, objective analysis of prison issues towards the more uncomfortable, and likely more obscure, ethical questions about how we choose to treat those individuals we confine:

Moral judgments (as either components or objects of analysis) are inevitably inherent in both penology (the practice of punishment) and penalty (the justifications and explanations of why punishment takes the form it does). Yet, in recent times, questions about moral penal practice have seldom surfaced as such in the directives of the politicians and civil servants who direct and fund prison policy; nor have they been frequently addressed by academic analysts exploring the meaning of contemporary penalty. (Carlen 2001, p.469)

This empirical study helps to establish the prisoner as a subject – as an individual whose humanity we need to recognise – and contributes to the greater goal of urging others to acknowledge the myriad of moral and ethical concerns that continue to surround the governance of society’s prisons (Bosworth 1999; Carlen 2001; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1996).⁷

Notes

- 1 For a detailed discussion of the definitions of 'self story' and 'personal experience narrative' please refer to Denzin (1989). For the purposes of this article, narrative and story will be used synonymously to refer to the experiences and views shared by the participants of the research.
- 2 I made the decision to interview males because the academic literature is inclined to define women and food in relation to the body and frequently with respect to disordered eating. Notions of the body, hunger, food, and power are all closely associated with one another; however, in making a determination as to the limits of my work, and to distinguish my study from previous research (see Smith 2002), I was compelled to exclude discussions about food, body image and eating disorders. In this respect, interviews with males were less focused on such issues due to the weaker conceptual link in Western society between men and the body (Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991).
- 3 Participants are identified by randomly assigned numbers, rather than names, to protect confidentiality. These numbers are consistent throughout the document.
- 4 Kitchen stewards are employees of food service businesses that have been contracted by CSC to organise kitchen operations in Canadian federal penal institutions.
- 5 To 'prove' their religious or health-related need for a special diet, prisoners had to provide documentation from a religious leader or doctor justifying why the individual required that specific diet.
- 6 Interestingly, the use of hunger strikes was never mentioned in the interviews, even though it appears to be a key theme in the history of prison (dis)order and has often been an issue that is highlighted by the media. Although it is a topic that is very pertinent to the symbolic nature of food in prison, I have excluded it from this discussion of illegitimate group activities because it was not mentioned by the participants.
- 7 *Acknowledgements and disclaimers*: This article is based on my Masters thesis completed at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada. I would like to thank Dr Robert Menzies, Dr Margaret A. Jackson and Ian Webb for their continued support and assistance. I also greatly appreciate the anonymous reviewers who provided valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article. The support of the CSC is gratefully acknowledged. The reported findings and their interpretation do not reflect the official policy of the CSC.

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