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# Reflections on the Metamorphosis at Robben Island: The Role of Institutional Work and Positive Psychological Capital

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## Abstract

Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners from South Africa were imprisoned on notorious Robben Island from the mid-1960s until the end of the apartheid regime in 1991. The stark conditions and abusive treatment of these prisoners has been widely publicized. However, upon reflection and in retrospect, over the years, a type of metamorphosis occurred. Primarily drawing from firsthand accounts of the former prisoners and guards, it seems that Robben Island morphed from the traditional oppressive prison paradigm to one where the positively oriented prisoners disrupted the institution with a resulting climate of learning and transformation that eventually led to freedom and the end of apartheid. At a macro level of analysis, we use the theoretical lens of institutional work, and, at a micro level, positive psychological capital (hope, efficacy, resiliency, and optimism) to explain what happened. This metamorphosis led to one of, if not the greatest, societal transformations in modern history. We conclude by discussing some implications and lessons learned for organizational scholars and practitioners.

**Keywords:** Robben Island, psychological capital, institutional work, organizational change, positive change

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

Mahatma Gandhi

Robben Island is known not only in South Africa but throughout the world as a place of exile, isolation, and sadness. For nearly 400 years, colonial and apartheid rulers banished those they regarded as political troublemakers, social outcasts, and the unwanted of society (for many years, it was a leper colony) to this rocky, 1,420-acre outcrop that sits just 7.4 miles from beautiful Cape Town. Yet, despite its horrific reputation, starting in the 1960s, the political prisoners on the island began a journey at the psychological and political levels to turn this “hell hole” into a symbol of freedom, personal liberation, and hope for the future (see <http://www.robbenisland.org.za>).

The traditional prison is characterized by influence and power focused on top-down actions and processes by those in control. Yet, as we shall see, the prisoners on Robben Island reversed this paradigm and changed the behavior and values of their guards. Specifically,

in retrospect, they seemed to improve the conditions of their abusive incarceration through institutional disruption and by drawing from their positive psychological resources or capital. Similar to the famous Gandhi quote above, their disruption of the institutional status quo and their positive psychological capital led to the changes they wanted to see in their little world of Robben Island, and, importantly, in the broader world outside the prison.

As well-known management-of-change expert Gary Hamel (2000) has noted,

You’ve been told that change must start at the top—that’s rubbish. How often does the revolution start with the monarchy? Nelson Mandela, Václav Havel, Thomas Paine, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King: Did they possess political power? No, yet each disrupted history; and it was passion, not power, that allowed them to do so. (p. 24)

Using a historical case methodology (Yin, 2003), we

first provide a brief overview of the backdrop for the transformation that occurred at Robben Island in terms of the climate of apartheid in general, and, in particular, the top-down, oppressive nature of the prison as an institution, and prison life in the early 1960s. After stating the research question and describing how we collected the case information, we frame the analysis of the phenomenal change that occurred through institutional-work theory and the power of positive psychological capital. We conclude by identifying some implications for extending the role of institutional work, and especially positive psychological capital, for leadership, organizational participants, and society in general.

### The Backdrop of the Robben Island Metamorphosis

Times were incredibly tough for non-Whites in the race-based classification system that characterized the apartheid regime in South Africa from its inception in 1948 through its demise in the early 1990s. Inhabitants were classified into one of four racial groups—"native" (Black), "White," "colored" (this term is used in South Africa to designate those of mixed race), and "Asian." Residential areas were segregated along these classifications, sometimes by means of forced removals. Non-White political representation was completely abolished in 1970, and, starting in that year, Black people were deprived of their citizenship. The government segregated education, medical care, beaches, and other public services, and provided Black people with services inferior to those of White people (Dingake, 1987; Waldmeir, 1997).

The following excerpt is taken from the 1962 trial of Nelson Mandela, in which he was convicted and sent to Robben Island. The charge against him, for inciting Black South Africans to strike illegally and for leaving the country without a valid passport, is representative of the legal climate at the time, but his reaction below illustrates the breadth of his concern about race discrimination everywhere, and about changing the system of apartheid in his own beloved country (Mandela, 1984).

I hate the practice of race discrimination, and I am sustained in that hatred by the fact that the overwhelming majority of mankind, both in this country and abroad, are with me. Nothing that this Court can do to me will change in any way that hatred in me, which can only be removed by the removal of the injustice and the inhumanity which I have sought to remove from the political and social life of this country. (p. 26)

Titles of books by former prisoners, such as *Hell-Hole* (Dlamini, 1984) and *Island in Chains* (Naidoo & Sachs, 1982), aptly describe the top-down power situation that political prisoners such as Mandela faced upon their arrival at the apartheid political prison located on Robben Island in the early 1960s. Both books portray this prison

as a world of chains and torture, of attempts to enslave the prisoners, to humiliate them, and to destroy any sense of their dignity as human beings. Mandela himself described Robben Island as "the harshest, most iron-fisted outpost in the South African penal system" (cited in Kramer, 2003). Former *warder* (the term used for the guards) and censor James Gregory, who came to the Island in 1966 said, "What the people in charge told me was that it would be my job to demoralize the blacks, especially him [Nelson Mandela], reduce them to nothing" (Buntman, 2003, pp. 196-197).

From 1963 forward, all of the warders and prison-department employees were White, and all the prisoners were non-White men (i.e., Black, colored, or Indian). In fact, the warders at first truly hated the prisoners, having been told that they were all terrorists and that they posed a "communist threat" (Buntman, 2003; Naidoo & Sachs, 1982). Blatant and covert racism defined much of prison life, with racial slurs a constant feature of daily life in the early years. Food and clothing were provided on a racially differentiated basis (to Blacks, coloreds of mixed race, and Indians), and both of these essentials for living were totally inadequate. For example, the prisoners' clothing included short pants and short-sleeved shirts that were dirty and torn, ill-fitting shoes for Indian prisoners, and sandals for Blacks, and, in winter, ill-fitting jerseys.

Beatings, racist taunting, public strip searches (including rectal "examinations"), and almost complete disregard of prisoner complaints characterized prison life in the early 1960s (Naidoo & Sachs, 1982). A particularly egregious instance of maltreatment occurred when prisoner Johnson Mlambo was buried in sand to his neck, and then urinated upon by warders. As one prisoner noted in describing the behavior of the warders, "Somehow they seemed to have enjoyed it. They seemed so totally depraved that they could live with this comfortably and find nothing wrong with it" (Moseneke, in Buntman, 2003, p. 49). Furthermore, the constant searches of prisoners' clothes, possessions, and cells, together with censorship of their letters (both sent and received), and extremely limited access to news from the outside world, were features of the authorities' abusive top-down power and control of the political prisoners (Buntman, 2003). These actions are consistent with the definition of evil: intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others—or using one's authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf (Zimbardo, 2008).

Perhaps the most brutal aspect of day-to-day life was the hard labor the prisoners performed, and the abuse associated with it. Most prisoners would quarry lime or stone, chop wood, crush stone, or repair or make roads with a pick and shovel. Conditions were harsh and dangerous, as illustrated by the damage done to Nelson Mandela's eyes after years of working at the lime quarry

without any eye protection. Prisoner Steve Tshwete commented as follows:

Robben Island was a real struggle for survival against assault and insult, with warders shouting, "You will never get your freedom ... you are nothing, just a kaffir [dog]. The white man is here to rule, and this is his country ... you are here to serve the white people of this country. A kaffir is a dog and you are a dog and Mandela is a dog. You can have 101 doctorates but you are a kaffir ... you are a number ... you are nothing." (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 39)

Prisoner Jacob Zuma (as of 2012, president of South Africa) also noted,

On our first day we were locked up in one of the cells in the old prison. We saw warders taking big sticks and clubs and getting ready for something we didn't understand. Then we saw a group of political prisoners being brought into the new cell block and being beaten up as they entered the gates. We shouted protests from our cell. Because of this, they thought we needed a similar reception, so in the afternoon we were called into the yard, where we were beaten for about 40 minutes ... This was the treatment we got on the first day. We went to sleep that night not knowing what to expect the next day. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 57)

As for Nelson Mandela's conditions, for 4 years, he slept on a 2-inch-thick mattress placed on the cold cement of the cell floor. For approximately 15 years, he lived without underwear, wore shoes without socks, and was not allowed to wear long pants (Sithole, 1994). To be sure, the power differential between warders and prisoners resulted in a system of pervasive, top-down dominance.

### **A Crack of Sunlight Through the Repressive Prison Walls**

Despite the horrible conditions, there was still evidence that the prisoners maintained a positive mindset throughout their ordeal. As former prisoner Ahmed Kathrada revealed,

Right from the beginning the authorities made it clear that their mission was to break our morale and to crush whatever political ideas we had. They inflicted all sorts of cruelties and humiliations on us, and tried to bribe individuals into working for them. They failed in all this, and the goodness in the prisoners came to the surface. Try as they might, they could not break our morale or change our ideas—we stood together as a united force against the authorities. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 42)

Buntman (2003) also noted that the repressive prison situation demanded constant negotiation between the prisoners and the warders and other prison authorities. As a result, the prisoners developed a peculiar intimacy with the apartheid state, a familiarity with the enemy that taught the prisoners about the strengths and weaknesses of the regime they sought to destroy. Although Robben Island was designed as an institution of repression, it was continually transformed by the political inmates into a site of resistance, tolerance, and change.

It is also important at the outset to note the role of external forces in helping to improve prison conditions. In particular, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) made three visits to Robben Island, in 1963, 1964, and 1974. Former political prisoners often give credit to the ICRC for its part in the struggle for improved conditions. In the words of Philemon Tefu (imprisoned on Robben Island from 1963 to 1985), "Improvements came markedly in 1974 when the Red Cross representatives were allowed to get into the prison unescorted by the warders" (Makola, 2010). Another driving force for change was Helen Suzman, a White South African antiapartheid activist and politician. Suzman was noted for her strong public criticism of the governing National Party's policies of apartheid at a time when this was atypical of fellow White South Africans, and found herself even more of an outsider because she was an English-speaking Jewish woman in a parliament dominated by Calvinist Afrikaner men. According to former prisoner Neville Alexander (imprisoned from July 1963 to April 1974),

Helen Suzman's visit to the Island in 1967 was one of the benchmarks of our imprisonment. She managed to get the authorities to allow her visit, and her perseverance demonstrated her commitment to human rights. After her visit, we were allowed more visits and letters and it was easier to get permission to study. (Alexander, quoted in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 51)

A well-accepted, classic tenet in the fields of psychology and in leadership is that those in abusive, top-down power situations are likely to do evil deeds to those below them (e.g., see Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Milgram, 1963; Zimbardo, 2008). Abusive, top-down power situations, such as the one created in the famous Stanford Prison Experiments, provide a context that includes socially approved roles, rules, and norms, a legitimizing ideology, and institutional support that transcends individual agency (Zimbardo, Maslach, & Haney, 2000). In the field of leadership, a basic tenet is that the situation has considerable power in influencing others (Fiedler, 1967; Schriesheim, Tepper, & Tetrault, 1994; Vecchio, 1983).

Those who study prisons often point out that an abusive, top-down power situation helps to explain the hostile behavior of prison guards toward inmates,

or captors in general, toward captives (e.g., the highly publicized torture, humiliation, and abuse by military guards of the concentration-camp inmates during World War II, and, more recently, Iraqi prisoners of war (POWs) at Abu Ghraib Prison starting in 2004; also see Dilley, 2004). The explanation is that the abusive, top-down power situation creates a culture that draws those in control into it and causes them to act in ways that may be inconsistent with their "normal" behavior patterns. For example, one former Robben Island prisoner observed this process firsthand:

We could move beyond how we felt about the guards once we realized that the guards were just part of a system that robbed us of control over our own actions and behaviors. The guards were not inherently evil people; they were just instruments of the system. Thinking about them as people who are parents and lovers, independent of the system, enabled us to forgive the guards, but never to forget what they did. (personal communication to Rita Kellerman, August 24, 2005)

## Research Question and Method

Using this historical information as background and a point of departure, we derived our research question as follows:

*Research Question 1:* How were the political prisoners who were incarcerated at the Robben Island maximum-security prison from the mid-1960s to early 1991 able to transform their experience of imprisonment from one of abuse and subjugation to one of learning and transformation?

In order to investigate this research question, the first author visited the prison, personally interviewed several former prisoners, and received firsthand accounts from other former prisoners who were interviewed by his associate, Rita Kellerman. Both authors read firsthand accounts of former prisoners and their guards (known as "warders"), and many accounts of prison life on Robben Island, as described in the literature from political science to sociology. To understand the historical, situational, and environmental contexts in which the events on Robben Island occurred, we read a number of sources (Alexander, 1992; Buntman, 2003; Naidoo & Sachs, 1982; Waldmeir, 1997), as well as the transcript from Nelson Mandela's 1962 trial (Mandela, 1984). Buntman (2003) also conducted 92 interviews that lasted between 1 and 8 hours, 70 of which were with former prisoners. These firsthand accounts, coupled with those of jailers and prisoners found in Schadeberg (1994), Dingake (1987), Dlamini (1984), Mandela (1994), Mkhwanazi (1987), and Vassen (1999) helped us to crystallize the themes in this case analysis. Our two main themes that emerged were macro-oriented institutional work

(more specifically, the prisoners' attempts to disrupt the institution) and micro-oriented positive psychological capital (consisting of the prisoners' hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism).

Table 1 presents a summary list of our sources (primary and secondary) and the names, roles, and races/ethnic groups of individuals quoted in this article. Through the historical case-study method (Yin, 2003), we seek to understand more fully at the macro level the institutional processes that the prisoners used to disrupt the existing system. We also seek to understand at the micro level the practices that the leaders of the prisoners and the prisoners themselves institutionalized, and how they drew from their individual and collective positive psychological capital, or PsyCap (consisting of their positive psychological resources of *hope*, *efficacy*, *resilience* and *optimism* or the "HERO within," see Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007) to survive, resist, and effectuate change. We will argue that PsyCap enabled the prisoners to transform prison life and their guards at Robben Island. After providing the meaning and relevancy of these macro- and micro-level explanations, we will examine some specific coping strategies that the prisoners used and the role that education, equality, and leadership played in the metamorphosis.

## Institutional-Work Perspective

Institutional work is a macro-level theoretical lens that we draw upon to help interpret the events that took place on Robben Island. The concept of institutional work describes "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). Traditionally, institutional approaches to organization theory have focused attention on the relationships among organizations, and the fields in which they operate, providing strong accounts of the processes through which institutions govern action. In contrast, the study of institutional work shifts the focus to understanding how action affects institutions, more specifically, the practical actions through which institutions are created, maintained, and disrupted (DiMaggio, 1988; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, 1999; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). Thus, the concept of institutional work is based on a growing awareness of institutions as products of human action and reaction, motivated by idiosyncratic personal interests and by agendas for institutional change or preservation (Lawrence et al., 2009).

Institutional work involves physical or mental effort. In this historical case analysis, we examine the strategies used by the actors, that is, the prisoners on Robben Island, to disrupt and change institutional arrangements of the oppressive top-down power structure. The prisoners challenged the existing system and the strategies used by their guards to preserve and maintain the institution they represented. Through this disruption mech-

**Table 1.** Sources Used in Robben Island Research and Names/Roles of Those Quoted.

Sources <sup>a</sup>	Firsthand account?	Names and roles	Race
Alexander (1992)	Yes	Alexander, N. (Prisoner)	Unknown
Buntman (2003)	Yes	Brand, C. (Warder)	White
Dingake (1987)	Yes	Daniels, E. (Prisoner)	Colored
Dlamini (1984)	Yes	Du Toit, A. (Warder)	White
Kramer (2003)	No	Green, M. (Warder)	White
Makola (2010)	Yes	Gregory, James (Warder)	White
Mandela (1984)	Yes	Kathrada, A. (Prisoner)	Indian
Mandela (1994)	Yes	Lekota, P. (Prisoner)	Black
Meldrum (2007)	Yes	Mandela, N. (Prisoner)	Black
Mkhwanazi (1987)	Yes	Masondo, A. (Prisoner)	Black
Naidoo and Sachs (1982)	Yes	Mbeki, G. (Prisoner)	Black
Schadeberg (1994)	Yes	Mkalipi, K. (Prisoner)	Black
Sithole (1994)	No	Mkhwanazi, T. (Prisoner)	Black
Vassen (1999)	Yes	Mlambo, J. (Prisoner)	Black
Waldmeir (1997)	No	Molala, N. (Prisoner)	Black
		Moseneke, K. (Prisoner)	Black
		Sexwale, T. (Prisoner)	Black
		Tefu, P. (Prisoner)	Unknown
		Tshwete, S. (Prisoner)	Black
		Tsiki, N. (Prisoner)	Unknown
		Venkatrathnam, S. (Prisoner)	Indian
		Zuma, J. (Prisoner)	Black

a. See bibliography for complete citation.

anism, we can focus on how action and actors affect institutions. We can identify the prisoners as “institutional entrepreneurs” at Robben Island—that is, organized actors “who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones” (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004, p. 657). We can identify the strategies the prisoners used to change the existing institutional arrangements they encountered.

Institutional work includes three broad categories: creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions. We focus on the prisoners’ efforts to disrupt the institutional norms of prison life. These were the primary objectives of the actors on Robben Island. Disruption, however, is the least well documented in the theory of institutional work. Indeed, relatively little is known about the concrete practices used by actors in relation to institutions and the discontinuous and nonlinear processes that take place in changing them (Lawrence et al., 2009). Previous work has shown how actors disrupt institutions by “disassociating the practice, rule, or technology from its moral foundation” or by “undermining core assumptions and beliefs” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, pp. 236, 237). Our historical case analysis reinforces those findings, as the prisoners worked to help their guards to overcome their allegiance to the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Prisons are institutions supported by regulative and normative mechanisms that include well-established laws, rules, and codes of conduct (Zimbardo, 2008). As

Lawrence, Winn, and Jennings (2001) have noted, the continuation of institutions cannot be taken for granted, for even the most highly institutionalized technologies, structures, practices, and rules require the active involvement of individuals and organizations to maintain them over time. Institutional work aimed at disrupting such institutions requires of actors not only a personal effort to move beyond taken-for-granted routines, but also an involvement in political or cultural action (Fligstein, 1997; Lawrence et al., 2009). We would argue that this is what transpired at Robben Island. The prisoners sought emancipation, that is, freedom from “repressive social and ideological conditions” (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, p. 432) in terms of the disruption component of institutional work.

### *Disrupting Institutions*

Institutional work aimed at disrupting institutions involves attacking or undermining the mechanisms that lead members to comply with institutions. Although relatively rare in the published empirical literature (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), such disruptions often bring about large-scale revolutionary change (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Based on all published accounts and supported by the prisoner quotes, we are suggesting this is what happened at Robben Island. We posit that the disruptions in that institution led eventually to the

overthrow of the apartheid regime—the ultimate objective of the prisoners.

In this context, two forms of institutional work identified by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) seem particularly relevant. The first way of disrupting institutions is what they call “disassociating moral foundations.” This involves separating existing rules and practices from their moral foundations. Evidence that this mechanism of disruption occurred at Robben Island is reflected in the observation of former prisoner Steve Tshwete that

some warders ... began listening when we said, “You are South African like I am and both of us have a responsibility to build a free and democratic society for all ... this is your home ... this is my home ... and I’m not inferior because I’m black, nor are you superior because you’re white.” It began to dawn on them that we might be saying something relevant. (Tshwete quoted in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 39)

The second mechanism relevant to disrupting institutions identified by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) is “undermining core assumptions and beliefs.” This involves removing the costs, the penalties, associated with abandoning taken-for-granted patterns of rules and practices. Examples of such costs would be the effort associated with innovation and the risk of differentiation. Evidence of this form of disruption can be found in the quote of former prisoner Patrick Lekota that

The warders were primed to see us as terrorists, Communists, and devils with horns. But these largely uneducated people, many of whom came from orphanages, eventually wanted to understand why we were there. It was tremendously refreshing and inspiring to see these ordinary people appreciating our cause. (quoted in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 45)

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) emphasize that actors who succeed in disrupting institutions work in highly original and potentially countercultural ways. They are immune or somehow less affected by the governance mechanisms of their institutional environment. They succeed primarily by redefining, reconfiguring, abstracting, and generally manipulating the social and symbolic boundaries that constitute institutions. To do the work of disrupting the institutional norms of the prison on Robben Island, the prisoners drew from and developed their positive psychological capital, or PsyCap, as the next section demonstrates. They used specific practices or coping strategies (setting goals, establishing a code of conduct, institutionalizing education for all, and maintaining a common identity and a united front) as forms of institutional work to operationalize and enhance PsyCap. The remainder of our analysis demonstrates how these micro-level psychological processes and operational strategies were at work on Robben Island.

## Psychological Capital Perspective

Besides the macro-level institutional-work explanation for the metamorphosis at Robben Island, our historical case analysis also supports a micro (at the individual and collective levels) psychological capital, or PsyCap, explanation. The comprehensive definition of PsyCap is as follows:

An individual’s positive psychological state of development characterized by: (1) having confidence (efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back, and even beyond (resilience) to attain success. (Luthans, Youssef, et al., 2007, p. 3)

The four facets of PsyCap (i.e., hope, efficacy, resiliency, and optimism) were identified by Luthans (2002; also see Luthans, Youssef, et al., 2007) on the basis of four criteria: Each is based on a theoretical and research foundation; there is construct-oriented evidence of validity for each one; each is open to development; and each demonstrates positive impacts on desirable outcomes. When combined, these four positive psychological resources have been shown conceptually (Luthans, Youssef, et al., 2007; Stajkovic, 2006) and empirically (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007) to constitute a higher order, core construct. The common feature among the four is “one’s positive appraisal of circumstances and probability for success based on motivated effort and perseverance” (Luthans, Avolio, et al., 2007, p. 550). Importantly, growing research evidence clearly shows that PsyCap is “state-like” (Luthans, Avolio, et al., 2007; S. J. Peterson, Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa, & Zheng, 2011), and thus capable of being developed (Luthans, Avey, Avolio, & Peterson, 2010; Luthans, Avey, & Patera, 2008), as opposed to being fixed and “trait-like.”

This developmental nature of PsyCap helps explain how the new prisoners seemed to become positive soon after being incarcerated. Over time, their PsyCap was sustained and grew, even during very tough times. After first discussing each of the four components of PsyCap, we turn to the roles that learning and education at Robben Island also played in the PsyCap-development process. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis found that PsyCap has a positive impact on desired attitudes, behaviors, and performance outcomes (Avey, Reichard, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2011).

To date, PsyCap has been depicted and researched at the individual level of analysis. However, recent research has demonstrated the positive impact of collective PsyCap (Walumbwa, Luthans, Avey, & Oke, 2011), and theoretical and empirical support has even been

shown for organizational-level psychological capital (McKenny, Short, & Payne, 2012). Although most of the analysis and discussion of PsyCap in this case analysis focus on the individual level, we also cite examples where the collective PsyCap of the prisoners came into play. Overall, we use the prisoners' descriptions of their *hope, efficacy, resiliency, and optimism*, or the "HERO" within them (as individuals and collectively) to provide evidence of the important role that the prisoners' apparent high level of PsyCap played in helping explain the metamorphosis at Robben Island.

### *Role of Hope*

According to positive psychologist Rick Snyder (1994), people who are hopeful believe they can set goals, figure out how to achieve them through appropriate pathways, and motivate themselves to accomplish them. They also proactively determine how to circumvent any obstacles they encounter to accomplish their goals. In his 1963-1964 trial on charges of sabotage, attorney Nelson Mandela represented himself. His closing statement reflects the hope component of psychological capital (Mandela, 1984):

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society, in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal that I hope to live for and achieve. But if need be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die. (p. 48)

The prisoners on Robben Island also knew that there was hope, in that they had the support of the international community. As the pressure increased on the apartheid government in the form of severe economic sanctions, the prisoners could experience increased, realistic hope. They knew that their suffering was not going to be in vain. The severe obstacles could be overcome, and their goal of freedom at the end of their torturous journey could be attained.

### *Role of Efficacy*

This powerful PsyCap component refers to an individual's conviction (or confidence) about his or her abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to execute a specific task in a given context successfully (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998a, 1998b). This construct is most closely associated with the widely recognized theory and research of Albert Bandura (1997). Efficacy greatly contributes to each of the other positive psychological resources in PsyCap. For example, the prisoners' efficacy certainly influenced the initiation of their resilient behavior in the wake of their abusive treatment, as well as their persistence at trying to disrupt the institution to make things better.

Bandura found that highly efficacious people enter situations they can master. Of course, such self-perceived efficacy does not guarantee success. However, if a person has appropriate skills and adequate incentives, efficacy expectations are a major determinant of people's choice of activities, how much effort they will expend, and how long they will sustain effort in dealing with demanding situations. This description of efficacy explains why the prisoners, with considerable practical and intellectual skills, together with lofty incentives to rid themselves and their country of the yoke of apartheid, chose to disrupt the institution and to persist with considerable effort under unimaginable conditions.

Besides success, Bandura (1997) has found two other relevant sources of efficacy: vicarious experiences through modeling the behavior of relevant others and social persuasion. He found that efficacy-building vicarious experiences occur when people see others similar to themselves succeed by sustained effort. Subsequently they come to believe that they, too, have the capacity to succeed. Social persuasion is not as powerful, but it can also boost people's belief in their efficacy when respected, competent others persuade them that they "have what it takes" to succeed on a particular task (Bandura, 1997). Here is where the leaders served as models and persuaders in building the prisoners' efficacy and also where they contributed to the collective PsyCap of the prisoners. In total, the prisoners' obviously high levels of efficacy were sourced and enhanced using all of these strategies (i.e., success, modeling, and social persuasion) by the prisoners' peers, by their leaders, and through themselves.

### *Role of Resiliency*

In the situation at Robben Island, the prisoners found themselves pushed almost beyond the boundaries of human endurance, yet they seemed to get through this horrible experience by being resilient. Consider this example related by a former prisoner who wishes to remain anonymous. He related that on one occasion, he was stripped naked and dropped into a pit where he was not able to move his arms or legs. The guards then fitted a metal band around his head through which an electrical current was activated by the flip of a switch. He remembers this experience as the most painful anyone could imagine. He felt at that moment death would have been a relief. And then, he said he realized that the guards, his torturers, could do nothing more to hurt him; he felt an inner positive strength knowing that no matter how much his body might hurt, his soul was invincible. In other words, despite facing severe adversity, the prisoners at Robben Island demonstrated remarkable resiliency in dealing with the abusive, top-down power situation they faced.

We suggest that this resiliency may be the most relevant psychological resource within the prisoners' PsyCap, and that is why we give it relatively the most



attention. Moreover, we believe this to be true not only at Robben Island but also, by extension, in the country of South Africa as a whole. Resilience is part of a view of life that emphasizes positive strength. Literally, it means “to bounce or jump back.” Resiliency is a complex system of interacting personality traits, state-like psychological resources, and action behaviors (Strümpfer & Kellerman, 2005). Factors such as the ability to evaluate difficult or demanding situations, coupled with the other hope, efficacy, and optimism components of psychological capital are critical for activating resilience.

Resiliency includes at least three kinds of adaptive responses (Strümpfer & Kellerman, 2005):

1. An ability to cope or function positively, despite inordinate demands.
2. Self-repair and recovery from periods when the individual was functioning poorly, or from episodes of illness, injury, or disaster.
3. Readiness to anticipate and deal with demands that may be inevitable, for example, those in the jobs of first responders, that is, soldiers, firefighters, police, and members of rescue services.

Resiliency contributes to one’s psychological strength and positivity in the following three ways. First, it provides general motivation for goal-directed action. Second, it incorporates energy, alertness, and concentration that provide the physical and mental resources to function well. Third, it generates enhanced feelings of efficacy and optimism that lead a person to expect successful performance (Strümpfer & Kellerman, 2005).

A separate outcome of resiliency, sometimes referred to as thriving, which consists of vitality and growth (e.g., see Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012), may appear when one looks back sometime later. After an experience of severe adversity, such as incarceration as a political prisoner at Robben Island, resilient people may not only return to a previous level of functioning but also can actually surpass that level to grow well beyond where they had been before the adversity. Individuals are transformed by the demands of their struggles – strengthened, hardened, toughened, or steeled by them – to rise far above the misery of their adversity.

Importantly, the resiliency exhibited by the Robben Island prisoners was not something that unusual or magical that they alone possessed. For example, positive psychologist Ann Masten (2001) has described the ordinariness of resiliency. Often people are not on a stage (or in a stadium) with an audience, there is no fanfare, nor are their pictures in the newspapers. Indeed, no one may even pay any attention to their resiliency. They are sometimes literally on their own, with little or no support, whether emotional, tangible, or of any other kind. Often, others around them are, more or less, in the same boat, and what they are doing does not strike anyone in this context as something unusual to be appreciated, ad-

mired, or needing help. There are usually few or no rewards, at least nothing immediate or even near – and no time or strength for dreaming about these. In a similar abusive, top-down power situation such as that found at Robben Island, commenting on survivors of Nazi concentration camps, Helmreich (1992) wrote,

The survivors were not supermen; they were ordinary individuals before the war, chosen by sheer accident of history to bear witness to one of its most awful periods ... It is not a story of remarkable people. It is a story of just how remarkable people can be. (p. 276)

This observation seems to apply to the Robben Island prisoners as well.

In spite of incredible hardship, brutality, and constant emotional agony, the political prisoners on Robben Island were remarkably resilient. They had a clear purpose or vision, which was to free South Africa from the apartheid regime and to build a democratic state in its place. Their struggle had meaningfulness (Antonovsky, 1987), which reflected a deeper understanding with feeling, as well challenges that were worthy of the investment in and leverage of their positive psychological capital.

### *Role of Optimism*

One way to understand optimism is to contrast it to pessimism. When bad things happen to people, pessimists tend to attribute the causes to internal (their own fault), stable (will last a long time), and global (will undermine everything they do) factors. Optimists, on the other hand, attribute the causes of failures to external (not their fault), unstable (temporary setback), and specific (problem only in this situation) factors (Seligman, 1998). Research has shown optimism to be linked significantly with desirable characteristics such as happiness, perseverance, achievement, and health (C. Peterson, 2000). Optimism also introduces an element of futurity, positive future expectations and outlook, into a situation. Here is an illustration that is analogous to the “glass-half-full” mantra of optimists: Former Robben Island prisoner Ahmed Kathrada often referred to a quotation in which two prisoners looked out of a prison cell. One saw stars and the other saw bars. He, like many of his fellow prisoners, saw stars (Kathrada, in Schadeberg, 1994).

### **Positive Practices/Coping Strategies Used by Prisoners**

The prisoners systematically used a number of positive practices or coping strategies to sustain and develop their PsyCap, to do their institutional work of disrupting the prison institution, and even to survive. These strategies included establishing goals, a code of conduct, and a system of education (teaching and learning).

### Use of Goals

The political prisoners had short-term and long-term goals. Their principal short-term goal was to survive—not only physically but also mentally, intellectually, and politically. To do that, the prisoners developed mechanisms not simply to tolerate but also to remove, to the extent that was possible, the abusive, top-down control of their lives, and to introduce their own self-government, on a community and organizational basis. They did this through educational, cultural, and sporting activities, as well as by instituting a strong code of conduct (Alexander, 1992).

Sports in particular played an important coping role for the prisoners. For example, even while in solitary confinement, the prisoners were able to compete in chess matches by fashioning a board and marked pieces (e.g., WP was a white pawn) from the cardboard boxes used to wash their clothes. They would call out their moves, and each player, in turn, would move the same piece on their own board. Mandela was said to be strategically a very slow player who would rattle the patience of his opponents. The prisoners were also able to convince the authorities to let them build a soccer (football) field. Using donated equipment, the various categories of prisoners played many spirited games, thereby building their individual and collective PsyCap. Through such sporting activities, the prisoners developed a shared set of customs and rules to govern life on the Island. Sports helped to preserve their physical and mental health, while building their individual and collective (team) PsyCap. Of course, the popular movie, *Invictus*, a few years ago showed how Mandela (played by Morgan Freeman) recognized the value of sports. He joined forces with the White captain of the rugby team (played by Matt Damon) to help unite post-apartheid South Africa.

The long-term goal of the prisoners was to be freed from prison and the apartheid social order so they could enjoy freedom and self-determination within, and as part of, the broader community of the nation as a whole (Buntman, 2003). In short, the prisoners drew from their positive PsyCap to establish short- and long-term goals with the result being a reversal of the existing abusive, top-down power relationships within the prison, and also in the broader South African society at large.

### Code of Conduct

Prisoner-established norms and rules guided their experience. Three important features of the prisoners' code of conduct called for them to maintain their commitment to a changed society, to ensure noncollaboration with the authorities, and, most importantly, to find and make positive interpretations (i.e., optimistic explanatory style) and future benefits from their imprisonment (Moseneke, in Buntman, 2003). The code also emphasized mutual support and the needs of the community

as a whole. This code transcended differences by ethnicity, language, and political beliefs. For example, prisoner Patrick Nkosi Molala emphasized a superordinate goal that inspired all political prisoners:

It is very, very crucial for people to understand that we may have existed on the Island as people belonging to different organizations, and we may have had our tiffs, our conflicts, our battles, but when it came to the authorities, when it came to the warders and all those things, we were completely supportive. And we would always act as one; we *have always* acted as one. (cited in Buntman, 2003, p. 238, italics in original)

In general, the code emphasized positively oriented self-discipline, mutual respect, conflict avoidance, and a strong rejection of physical violence as a means of conflict resolution. Thus, when Amos Masondo arrived on Robben Island, Prisoner Harry Gwala told him and other prisoners, "you don't allow the warder to impose discipline on you, but you impose discipline among yourselves as a group" (Masondo in Buntman, 2003, p. 237). A basic tenet of sustaining a positive mind-set is to follow rituals (specific behaviors at specific times, see Lyubomirsky, 2007), and Gwala had these in his daily prison routine: rising early to exercise, wash, and tidy his bedding.

At a more general level, control over one's individual and collective destiny served as a guide to the prisoners' daily behavior and as a source of self-efficacy and power in disrupting the institution. On this point, Mandela (1994) duly noted, "The inmates seemed to be running the prison, not the authorities" (p. 502). The prisoners' rituals and goals were powerful forces indeed, for they enabled the bottom-up influence and power at Robben Island and they served as an effective counterweight to the roles and rules imposed by the warders in an effort to maintain existing institutional norms.

Within the community of political prisoners, and their organizational subdivisions (e.g., the African National Congress [ANC], the Pan Africanist Congress, the Black Consciousness Movement), besides having rituals and goals, there were also formal rules prescribing certain behaviors (such as helping those in need). There also were unofficial moral requirements that people followed, such as participating in joint protest action, or not betraying a fellow prisoner to the authorities. As former prisoner Tokyo Sexwale noted,

We saw ourselves as revolutionaries, and we lived according to a strict code of conduct. Things like pinup pictures were not acceptable. We remembered important dates like the birth of the ANC, Africa Day, May Day. ... We would hold little rallies in the different sections and have discussions, poetry readings, and plays. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 35)

This is the essence of disruptive institutional work, for the prisoners sought to disassociate existing practices or rules from their moral foundations. Prisoners also provided mutual support, as illustrated in comments from former prisoners Kwedi Mkalipi and Jacob Zuma:

When I left the Island after 20 years, I felt guilty about leaving my friends behind. I had cultivated strong relationships, the type of bonds that meant that whenever somebody got hurt by the warders we'd rush over and comfort them. (Mkalipi, p. 49) [We were] as strong as a family unit. We were always very supportive of each other and would help anyone who was sick or had family problems. We were there to console and comfort those who had lost family members and those few prisoners who couldn't take prison life. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 57)

To enforce their power, prisoners imposed sanctions for nonconformers. Two of the most severe were expulsion from one's political organization and isolation or ostracism for a specific period of time. The isolation or ostracism would end, assuming "good behavior" was observed. As former prisoner Thami Mkhwanazi noted,

The prisoners' codes of conduct were unwritten, but they governed every aspect of prison life, from how prisoners related to each other to how we dealt with prison authorities. They were taught painstakingly to each new person, and a transgression would lead to disciplining by a special prisoners' panel in one's own camp. (cited in Buntman, 2003, p. 238)

The reversal of the power paradigm due to the political prisoners' positive code of conduct was further described by former prison official Mike Green:

I'd been working with criminal prisoners for a long time and it was a total change for me to work with political prisoners. With criminal prisoners you couldn't leave money around, but it was quite a different story with political prisoners, who would probably return it to you. You wouldn't have to do things like clean their cells, as they had their own roster for cleaning the various sections. They basically did things their way rather than having to be told. It was a pleasure to work in the leadership section because those prisoners were very disciplined, and when you requested that they go to the cells to be locked up you didn't have to request a second time. They'd move into the cells and close the doors for you; you just had to turn the key. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 61)

### *Role of Education*

By 1966, there were 1,000 political prisoners on Robben Island when the authorities granted them study privileges (Kramer, 2003). Indeed, another piece of the positive approach was that prisoners spent time and energy educating themselves and their guards to have an impact on daily life in the prison, and, ultimately, in the post-apartheid environment. Just as Viktor Frankl used his devastating experience as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps to develop his famous psychotherapy theories, the Robben Island prisoners turned their experience into an opportunity to learn. As Buntman (2003) noted,

Prisoners on Robben Island self-consciously developed and cultivated the belief that their prison was a "university," a training ground for young leaders, a lecture podium for the most senior leaders of the anti-apartheid struggle, a tolerant community in which pluralism respected all political movements, and a center of such profound and essential correctness that even warders and criminals could be converted to the "cause." (p. 268)

Prisoners with expertise were encouraged to teach "classes" irrespective of their ideology and affiliation. This led to the expression, "each one, teach one." For example, Walter Sisulu, one of the leaders of the ANC, taught political history at the lime quarry, while he and his fellow prisoners worked. Jacob Zuma, Stephen Dlamini, and Harry Gwala used lunchtimes to revise political lectures or discussions that they had had earlier, to analyze news items, and to discuss labor theory. Others taught math, history, or English. Former prisoner Steve Tshwete noted, "We also had a number of comedians and storytellers on the Island who sometimes entertained us while we were chopping stones" (Tshwete, in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 39). Perhaps author Patti Waldmeir (1997) captured the impact of the prisoners' educational efforts best when she wrote,

The government thought it could kill off dissent by exiling political opponents to Robben Island; instead, it merely succeeded in consolidating the opposition. But perhaps Pretoria gained, perversely, in the end, for generations of young hotheads got a sobering political education at what was known as "The University of Robben Island." Those who entered the prison hating whites— probably a majority—emerged hating the system which whites had built, but not the race itself. (pp. 15-16)

The system that Whites had built and maintained, as reflected in the prison at Robben Island, was the same one that the prisoners sought to disrupt by using the tactics of institutional work—disassociating existing practices or rules from their moral foundations, and

undermining core assumptions and beliefs. At another level, we have reflected throughout on the prisoners' intentional efforts (i.e., their PsyCap) to have a positive mind-set and to take positive things from their imprisonment. Taking advantage of opportunities to further their education, despite the fact that there were important constraints on such activities, is one of the most positive things prisoners could do for themselves during their imprisonment. When political prisoners began arriving on Robben Island in the early 1960s, the official South African Prisons Service policy encouraged such prisoner study. Higher education was facilitated by enrolling in the University of South Africa (UNISA), a well-known correspondence-based institution, or other schools, based on distance learning (Dingake, 1987). There were three major benefits associated with such scholastic study (Buntman, 2003). First, remembering that PsyCap is "state-like" and open to development, the educational component was important in maintaining and even increasing the prisoners' level of PsyCap (especially their efficacy). Former prisoner Moseneke supports this statement when he commented, "Many people have emerged to survive Robben Island largely because of their studying. It is the one single thing that really keeps you together" (Moseneke, in Buntman, 2003, p. 62).

Second, the prisoners' educational pursuits contributed to the prison community as a whole. Islanders sought to increase the educational levels of all the prisoners, and formal and informal education was conducted across organizational lines. Indeed, there was a concerted effort to ensure that no man who came to the Island illiterate left it unable to read and write. Finally, this commitment to education was seen as the basis of sound political action. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the possibility of a negotiated settlement began to emerge, Naledi Tsiki used his university training in political science, acquired at Robben Island, to explain different constitutional models of democracy to his fellow prisoners to prepare them for the changing political terrain they would be facing outside prison (Tsiki, in Buntman, 2003).

While educating themselves seemed to be driven by the prisoners' PsyCap, their fundamental beliefs about the potential of education also illustrated the prisoners' overall comprehension of larger issues and their purposefulness. At a broader level, prisoners saw others like themselves gradually improving their education through sustained effort. They saw their leaders teaching as well as learning, and they felt a deep sense of mutual support. These factors enhanced the prisoners' individual and collective sense of PsyCap efficacy, and boosted their confidence that they could survive and ultimately prevail in their struggle against apartheid.

Notice the PsyCap optimism reflected in the following quotation from former prisoner Tokyo Sexwale concerning the environment for learning and a new start:

I was sentenced to 18 long years on Robben Island. You must eventually like the place if you are to survive. I loved it because it was a place of fresh air, fresh ideas, fresh friendships, and teaching the enemy. ... We were all convicted, prisoner and jailer ... we were chained to one another. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 34)

Aubrey du Toit was the jailer in charge of all prisoners' studies and the local secretary for UNISA. When a prisoner arrived on Robben Island, du Toit interviewed him and presented different options for study. According to du Toit, "Mr. Nelson Mandela was very strict about people studying, not only prisoners, but also warders" (Schadeberg, 1994, p. 47). In fact, the prisoners tended to be very astute observers of their jailers. As was noted earlier by then prisoner Tshwete (in Schadeberg, 1994), they received attention from the warders by convincing them that although they were of a different color, they were all in this together to build a free and democratic society for all South Africans.

Clearly, the prisoners were trying to forge a positive vision that they, as well as the warders, could aspire to attain. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that everything the prisoners did, they did with their eyes on the ultimate goal: the overthrow of the apartheid regime. As Mandela (1994) noted,

Some of the warders began to engage us in conversation. I never initiated conversations with warders, but if they addressed a question to me, I tried to answer. It is easier to educate a man when he wants to learn. Usually these questions were expressed with a kind of exasperation: "All right Mandela, What is it you [i.e., the African National Congress] really want?" ... I would then calmly explain our policies to the warders. I wanted to demystify the ANC for them, to peel away their prejudices. (p. 443)

To reduce or eliminate prejudices, the prisoners had to deal with multiple cohorts of guards (warders) over time. Former prisoner Neville Alexander (1992) emphasized that they reversed the power and influence by becoming the teachers of the guards:

Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that eventually we became the teachers, literally, of some of these warders. The authorities quickly realized that this meant that they couldn't keep any set of warders for too long because the danger of fraternization was obviously very great. (p. 77)

Note how the prisoners used education as a tactic to undermine established beliefs of the warders. Again, this is an example of disruptive institutional work. The prisoners believed strongly that the more educated the

warders were, the more likely they were to be open-minded, less racist, and less violent, and often prisoners would help warders with their studies. Aubrey du Toit, the former jailer, credited Nelson Mandela for urging him to study academic Afrikaans; James April, an ANC prisoner, for painstakingly teaching him Shakespeare; and members of the Black Consciousness Movement for encouraging him to leave the prisons service to work for the Afrikaans-owned insurance company, Sanlam, which he eventually did. As du Toit himself noted,

I have to put more emphasis on the fact they [would] ... try to help you, especially with your studies and your self-esteem, and they're not helping you as a prison warder, they're helping you as a South African. And it doesn't matter if you're black or white, or whether you are a warder or a ... prisoner. (cited in Buntman, 2003, p. 262)

In other words, on Robben Island, education and knowledge not only contributed to the prisoners' PsyCap but they also were clearly seen as power, they undermined the existing institution, and they facilitated the metamorphosis.

### *Role of Equality and Leadership*

As we have seen, to resist the prison authorities effectively, and to remain positive, it was important that the prisoners maintained a common identity and a united front that crossed all lines. This was an important tactic. For example, during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, American POWs were imprisoned and socially isolated from one another. The POWs were stripped of their social identities by their captors, and they could not trust or bond with each other as they had in the World War II POW prison camps. At Robben Island, the prisoners did not allow this social isolation to happen. Although they belonged to many distinct political groups with different visions for an alternative to apartheid, they focused on maintaining a community identity, a collective PsyCap. An example was the camaraderie provided by the chess matches, even while in solitary confinement. This strategy required constant attention and reinforcement from leaders and peers. The negatively oriented alternative, splits and divergence among the prisoners, would permit the prison authorities to use isolation and other divide-and-conquer strategies. In fact, initially the authorities tried to do this, as former prisoner Johnson Mlambo described:

They tried to individualize us. And, of course, we had to battle hard to maintain this oneness.... The authorities wanted us to live as individuals, not as an organized group. (cited in Buntman, 2003, p. 88)

A key part of the strategy in maintaining a positive approach was to promote tolerance for all perspectives within and across organizations, and to respect the different opinions of others. Former prisoner Sonny Venkatrathnam emphasized this point:

Most of the people on the Island, and in the single cells at least, don't enter into ideological debates ... we accept one another's position on the basis that you are not going to change me, and I am not going to change you. But other issues we will debate, and if part of our logical standpoints don't convert we will argue and discuss, and we will not allow intolerance ... We could talk to anybody as equals.

That was the other great thing [on the Island]. Whether it was Nelson or any of the young chaps, there was no position [of inequality] in the single cells at least. Everybody was treated equally. Even in terms of work—you know we organized our own work schedule— if it's this group's turn to wash the toilets, [from] Nelson to the youngest guys will join in and help do it. The point is, there was always absolute equality in terms of where prison life was concerned. (cited in Buntman, 2003, pp. 90, 92)

The philosophy and behavior of the prisoner leadership was key to maintaining this equality and unity of purpose. Former prisoner Neville Alexander (1992) made this point emphatically:

I want to underline the role of people like Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu in particular [in teaching us how to deal with the authorities] ... While we were terribly impetuous and would have run ourselves suicidally against the prison walls ... [they] realized that if we adopted a particularly humane, dignified, friendly attitude (short, of course, in collaborating in our own indignity), that eventually we would break through. (pp. 77-78)

Breakthrough they did, as reflected in the words of former jailer Aubrey du Toit:

When I grew up I had no contact whatsoever with black people ... it was a shock to meet [them] and see that they were intelligent human beings. As an Afrikaner, I grew up believing that the ANC, PAC, Umkhonto we Sizwe ["Spear of the Nation"] meant the Communist enemy ... your hair stood on end when you heard the name Nelson Mandela. These are the people who were going to take over our country. The Afrikaner people were frightened of them ... [After I got to know them] it was a real

eye-opener for me to see that they also wanted the best for South Africa. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 47)

Mandela, in particular, had a very pragmatic understanding of resistance. He argued,

The best way to effect change on Robben Island was to attempt to influence officials privately rather than publicly. I was sometimes condemned for appearing to be too accommodating to prison officials, but I was willing to accept the criticism in exchange for the improvement [in prison conditions].

I always tried to be decent to the warders in my section; hostility was usually self-defeating. There was no point in having a permanent enemy among the warders. It was ANC policy to try to educate all people, even our enemies. We believed that all men, even prison-service warders, were capable of change, and we did our utmost to try to sway them. (Mandela, 1994, pp. 496-497)

Again, we suggest that Mandela's high level of PsyCap, coupled with his personal dignity and charisma, led him to his positive leadership approach toward treating even his enemies cordially and with respect. These characteristics were not lost on his enemies, as former jailer Aubrey du Toit noted:

Mr. Mandela was a prisoner but also a leader. Anybody could see that, even though he had no official status. The moment he walked into a room, his manner, his way of speaking, his dress, you knew he was a leader. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 47)

Despite his acknowledged status among the prisoners as well as among the warders and higher authorities on Robben Island, Mandela always practiced what he preached about equality among individuals. Former prisoner Eddie Daniels provided one example of this:

Nelson Mandela was a good friend to me on the Island. Once when I was ill and I was unable to get up to empty my chamber pot, Nelson Mandela came into my cell, asked me how I was, and said, "You just relax," and he took the chamber pot, emptied and cleaned it, and brought it back. This was a really magnanimous gesture. It's a moment I will never forget.

Nelson Mandela's influence on the Island was tremendous — This man was so humble and yet so dy-

namic. Walter Sisulu was just as big a giant. When I felt demoralized, I could hug them and their strength would flow into me. Many people came to Nelson and Walter from different political organizations to talk about their problems. Nelson and Walter showed us what it means to survive in the face of adversity, the meaning of true discipline. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 53)

Notice two key elements of the resiliency component of PsyCap in this quotation: the ability to cope or function positively, despite inordinate demands, and self-repair and recovery from periods when an individual was functioning poorly. This quotation also illustrates vicarious efficacy (Bandura, 1997), that is, modeling the behavior of others, and it shows the collective nature of PsyCap as well.

To Mandela's credit, however, throughout his imprisonment, neither the ANC nor the prisoner community as a whole depended solely on his leadership (Buntman, 2003). Another influential leader at Robben Island was Govan Mbeki (the deceased father of former South African president, Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded Mandela). He described how the prison leaders reached collective decisions:

Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Raymond Mhlaba, and myself were never allowed to be together in a group, but we overcame this by consulting two at a time, and ultimately we would arrive at a collective decision. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 30)

It might appear from these accounts that leaders came out of Robben Island because leaders went in, but this does not necessarily seem to be the case. Here is how Jacob Zuma, the 2012 president of South Africa and a prisoner from February 1964 to March 1979, described his own training as a leader:

If I take my own example, when I went to Robben Island I was an ordinary young cadre ... I hadn't been a commander before, I hadn't been anything. I began to work in the smallest unit of the ANC [on the Island] as a member of the group, and I was changed from one group to another. I then at one point became identified to collect news for the cell.... At one time I was appointed a group leader, which was different than me serving as a group member ... Once you are a cell leader you actually attend cell leadership meetings of all the groups. At another point ... I was the public relations person ... At times we'd be asked to prepare a lecture ... By the time I left Robben Island I was the chairman of the political committee that was responsible for disseminating political lectures throughout the prison. (cited in Buntman, 2003, pp. 147-148)

### *The Completed Metamorphosis: Examples of the Changed Behavior of Those in Control*

The more they got to know and interact with the prisoners, the more conflicted most of the warders seemed to become. This is again an example of institutional disruption in action, disassociating moral foundations, and undermining core assumptions and beliefs. Consider the experience of former warder Christo Brand, who came to Robben Island in 1978 as an unquestioningly pro-apartheid, 18-year-old White prison guard. In his own words,

When I came to the prison, Nelson Mandela ... was down-to-earth and courteous. He treated me with respect, and my respect for him grew. After a while, even though he was a prisoner, a friendship grew. It was a friendship behind bars.

Brand did favors for Mandela, such as smuggling him the bread and hair pomade that he liked, and bringing him messages. He even broke prison rules to allow Mandela to hold his infant grandson. "Mandela was worried that I would be caught and punished. He wrote to my wife, telling her that I must continue my studies. Even as a prisoner he was encouraging a warder to study." Those experiences with the dignified Mandela inspired him to change his views about the man, about racial oppression, and about his country (Meldrum, 2007).

Former prisoner Neville Alexander also described how the metamorphosis occurred:

The system was not only cruel to us but also to the warders. The innermost components of their own identity were challenged daily. They saw that we were scholars, disciplined and articulate, and these things obviously undermined the images they had in their heads about us. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 51)

Former prisoner Patrick Lekota made a similar observation, as we noted earlier:

The warders were primed to see us as terrorists, Communists, and devils with horns. But these largely uneducated people, many of whom came from orphanages, eventually wanted to understand why we were there. It was tremendously refreshing and inspiring to see these ordinary people appreciating our cause. This experience led to my belief that South Africa had a promising future. (cited in Schadeberg, 1994, p. 45)

This latter quote again provides support for the strong role that the prisoners' high level of PsyCap may have played in their struggle. However, a cautionary note is warranted at this point in the retrospec-

tive historical analysis. As Buntman (2003) has noted, the prisoners' experience should not be romanticized. The state's fear of "agitation," the persistent racism of apartheid, and the profoundly unequal power distribution in the prison obviously lessened the extent to which Robben Island was an environment conducive to challenging racist stereotypes and power relations, and to building an alternative order. Nonetheless, it seems remarkable in this retrospective analysis how much the PsyCap of the prisoners may have contributed to the positive dialogue, bargaining, and negotiation that actually led to the reversal of the abusive, top-down power paradigm at the prison.

Former prisoner Ahmed Kathrada provided a balanced and realistic assessment in a letter smuggled between December 11, 1970, and January 9, 1971—and therefore not intended for the eyes of prison censors:

Our (i.e., those in single cells) relationship with warders has been quite cordial and, with some, decidedly warm ... Ironically it is in jail that we have the closest fraternization between the opponents and supporters of apartheid; we have eaten of their food, and they ours; they have blown the same musical instruments that have been "soiled" by black lips; they have discussed most intimate matters and sought advice; a blind man listening in to a tête-à-tête will find it hard to believe it is between a prisoner and a warder ... But of course there are the [conservative and rigid followers of apartheid] and the rabid racialists as well. What a job we will have to rehabilitate them. (in Vassen, 1999, pp. 47-48)

On balance, therefore, as stereotypes were broken down over time, the behavior of at least some of the warders became more accommodating toward the prisoners, whereas for others, the relationship could never be anything but antagonistic. Changes in warder behavior toward the prisoners accompanied other improvements in conditions over time. Buntman (2003) summarized the overall improvement in conditions as follows:

From the early 1960s to the departure of the political prisoners in 1991, Robben Island arguably moved from being the worst to the "best" prison in South Africa, at least as far as black people were concerned. While the prison was never pleasant, by the 1980s it was no longer the "hell-hole" that Dlamini and others had described in the 1960s (p. 200). [It is also important to note that] the different dimensions of resistance—overcoming basic material deprivations and ending physical abuse, struggling for education and a sporting and cultural life, and organizing politically—all inter-relate and are not necessarily sequential. (pp. 59-60)

## Summary, Implications, and Conclusion

We began this article with the very relevant quote from Gandhi, namely, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” We proposed in this historical case analysis, using the accounts of the political prisoners of Robben Island, that there was considerable evidence that they disrupted the institution at the macro level, and at the micro level, that they demonstrated a high level of psychological capital. In other words, drawing from the perspectives of the theory of institutional work and psychological capital, the prisoners over time accomplished not only a metamorphosis at their institution, but they also implemented the changes they wanted to see in the world.

With the benefit of reflective analysis, we argue that the political prisoners, and especially their leaders, disrupted the institution and drew from and exhibited PsyCap. Those processes resulted in the dramatic metamorphosis from abuse and subjugation to learning and transformation at Robben Island. This disruptive, but positive, approach has many lessons for leadership. The Robben Island metamorphosis indicates, at least under oppressive conditions, that organizational participants become empowered when they have a common vision; when they feel that they are in control of their actions, and that they can self-govern; when they are responsible; believe that they can prevail (i.e., through hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism); can live in the organization under perspectives that they value; and can grow from the experience. These findings provide some initial qualitative evidence for recent calls for authentic leadership. Authentic, ethical, positive PsyCap leaders affect their followers’ positive PsyCap, desired attitudes, ethical behaviors (see Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), and positive leadership (Cameron, 2008; Youssef & Luthans, 2012).

Although considerable research has supported the positive impact that organizational participants’ and leaders’ psychological capital has on their attitudes, behaviors, and performance (e.g., the Avey et al., 2011, meta-analysis has 51 independent samples), it has not yet been tested in oppressive environments. This qualitative, historical case analysis provides at least beginning evidence that the PsyCap of participants may play a positive role in oppressive environments, and it reinforces research findings regarding the impact of PsyCap on positive organizational change (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008). The implication for leaders and prospective leaders is to nurture these positive resources in their followers, at least in harsh, oppressive situations. Again, by way of extending this historical case, we draw from Hamel (2000) who offers the following sage advice for organizational leaders in general:

It doesn’t matter whether you’re the big cheese or a cubicle rat. It doesn’t matter whether you fly in a

Gulfstream V or ride the crosstown bus. It doesn’t matter whether you command a legion of minions or only your Palm Pilot. All that matters is whether you care enough to start from where you are. (pp. 313-314)

Another lesson from the prisoners’ experience on Robben Island is the need for ethical, caring, self-aware organizational participants to ask probing questions. For example, do you care enough about your principles, your values, and your integrity that you are willing to challenge wrongdoing or wrong-headed policies? Do you care enough to resist the tug of powerful situations that challenge your fundamental beliefs? Do you care enough about finding meaning and significance in your work that you are willing to start a movement within your own team, organization, or community? If the answers to these questions are yes, then lead, seize the moral high ground, do your institutional work, and draw from and exhibit your positive psychological capital. The political prisoners from Robben Island have not only inspired us but also, we would argue, have shown us the way. We hope this article will contribute to their lasting legacy for future generations.

## Postscript

In his inaugural address, Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected president of South Africa, made the following statement (Mandela, 1994). As you read it, consider how Mr. Mandela tried to impart to his nation the concepts of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, and the institutional work that must be done to create “a society of which all humanity will be proud:”

Out of the experience of an extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long, must be born a society of which all humanity will be proud ... We have, at last, achieved our political emancipation. We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender, and other discrimination. Never, never, and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another ... The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement. (pp. 746-747)

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