Threats of force by prison officers in a male custodial institution. An ethnographic account

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This paper focuses on the practice of using the threat of force within a custodial setting. Prison ethnographers have rarely focused their observations on prison officers' threats of the use of force or on the actual use of force, partly due to the difficulty of access. The theoretical framework adopted here is mainly grounded on Collins' interactionist approach and, concurrently, Popitz's phenomenology of power. The ethnography was conducted observing the daily work of officers on duty as well as the interventions by emergency squads. In terms of structure, this paper introduces the issue of threatening the use of force, presents the research goals, and then unpacks the theoretical framework. The final section analyses the structure of a 'critical event', introducing the idea of 'status magnet/status shield' as a tool to integrate the interactionist focus; it then defines and describes prison officers' symbolic threats and credible threats of the use of force. Those are two relevant means of influence that officers would usually use in the case of a critical event. Threats of force would either result in a de-escalation of the situation or the actual use of force.[1]

1. Introduction

The threat of force by prison officers is a common practice within custodial organizations; it is embedded in the day-to-day relations between the keepers and the kept, where disputes and verbal assaults are not rare (Wästerfors, 2011), and where a variety of 'peacemaking' practices is used (Liebling et al., 2011). In Italy, the use of force is a *legitimate duty* of prison officers, regulated and prescribed by law. It is observable in many custodial institutions, such as prisons, forensic psychiatric hospitals (Miravalle 2015) and immigration detention centres (Campesi 2013; Bosworth 2014). The threat of force featured frequently in the custodial complex for adult males where the fieldwork for this article was carried out. There, prisoners were urged to follow formal and informal sets of rules under continual direct surveillance by prison officers; the use of force was always implicitly (Gariglio, 2017) in the picture.

There are at least three reasons to focus on *how* prison officers treat the use of force in practice during routine interactions with inmates (as well as with psychiatric patients and migrants) in custodial institutions. First, the threat to use force can traumatically affect psychological wellbeing and mental health of inmates. Also, in the case of physical interventions by officers, bodily integrity can also be at risk (the fact that prison population has a high rate of blood-transmissible diseases should not be overlooked). Second, the threat and the use of force in custodial institutions is very much a current issue in the Italian public media. Lastly, within the micro-sociology agenda, the study of the threat of force and of actual use of force reveals types of interaction that

Commentato [A1]: Guards scusa ma non mi piace

Commentato [A2]: Neologismo della Liebling senza spazio

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[1] The words 'prisoner' and 'kept' are used to refer to both defendants and sentenced inmates, and to psychiatric patients either subject to criminal proceedings or under sentence.

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resonate with the broader fields of prison ethnography and the sociology of violence (Collins, 2008).

However, to the best of my knowledge, the threat of the use of force has not yet been a major focus of inquiry in prison ethnography in Europe. The issue is particularly relevant in Italy, a country where access to the prison facilities for researchers is typically restricted if compared for example to the UK, France or the Netherlands (Ferreccio e Vianello, 2015), and where, consequently, the accountability of prison officers is limited. In Italy, researchers are usually only allowed to do interviews with selected individuals;[2] moreover, 'over half of the country's prison population finds itself […] confined to minimum living spaces and living under daily sedation' (Vianello, 2013: 31). There, 'very few [inmates] manage to gain access to "treatment"'.[3] One must remember, however, that prison officers, at least in relation to my experience, are also victims of their working environment; moreover, the job of the prison officer is also publicly stigmatized (Fassin, 2015). I observed officers working under conditions which can hardly be regarded as safe (e.g. the absence of personal and environmental alarms in the kitchen, where prison officers have no weapons and prisoners have knives, or the insufficient numbers of officers who regularly escort overly large numbers of so-called 'dangerous inmates'). In many conversations, officers have defined their own working condition as neither respecting their personal safety, nor their health and psychological wellbeing, despite all managerial efforts to improve and humanize prison conditions (Buffa, 2015).

The relevance of the officers' threats (and the duty of using force) is, however, not limited to the Italian penal system and can be extended, to a different degree, to other contexts, times and geographies. In the 1980s Marquart (1986, pp. 348–49) remarked that 'the threat of force by guards is always present'. About 30 years later, despite the decency agenda[4] as well as other reforms, the issue of prison violence remains a central concern. Even prison researchers, partly also for reasons of self-censorship, have not taken thoroughly into account this phenomenon (Drake, 2015). Certainly, critical criminologists such as Sim (2008), Scott (2008, 2015), Gonnella (2013) and Ruggero and Ryan (2013), have done important work to monitor and criticize the alleged wrongdoings, abuses and crimes committed by few officers. However, here I intend to focus on something different, which has hardly ever been studied as such. This paper strongly states that it is *also* urgent to focus ethnographically on officers' *duty* to use force, particularly on the practice of threatening the use of force that frequently precedes it. It is urgent not only because threatening and using force is part of the officers' normal routine and deserves attention as such, but also because officers do it regularly: it is part of the job they do 'on our behalf' and falls within the overall goal of 'peace-making'. Paraphrasing William

> **Commentato [A3]:** E' un omaggio a Sim lo lascerei

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2 In Italy, a professional group of almost 39,000 people, of whom about 3,500 are women, work as prison officers managing and controlling a population of 52,754 inmates of whom 2,210 are women .

3 In my fieldwork, prisoners and patients had a very efficient medical service available on the wing. The situation inside Italian prisons has improved significantly in terms of (average) overcrowding since 2013. At 30 September 2015, there were 52,264 prisoners, 17,251 of whom were foreign citizens. (https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_14_1.wp?facetNode_1=1_5_32&previsiousPage=mg_1_14&contentId=SST 1182705). However, in some institutions the overall Italian prison condition remains critical.

4 The Prison Reform Trust writes: 'the Prison Service's decency agenda requires that: no one is punished outside the rules; prisoners are protected from harm, including harm to them as a result of the prison experience; the regime provides them with enough variety and choice to make imprisonment bearable; they receive fair and consistent treatment by staff; and they are held in clean, properly equipped and properly maintained facilities' (http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/IEP%20Briefing%20Prison%20Reform%20Trust.pdf).

Terrill's writing on the coercive tactics of the police (2014), I would state that 'a portion (a good portion) of the *coercive tactics used by* [prison officers] *is wholly necessary and legal*' (2014: 6; emphasis added). At least, that was definitely my experience. Furthermore, the capability of using force lawfully is not only one of the prison officers' duties, but it is also the duty that contradistinguishes the job of the prison officer from the rest of the prison staff, such as social workers (Bennett et al., 2008). Introducing the study of the lawful use of force, rather than focusing only on unlawful uses, such as the alleged officers' wrongdoings and crimes, might help to better address the complexity of the work of prison officers as well as the practice they implement as a last resort, either lawfully or not.

This paper focuses specifically on *male*[5] prison officers threatening the use of force on male inmates performed by the emergency squad in an attempt to control and guarantee 'order and security'. These kind of emergency interventions were performed in very similar ways both in the forensic psychiatric hospital and in the prison.[6] Indeed, both institutions were hosted in identical, adjacent facilities within the same building. The ethnography was based in one closed-cell regime wing of the forensic psychiatric hospital where some 'very violent convicts' were locked up for a minimum of 20 hours a day. That wing was (and still is today, as of 26 May 2016) under prison officers' authority.[7] Officers are in charge of patrolling the wing to guarantee 'order and security' independently of other staff members that might also occasionally be present on the wing performing their duties. On the wing, 25 cells hosted a number of prisoners that varied from 31 to 44. An approximately equal number of inmates and psychiatric patients were hosted one next to the other in 25 cells in a row. Five-to-seven cells would host one prisoner, individuals that were too violent to be left unescorted with others in the same cell. All others cells would host two prisoners (but a few years ago, they would even host three prisoners in cells designed for one inmate only).

Disputes and fights within the cells and in the yards would occur frequently; yet, they would not necessarily lead to intervention by officers, much less to intervention by the emergency squad (officially called either *squadra emergenza* or *squadra disponibili*; inmates and patients would call it *la squadretta*). Officers on duty would often turn a blind eye, exercising their discretional authority (Liebling 2000). Low-ranking officers talking informally would frequently use the official penal categories into which prisoners are formally classified by law, either the Criminal Code or Prison Rules – for instance, 'Giorgio is a 222' (an offender not guilty by reason of insanity), or 'the newcomer will be a 4-bis' (an offender sentenced for organized crime and therefore excluded from parole). Asked about the meaning of such codes, officers would rarely be able to even explain them. In day-to-day informal interactions among low-ranking staff on the wing or in the canteen, however, officers would more frequently use words such as 'criminal' or 'crazy' to refer to prisoners. Although the use of such language was widely accepted, it remains problematic as it tends to generate perverse effects on the vulnerable persons in custody in terms of their wellbeing, self-esteem and the right to humane treatment.

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5 In Italy, prison officers working on a wing must be of the same sex as the prisoners; this ethnography was only conducted in a male wing, therefore all prison officers on duty were male.
6 In the forensic psychiatric hospital, however, prison officers would also use force, following a psychiatrist's request, to compel patients to accept a necessary medication.
7 Other parts of that institution were governed differently, mainly by medical staff.

This paper analyses threats that occur when the prison officers and inmates remain physically separated by either a cell door, or a gate, or any other barrier – i.e., when inmates are locked up in their cells, exercising in the yard, or locked up in a wing with a 'dynamic security' regime, in which prisoners can walk free in the corridor and prison officers stay off the wing. On the contrary, whenever an accident or 'critical event' (see section 4) would suddenly erupt without any physical barrier separating officers and inmates, the threatening phase would often be skipped and the use of force would abruptly enter the picture and create a new scenario (see Gariglio, 2015, 2017).

In the next sections, I first outline a few research questions and present the research process. I then illustrate the interactionist theoretical perspective and Popitz' phenomenological interpretation of threatening and being threatened. Finally, in the last two sections, I discuss the coming about of 'critical events' and the practice of threatening the use of force, either symbolically or practically.

2. Researching the threat of force inside a psychiatric forensic hospital

I have observed a custodial institution in the north of Italy that hosts 169 inmates and 185 prison officers, most of which are male (data unavailable).[8] A major forthcoming publication, entitled *'Doing' coercion in custodial settings* (Gariglio, 2017), will present this research in full. Provisionally, this paper focuses on describing how threats of force are performed by officers. In order to observe and analyse those practices ethnographically, different positions and approaches could have been adopted. My epistemology is grounded on critical realism, while my theoretical framework is a *bricolage* of interactionism and phenomenology. Many ethnographers, including myself, agree with Clifford when he challenges a positivist approach to ethnography. However, I follow Clifford not only in his claim that 'Ethnography is a hybrid textual activity: it traverses genres and disciplines' (1986: 26), but also, more importantly, when he states clearly that ethnography is *not* only, nor primarily, literature (1986; *contra*, Kaufman, 2015). This paper is the textual output of a lot of interactions, co-presence, observations, shared emotions, dialogues, banters, tears and so on, that have lasted for something less than two years. This research was a daunting experience for me, a feeling shared by a lot of prison research. Finishing it left me filled with disturbing memories, psychological distress, and the anxiety that I experienced in the institution. Nonetheless, I eventually left the place, whilst most officers and some prisoners continue to live there. Doing prison ethnography has also been a very rewarding experience, and on a few occasions was also unexpectedly hilarious (see Kraska, 1996). All in all, I am still regularly in contact with some of the prison officers via Whatsapp, Facebook, SMS and phone calls.

Initially, I started this research aiming to study the daily work and life of prison officers. Staying in the wing and eye-witnessing the events, I got to know that the threat of the use of force would constitute a long-lasting chain of interactions that occur routinely (Collins, 2004) regardless the presence of observers. This fact was completely unexpected to me, as was as my uncensored access to those practices (*contra* Ferreccio e Vianello, 2015). I considered it as a case of serendipity (Jacobsson et al., 2013). Field experience led me to progressively re-work my initial project. Eventually, doing

Commentato [A4]: 'Dynamic security' è un termine tecnico

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8 Data refer to 8 January 2016 (source: Ministero della Giustizia.
https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_data_view.wp?liveUid=2014DAPCARD&Nome=UFF56869)

fieldwork and re-reading my notes, the research ended up focusing on the issue of the duty officers have to resort to force. Of course, like any other custodial facility, the one in question constitutes by and of itself a constrained coercive environment (Jewkes and Johnston, 2013; Anastasia et al., 2011; Foucault, 1979) where 'implicit coercion' (Gariglio, 2017) would always be in the picture and imbue all interactions between the keepers and the kept. I did not aim to stand 'on the prison officers' side'.[9] Nonetheless, during my fieldwork, I built close relationships with a group of four officers.[10] Although most officers seemed either sympathetic or indifferent to me, at least one harboured a hostile attitudes, which he proved every now and then. I was not particularly interested in building a friendly relationship with prisoners, for I was aware that, by doing so, I would have easily compromised the trust prison officers had in me. However, at the end I built some kind of rapport with a few prisoners; some even asked to be formally interviewed, and I was pleased to do so.

Most of the time, only one officer worked on the wing. For some hours each day, excluding weekends and holidays, however, another officer would be intermittently on the wing to escort prisoners to medical visits and to ensure security for non-custodial staff working in the infirmary. Officers usually treated me fairly, granting me respect and some trust. I experienced unlimited access to the spaces of the institution: on no occasion (at any time, day or night) was I refused access. I worked for no less than 1,400 hours, covering all the shifts, usually for at least 12 hours a day. About 90 percent of the time was spent in only one wing, about 5 percent in the yards, and the rest just hanging around. From the outset, and during the entire ethnography, I worked without a badge, holding a small paper notebook and pen visibly in my hands to identify my researcher status. I saw hundreds of interactions in which either prisoners challenged officers (and, on a few occasions, me), or officers threatened or used force against prisoners. I also saw prisoners assaulting officers in front of me, literally walking over my feet and pushing me to the floor. I frequently heard prisoners screaming, yelling, and insulting each other or officers; and I saw episodes of sexism, machismo, racism and Islamophobia on both sides of the barred door. To be honest, however, I am not sure whether those kinds of episodes are more likely to occur within the walls rather than beyond them. I saw people cutting their belly with a razor blade and, afterwards, the doctor and nurse healing them. I saw people doing hunger strikes, or fighting. I saw people violently resisting the allocation of a prisoner to their cell. In other words, I saw 'nothing special', just 'normal prison life' as a few officers had described it to me.

I now turn to the description of my theoretical *bricolage*.

3. Forward panic and credible threats: unpacking the threats of the use of force

In this paper, I examine officers' threats of force as a particular type of *violence*, without implying any normative or moralistic interpretation of violence. Of course, by focusing on officers' lawful use of force, I do not intend to deny other relevant issues such as alleged wrongdoing or abuse by officers, but simply to focus on their lawful duty.

9 At least two articles in prison sociology have directly focused on the issue raised by Becker in 'what side are we on?' (Liebling, 2001, 2000; Sim, 2003).
10 The population of prison officers in the detention wing usually included more than two dozen officers. Most of them were at least 40 years old; a few were in their twenties. Almost the entire officer population under study was from the South of Italy or from Sardinia.

Following a symbolic-interactionist sensibility, each interaction is analysed in the light of the previous chains of interactions in which those particular actors were involved. Thus, as said, the main theoretical framework is based on an application of Collins' 'radical micro-sociology' (2004, 2008) and Popitz's (1990) *Phenomenology of Power*. In particular, Collins develops Goffman's concepts of interaction ritual and audience of the interaction, addressing the issue of emotion more directly. Dealing with *violence*, Collins (2008) further developed his theory of *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), introducing crucial concepts such as forward panics, weak victims, supportive audiences and rapid shifts in emotional balances, all of which were useful devices during my ethnographic observation. Adopting Collins' micro-sociology of violence, violent interactions and threats of force in prison[11] can be read as performances developing in an 'interaction ritual chain' in which each actor displays and defends his or her positive face. Officers try to influence both fellow officers and inmates regarding how they ought to be seen and treated. Concurrently, they construct and display to different types of audiences both their own dominant position in the interaction and their antagonist's subordination.

Challenges, provocations and insults, as well as claims and counterclaims between the parties, increase, in Collins' theory, the tension between one another. For Collins (2008, p. 20), 'violent interactions are difficult because they go against the grain of normal interaction rituals'. A 'confrontational tension' arises, defined as:

[t]he tendency to become entrained in each other's rhythms and emotions means that when the interaction is at cross purposes – an antagonistic interaction – people experience a pervasive feeling of tension … At higher level of intensity [confrontational tension] shades over into fear. For this reason, violence is difficult to carry out, not easy, (Collins, 2008, p. 20).

Violence comes up against a barrier of confrontational tension and fear. For violence to happen there must be situational conditions which allow at least one side to circumvent the barrier (Collins, 2012, p. 135).

In my observation, tension was clearly evident most of the time: fear often emerged in ethnographic interviews conducted with prison officers during fieldwork. Officers were more likely to disclose fearful emotions in one-to-one conversations or in backstage areas than in front of prisoners. Many prisoners often displayed fear, more or less openly, during confrontations. In other words, both tension and fear are common ingredients of the prison interactions I observed. In front of the squad, some prisoners would even show trembling and sweating bodies, a red face, very nervous movements, and so on. Officers would instead mostly display a militaristic 'cold' or 'poker face'.

Although I tend to be sceptical about general arguments, I must admit that Collins' theory often fits quite well with my observations inside. Both his analytical toolbox and his emphasis on the interaction and on the sequence of actions were very useful. I usually saw officers using the capacity 'to circumvent confrontational tension/fear' on a daily basis to perform their job 'as usual' without displaying any difficulty while threatening the use of force or actually becoming violent towards prisoners. Few officers working in the emergency squad would be unable to do so; a small number would just be a 'supportive audience', supporting the intervention just by being there; others might try to simply be 'bystanders', not engaging in the squad (in Goffman's words, they would do 'footing'). Bystanders may pretend to put some distance

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11 Collins deals with actual bodily violence rather than threats or so-called symbolic violence.

between themselves and their fellow officers by stepping a few steps away, or by contesting it by proxemics or verbal comments.

I had to learn how 'to circumvent confrontational tension/fear' myself, and to perform and display it competently in order to save my face and build my reputation among officers, thereby being granted access to the squad interventions. Being tough is a clear shared code of masculinity appreciated by many prison officers. My (masculine) performance (see also Sim, 1994) during the first squad's intervention that I witnessed, in which I tried to show my toughness despite my fears and emotions, clearly worked as an icebreaker and helped me gain acceptance by officers. In doing so, I did not want to cheat them, I simply tried to maintain an adequate face.

My interpretation of Collins' theory of violence is not limited to the ritual situations, but it also takes into account, in a much larger way than Collins, the ways in which particular vectors of inequality, and even personal idiosyncrasies and officers' sensibilities (and the lack thereof), influence the course of the interactions. Extending Hochschild's concept of 'status shield' (1983), I introduce the binary '*status magnet vs status shield*', underlining the influence of inmates' status on the officers' discretionary performance, not only shielding prisoners from a particular treatment, but also calling for it.

In the *Phenomenology of power* (1990), Popitz directly engages with 'threatening and being threatened' (pp. 65–84). He shows the intersubjective and interactive relationship implied in each 'threatening structure' (p. 66) from a phenomenological point of view. The shifting and on-going power dynamic in interaction depends on how the actors involved participate. Popitz argues that not only the victim who is threatened depends on his perpetrator's acts or threats, but also the perpetrator depends on – and becomes constrained by – the subsequent decisions and actions of his or her victim (p. 68). In other words, officers threatening inmates should not do it without taking into account the possible reaction of those who are being threatened. Prisoners are not passive recipients of the officers' threats; they are also actors involved in the situation; agency is on both sides, even in such a structured situation in which the power balance is particularly uneven.

4. The construction of a critical event

Critical events are particular episodes involving one or more prisoners whose particular conduct, behaviour or interaction pattern have been formally labelled, or informally treated, as critical events in practice by officers dealing with them. Critical events can be formally constructed by the book and consequently be written on the appropriate critical event register. However, they can also be constructed informally. In my interpretation, a critical event occurs each time the wing officer is not able to deal with the situation on the wing by himself and consequently asks for the informal intervention of the security manager.

Each prison officer on duty on the wing is continuously potentially involved in violent situations and can respond to them by either turning a blind eye or adopting various 'means of influence' (Kauffman, 1988) such as negotiation, persuasion, inducement, rewards – or, rarely, manipulation. In the flow of violent interactions, only a

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few of these episodes would be constructed as 'critical events', and treated accordingly. The construction of a critical event is a far-from-neutral process and implies a set of personal values, norms and routines imbued in particular prison officers' cultures. The likelihood that any particular occurrence is transformed into a critical event relates *not* only to its damaging effect or intrinsic violence; rather, it is also linked to other factors such as the prisoner's status and reputation, the previous chain of interactions in which a particular prisoner and a particular officer have been involved, personal idiosyncrasies and so on. Any violent behaviour, annoying attitude, bullying or even minor sign of protest is therefore more or less likely to be constructed as a critical event.

Prisoners with particularly low status in prison officers' eyes were often treated differently from those at the top of the status hierarchy;[12] interactions were more or less likely to be labelled as critical events depending on the particular status of the subjects involved and their position.[13] Although untangling the diverse dimensions impacting on discretion is out of scope here, discretion clearly emerged throughout the observation as a structural dimension of the situation (see also Liebling, 2000). Of course, workers' performances are imbued in discretion within any street-level occupations (Lipsky, 1980). However, in a custodial institution, discretion is particularly problematic since it may reinforce and normalize racism, homophobia and trauma.

Two extreme examples of the impact of *status magnet vs. status shield* may suffice to show at least the breadth of officers' discretion in constructing and managing a critical event. On one extreme, persons with very low status, such as 'gypsies' [*sic*.], were less likely to be taken seriously; travellers'communities were more likely to be considered to be 'the cause' of a critical event (although that particular occurrence was constructed as a critical event partly because their requests were less likely to be seriously dealt with). Travellers'communities and other marginalized groups such as the homeless or foreign nationals were therefore more likely to be threatened by officers also as a result of less difficult situations after previous negotiation had not produced the intended goal.

Some inmates really look for trouble here... They insist, they call and call again… they continuously call me or my colleague for no reason... they never have enough. They do not know what the verb 'to wait' means. Do they think they are in a hotel or what? Some start banging the toilet doors; others threaten us continuously. We do not even hear them anymore. Do they want a lesson? They seem to be looking for it intensively now. No problem, we are ready to please them whenever they wish (field note: summary of an officer's comment during an ethnographic interview on the wing).

At the other extreme, inmates related to organized crime enjoyed much more respect and officers treated them accordingly (Varese, 2010). The relationships between officers and 'mafia bosses' were characterized by a presentation of the Self in which, on both sides, *facework* was used displayed the maintenance of civility, deference, formal respect and interactive accommodation (Goffman, 1958). As one officer put it,

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12 Ethnographic research shows that police rarely treat all persons on the street in the same way, regardless of their ethnic background.
13 There is a large and growing literature adopting an intersectionist approach in prison ethnography. It would be possible to focus on to how gender/race/class work in the threat of using force (Ricciardelli et al., 2015), and I am planning to do it elsewhere. Here, I focus on two extreme cases to convey the essence of the issue.

[Mafia] bosses are gentlemen; they respect me as a worker and never disturb me without a good reason [like other prisoners often do]. Therefore I respect them and treat them accordingly. Usually, I try to respond each and every time they call me. They always say 'please and 'thank you' (field note: verbatim).

Consequently, officers never used the *credible* threat of the use of force with a 'boss' in front of me. Some officers justified it by saying that *'I boss sanno farsi la galera'* (a boss knows how to behave properly when 'doing time'). However, there might be other factors in the picture. Indeed, prison officers might fear bosses' retaliation and their capacity – even when incarcerated – to exert violence against them or their family outside.

5. Threatening the use of force

Following Popitz (1990), performing a threat is not an easy task. Threatening the use of force is costly for officers and strongly influences the credibility and reputation of both parties involved in the interaction. After performing a threat, officers are in fact dependent on the prisoner's next move. Officers who do not respond consistently to prisoner's reactions in these chains of interactions can lose their face, not only in front of the prisoner, but also in front of their fellow officers and other staff members. Possibly, this might be one of the reasons why officers often turn a blind eye in an attempt to avoid challenging and unpredictable situations in which they should be ready for bodily intervention at the risk of losing their credibility.

The threatening frame (Goffman, 1974) would usually be 'bracketed' into two different configurations. The first threat configuration, which I call the *symbolic threat* – a kind of reinforced 'authority maintenance ritual' (Alpert and Dunham, 2004, p. 172) – is performed by the simple arrival of the prison officers' emergency squad on the wing. The second threat configuration is what I call the *credible threat*. Usually, the credible threat follows the symbolic threat if, and only if, the latter fails to de-escalate the critical event.

Commentato [A5]: Preferirei così.

5.1. The symbolic threat of the use of force: the emergency squad's arrival on the wing

A *symbolic threat of force* is here defined as a display of authority and force by which a group of officers, called the 'emergency squad', intervenes in a critical situation to take control of it. The emergency squad's arrival on the wing starts the symbolic threat as an 'interaction ritual' (Goffman, 1967, 1961; Collins, 2004). The emergency squad can be composed of a number of officers ranging between three and nine, and can be either organized formally, looking like a proper military team, or in a looser fashion. The emergency squad can move towards the emergency location more or less quickly, displaying a more or less threatening attitude towards the prisoners. Any critical event is more or less likely to escalate depending on the particular place where it occurs, the reputation and attitude of both the prison officers and the inmates involved, as well as the presence or the absence of other observers on the scene (including a social researcher). Three triggering situations of critical events can be listed: (i) an explicit verbal, face-to-face command of the superordinate responsible for security; (ii) in response to a sudden loud security alarm signalling an emergency on one particular wing; or (iii) as reinforcement of an officer's self-defence after an alleged assault upon an officer

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(independently of the source of the information and the availability of a formal command to intervene).[14]

The physical entrance of the 'emergency squad' into the wing visibly introduces the issue of force for all the prisoners observing or hearing what is occurring. As a researcher and external observer, my first symbolic-threat scene was a very challenging and daunting experience, making me feel inadequate and unsure whether to stay or leave. A mix of contrasting emotions flooded me, including concern for people's safety, pity for inmates, but also sympathy for the officers. In any 'normal' day-to-day life on the wing, prisoners mainly deal with one officer at a time. By contrast, the arrival of the emergency squad's members is a visible and audible bodily presence that transforms the wing's atmosphere. The squad is now ready to perform its symbolic display of power in front of the prisoners involved in the intervention, moving towards the particular cell (or other closed location) where a particular prisoner (or a group of prisoners) has caused a critical event. This symbolic intervention can last up to a maximum of 30 or 40 minutes, during which time the squad tries to calm down the agitated prisoners to achieve compliance (Kauffman, 1988).[15] Normally, the symbolic threat would not occur abruptly; instead, it is the outcome of the failure of at least two chains of interactions. First, a series of failed negotiations have occurred at the wing level, directly involving both the particular prisoners and the wing officer. That phase could last for hours or even days, during which the prisoner can 'give trouble' but not serious enough to be framed as a 'critical event'. Second, a subsequent negotiation begins with the wing manager, asking for help. Usually, at this point, a superordinate officer is sent on the wing by the security manager, with the goal of negotiating a peaceful solution to the problem (yet, the attitudes of the senior officers who frame this intervention vary significantly and impinge on the negotiation itself).

The squad's arrival on the wing changes the atmosphere, with the wing often becoming quieter, yet occasionally noisier. Usually, the squad enters the wing ritualistically and approaches prisoners paternalistically. Even when the tone of voice is low, the military hierarchy characterizing the chain of command is displayed by both the configuration of the squad and the proxemics of its members. Often, a commander officer heads the squad; in his absence, other senior officer in charge act as substitutes. The position of each officer within the squad's configuration mirror their grade and seniority, as well as their willingness to be part of the action. At this stage, no real physical confrontation or assault happens, because the officers are on one side of the gate, and the prisoner(s) on the other.

Under such circumstances, all other activities previously going on in the place are immediately suspended. Some basic tools of negotiation, such as a chat, a cigarette, or exceptionally a plastic cup of coffee, are employed by the head of the squad in an effort to avoid a confrontation and open a dialogue, thereby resolving the dispute without resorting to physical intervention. Sometimes, different solutions would be extensively discussed between the head of the squad and the prisoners. Seldom does the situation

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14 The emergency squad also provides support to the psychiatric and medical staff by threatening prisoners in an effort to help a psychiatrist or a doctor to perform his or her own medical duties with a recalcitrant prisoner who is under compulsory medical treatment and would not comply with it by any other means (see Sim, 1990). This issue will be addressed elsewhere (Gariglio, 2017).

15 The emergency squad is constructed in practice when it has to intervene. Only a couple of officers are usually formally on duty as an emergency squad. Others would leave their main duty in the case of an emergency.

immediately turn into a conflictive one. Usually, it slowly de-escalates and turns into, in the officers' words, 'just another boring *deja vu*'. Nevertheless, occasionally the situation does not improve, or not quickly enough, and a shift to the next threat configuration occurs.

Occasionally, the squad's arrival is followed by a sharp increase of protest on the prisoners' side. Some prisoners are disturbed in one way or another by the arrival of the emergency squad and start to shout and yell all kinds of insults towards either the guards or the prisoner that had caused the event. Some prisoners feel humiliated, others provoked; some feel powerless, other desperate or annihilated by the number of officers; some simply 'hate any guy in a blue uniform'. It should be clear, though, that the majority of the daily dozens of critical events either end positively – without further need for any explicit symbolic threat by the emergency squad – or are left 'unnoticed' by the officers, who turn a blind eye. This might support Crewe's (2011) interpretation of the relevance of soft power, even in such a critical custodial setting.

To summarize, after a critical event is defined as such, the emergency squad arrives quickly on the wing, with the bodily and noisy act of entering the wing 'bracketing' the start of what I call a *symbolic* threat. Its arrival marks a turning point and strongly affects the atmosphere of the place. Often, the simple arrival of the squad in the wing is sufficient to end the issue, and the squad eventually leaves the wing. The process of de-escalation is then attended by just the wing officer, with or without the security manager. However, the squad's arrival on the wing is not always enough to end the issue, in which case a negotiation with the prisoner is engaged, trying to convince him to stop behaving 'stupidly'.

5.2. The credible threat of the use of force

Even in a violent place such as a custodial or psychiatric wing, officers use their force rarely. My ethnography thus partly confirms Collins' thesis. Prison officers are less likely to use bodily force than to just threaten it symbolically or credibly. I observed a small number of officers' bodily interventions, but I observed a far greater number of threats. This might be interpreted as an effect of my own presence in the field, but Popitz's (1990) theory might also provide a valid alternative explanation. Threats are costly for anybody making them, let alone using force with subjects who are likely to have transmissible diseases (at least that was the case with the particular subjects in custody where I did my ethnography).

Shifting from a 'symbolic threat' to a 'credible threat' is therefore a major move. Symbolic threats are the result of the squad's bodily performance, through which an unusually large number of officers enters the wing in a platoon, as explained above. In comparison, the credible threat of the use of force is the result of a performance that officers give in front of the inmates. The credible threat is, in Popitz's terms, a promise that constrains officers and prisoners. If the credible threat of the use of force does not produce the intended results, then force might be used as a consequence. Certainly, some officers are particularly prone to use force and do not approve of negotiations (Collins, 2008); usually however this was not the case in my field. The discovery of a set of scripts used by officers to transform their symbolic threats into a credible one was crucial. Two scripts appeared particularly relevant. In the first script, one or more officers of the

emergency squad extract and slowly *wear gloves* standing in front of the prisoners; in the second, officers start to *move fingers* either behind their back or visibly. On some occasions, a combination of these two scripts was observed. By adopting one of these two scripts, prison officers 'signal' (Gambetta, 2009) to one another and to prisoners that the situation is approaching a violent turning point: the use of bodily force and the entrance into 'the tunnel of violence' (Collins 2012). When the performance of one of the two scripts begins, a clear emotional dimension and tension becomes palpable. An officer might propose to his colleagues – without necessarily saying anything verbally – to follow him and move up to the next level of the intervention, thereby 'finally stopping bullshitting' (field note). As another officer told me just before the intervention:

Now let's stop it! Who do you think we are? Social workers, or what? Should I waste my time arguing endlessly with him? Do you think I am crazy? Should I become crazy too? It's simply too much... you can see it by yourself, don't you? (field note: verbatim)

Officers in the squad do not always agree with the definition of the situation, nor do they agree regarding the most appropriate next move. Therefore, some might prefer to change their 'footing' (Goffman, 1981) to become either the members of a supportive audience (Collins, 2008) or simply a bystander keeping some distance from the situation. By avoiding direct involvement in action, they would publicly display (either to me or to others on the wing) their position towards the particular action being taken and, to some extent, towards the group's values and norms. Eventually, in most instances, 'tactics of talk' (Liebling and Tait, 2006) can achieve the intended result, and the situation de-escalates. While negotiations are considered the best option by most officers, a few officers told me in interviews that in the past it was more common to consider negotiation negatively, preferring physical confrontation.

The outcome of any specific credible threat was unpredictable. Any particular situation could produce different outcomes, also depending on what I have called *status magnet vs status shield*. Human beings in flesh and blood, with their own emotions, cultures, and idiosyncrasies confront to come up with a solution, or proceed to a physical confrontation. Depending on the particular situation and the particular actors involved, more or less favourable conditions may turn the situation in one direction or another. In other words, simply by enacting the scripts or not – e.g., wearing or not the gloves, moving or not the hands– officers bodily coordinate and align themselves to their next move, signalling their intention to prisoners, who are urged to take the next move quickly. Eventually, the prison officers who are ready for action follow the head of the squad, while few others might step aside. According the prisoner's move, the decision is taken to either continue the credible threat or jump quickly to the bodily use of force, opening the barred door and starting to fight 'with no pity', as one officer told me in an interview (Gariglio, 2015).

These scripts were invisible to me for months; yet, they were clearly understood by all prisoners, who normally changed their behaviour accordingly in response to the officers' signals. Prisoners must quickly decide to either calm down or accepting to fight the officers. The situation evolves quickly with very high tension (Collins, 2008), especially if the prisoner shows no willingness to negotiate. Officers might then feel obliged to behave accordingly, so as not to lose their reputation. As real action approaches, even those officers who tried to resist the intervention must join the others –

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it's their duty, after all. The escalation might also be provoked by the growing tension and excitement either among prisoners or/and officers. At that stage indeed any act could easily produce unintended consequences on both sides of the barred door, particularly with certain prisoners and/or officers who are more likely than others to interpret the acts in the other camp as provocations.

On some occasions, the use of force might precipitate because some prisoners interpreted the officers' wearing the gloves as an act of hostility. Following such perceived provocation, a prisoner might start to insult, threaten, and display the intention to punch officers through the gate. On another occasion, as one officer said to me during an intervention, 'patience is exhausted'. When the barred door gets opened, the violent fight erupts. It ends with a prisoner being restrained. Sometimes a prisoner and/or an officer also needs medical treatment. More frequently, however, de-escalation occurs, without need for bodily use of force.

A few concluding remarks

This paper aimed to unpack some aspects of what emerged in one particular wing of a custodial institution by 'doing' ethnography (Gobo, 2008). This has been achieved mainly by adopting a *bricolage* of micro-sociological theory and phenomenology, which resonate very well with one another, showing how and to what extent constructing a 'critical event', and exerting a threatening either symbolically or credibly are performed in practice in that particular field. Moreover, this paper is intended to encourage others to study these issues in other contexts and geographies. Studying the most critical and challenging *duty* of prison officers, the lawful use of force, might give scholars a better grasp of the actual situations in which, more or less frequently, wrongdoings and crimes against prisoners (and vice versa) occur. It might also better informing policy-makers and prison managers on the nature of such events. Yet, it is worth recalling how time-consuming and emotionally challenging it can be. For me in particular, working in such claustrophobic setting was draining.

Staying mainly in one particular wing proved to be a good way to address this issue empirically (*contra* Crewe, 2009), gaining access to violent interactions as well as building enough trust to discuss those interactions with the actors. This paper and my forthcoming book (Gariglio, 2017) intend to propose some exploratory results, suggesting new paths for the empirical and theoretical inquiry on threats and violence, both in prison and beyond. In conclusion, despite the efforts by officers and inmates to relate to each other in the wing, it is unfortunate to observe how the officers and the emergency squad lack adequate training on how to work with both difficult violent prisoners and mentally unstable prisoners. A major policy recommendation stemming form my research thus concerns the necessity for more training of officers, in particular more specific training in de-escalation techniques. Although the officers used negotiation frequently, their knowledge about how to deal with inmates was de facto only based on learning by doing.

Commentato [A6]: Ho solo invertito i termini

Commentato [A7]: Lo lascerei

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