Social Dynamics in North Korean Prisons:
Resistance and Inverse Empowerment Theory

by Jee Jee Hyun Kim

B.A. in Sociology, May 2007, George Washington University

A thesis submitted to

The Faculty of
The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
of The George Washington University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

May 20, 2012

Thesis directed by
Fran Buntman
Assistant Professor of Sociology

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to North Korean refugees, whose courage endures.

Acknowledgements

I thank my mother and father, Pascale Monique Kim and Young Il Kim for their lifelong love, devotion, and support in providing me the opportunity to pursue a university education. I appreciate my brother Hyo Won Kim, who encourages me, and my partner Topher Bryson, who inspires me.

Without Dr. Ivy Ken this thesis could not have been written; without Dr. Fran Buntman it would not be read. I am grateful for their generous guidance, patience, and skill.

I also wish to acknowledge those whose instruction improved this work:

Dr. Dameon Alexander, for his leadership and example,

Dr. Andrea Bertone, for her benevolence and hospitality,

Dr. Daina Eglitis, for her motivation and kindness,

Dr. Hiromi Ishizawa, for her amiability and commitment,

Drs. Jae Jung Suh and Kathryn Weathersby, for their cultivation and illumination,

Dr. Michelle Kelso, for her enthusiasm and flexibility,

Drs. Pat Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley, for their spark and wisdom and

Dr. Ronald Weitzer ,for his expertise and counsel.

Abstract of Thesis

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How do prisoners and guards in the North Korean gulag respond to the dynamics of prison conditions? Exploring these phenomena advances sociological understanding of oppression and domination, and responses to them. This research builds a theoretical framework grounded in testimonies from 44 former prisoners and guards. I develop explanations for expressions of resistance, and apparent inaction as action. Some prisoner and guard behaviors reflect redefined normalities in the harsh prison camp setting: oppressive conditions impress upon them that they have few, if any options. I offer inverse empowerment theory to explain how people in North Korean prisons may reduce their power despite their efforts to empower themselves.

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Chapter 1: Introducing North Korea and its Prison Camps

> That man betray you because he is watched always. No choice! (Treston 2004:164-165)
>
> the earth and the sky was all a mix and swirling about me and my tears ran down…my heart…was being torn to bits and pieces by the cruel life we were living. Maybe this can only be understood by people who have had this kind of…painful experience, given no choice…in a place where they could not be sure of life or death. (Mi Yeong Jeon 2002a)

North Korea is one of the most isolated nations in the world (Evans 2007).[1] Officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), North Korea reportedly abducts and confines its citizens in prison camps (Hawk 2003). Inmates and guards in North Korean prison camps are so well concealed that some prisoners' families believe them to have simply "disappeared" (Kang 2001). Within the camps, prisoners and guards live amid relations of dominance and oppression that have been difficult to study. Despite increasing international awareness and continued documentation of new refugee testimonies, academic research about North Korean prisons has been nearly impossible; North Korea strictly regulates outsider access, and denies the existence of its prison labor camps. In this thesis, I explore how inmates and guards respond to the DPRK prison conditions in which they live and work.

The present chapter considers the sociological importance of researching North Korean prisons. I question inmate and guard responses to DPRK prison camp life to understand power dynamics within coercive, punishment-oriented institutions. Chapter 2 provides an overview of works that inform our knowledge about life in North Korean prisons to date, with literature from a broad range of sources. In chapter 3, I explain the grounded theory methods used to analyze testimonies about imprisonment offered by refugees from North Korea to a human rights group. Here, I briefly describe the perceived absences of choice refugees signified, and follow with a discussion and analysis of their meaning in chapter 4. I offer *inverse empowerment theory* to explain that refugees routinely behave or resist in ways they believe may empower them, only to find themselves increasingly vulnerable as a result. In chapter 5, I

[1] Its capital of Pyongyang is one of the few places in the country where strictly monitored tours are sometimes available to foreigners (Koryo Tours 2012).

conclude with the key finding of inverse empowerment, which occurs when refugees' attempts to influence their lives paradoxically resulted in their decreased power. It is important that this unintended forfeit of power not be mistakenly attributed to what Sen identifies as "Asian cultural values;" generalizations that Asians are "opposed - or indifferent - to basic political rights" (Sen 2010). I find instead that inaction can be a method of resistance, but that this may result in the inverse empowerment of North Korean prisoners and guards who resist their oppression.

The subject of prison and other, similar camps is extensive and increasingly recognized, particularly in the context of the Soviet gulag and Holocaust studies. The phenomenon of harsh conditions in labor camps has been observed time and again, but there is little knowledge of the social conditions and processes in North Korean camps. This research responds to an absence of such analysis by sociologically examining narratives of former North Korean prison camp inmates and guards. I primarily use the term "prison camp" throughout this project. However, the prison system in North Korea has rightly been compared to the Soviet gulag and encompasses labor camps, jails, and life-term concentration camps (Hawk 2003; Martin 2004). The distribution and management of prison camps is linked to their function as punitive "total control zones" where political, juvenile, psychiatric, and criminal inmates are confined.

It is important to explore social processes in the North Korean gulag – the broad system comprising state and local level penal institutions. The production and maintenance of individual and group social relationships, the reasoning and motivations at the foundation of decision making, the influence of social life on individual action; all of these are valuable because our understanding of them informs the quality of life we choose to create for ourselves and others. Research raises matters of consequence for social, political, and economic relationships at individual and international levels. My research agenda here is to construct theory from the empirical observations of former North Korean prisoners and guards to understand their complex and sometimes contradictory responses to the camp environment.

I examine the testimonies of 44 refugees who were incarcerated or employed in North Korean penal institutions between 1970 and 2007. Throughout the research process, I use

inductive approaches to build new theoretical concepts grounded in secondary interview data from the online database of activists who procured face-to-face meetings with refugees, some of whom were former prisoners and guards. It is hard to verify witness accounts because of North Korea's isolationist foreign policy. Yet statements of thousands of refugees echo strikingly similar chords: in North Korea poverty and starvation are standard, while criticism against the government is punishable by death (Margesson, Chanlett-Avery and Bruno 2007; Lee 2010). Refugees who have identified themselves as former prisoners and guards report torture, involuntary scientific experimentation on prisoners, and public execution as typical in the prison system (Hawk 2003; Howard 2005; Kang 2001; Lee 1999). The reality that refugees represent conflicts with Pyongyang's portrayal of idyllic unity and moral righteousness in North Korea (Korean Friendship Association 2007; Hawk 2003). Understanding what transpires in the prisons of the DPRK is key to explaining social conditions and group responses that together, deeply impact people's lives.

Escapees from North Korea mainly live in two geographic areas: illegally in northeastern China, where they struggle to avoid detection and repatriation, and legally in South Korea, where they try to adjust to capitalism and democracy. The massive emigration of refugees can be traced to North Korea's long-deteriorating economy coupled with environmental catastrophes that culminated in widespread famine in the 1990s.[2] Many prisoners are repatriated refugees, charged with illegal border crossing (Kim, Yun, Park, and Williams 2009). Scholars estimate that the DPRK prison population fluctuates around roughly 200,000 individuals, though these numbers are based on the empirical observations of former prisoner and guards and cannot, to date, be verified (Hawk 2003). Acrimonious political relations between North Korea, its immediate neighbors, and the West derive from a long history of conflict and estrangement dating from the 19th century. But since the 1953 armistice following the Korean War, almost 17,000 North Koreans have fled to South Korea, and the North Korean refugee population continues growing despite the great difficulties in escaping

[2] Refugees necessarily go into and through China or less often Russia because they are barred from direct route to South Korea by the 38th parallel. Near the demilitarized zone (DMZ), the 38th parallel is the most heavily armed border in the world.

(Hanopolis 2010; Hawk 2003). Refugees include former prison camp guards and inmates (Kang 2001; Lee 1999). The existence of 16 camps has been verified by satellite imagery and all maintain similar methods of management, suggesting modern, bureaucratic patterns of operation and oppression (Hawk 2003). This study focuses on how prisoners and guards respond to the systemic operations that shape social relationships, and what a control-based method of administration means to those who work and are held captive in the DPRK.

Thus, this paper considers how social life is shaped and stratified in North Korean prisons by examining how prisoners and guards respond to the camp environment. I find that their actions - and inactions – can be ascribed to their perception of not having choices. Refugee interpretations of restrictions are associated with their engagement in behaviors that, while intended to increase their agency, ultimately decreases their power. My attempt to understand this phenomenon begins with the following research questions.

Action, Inaction, Reaction: How do Prisoners and Guards Respond?

How do some North Korean inmates respond to their imprisonment? Reports of living conditions in North Korean detention centers and prison camps routinely, perhaps even universally, describe human rights abuses at every level, from food shortages to indiscriminate homicide (Kato et al. 2004). Comparative studies of more or less similar cases of imprisonment – such as the U.S.S.R. gulag and Nazi labor camps – point to an array of responses that can explain some phenomena reportedly involved in North Korean imprisonment (Caplan 2004). But while North Korean prisons are not fundamentally unique in form or function, they manifest in the social milieu specific to North Korean culture, history, economics, and politics. I attempt to understand dynamics involved in prisoner responses to deprivations of camp life by studying the testimonies of former prisoners. How did they react to daily life and labor in prison? What did they think of other prisoners, and the interactions they witnessed between prisoners and guards? Why might some prisoners in similar situations have different reactions? I mainly focus on inmates' experiences, but it is also important to discuss the role and significance of guards. What implications about social life in the camps can be drawn from the experiences of some former prison guards?

Prison camp guards are expected by the North Korean state to maintain a very punitive camp environment. But how do guards respond to their appointment and orders within the prison camps? Research has shown that when some guards treat prisoners with neutrality or assistance, they deviate from state expectations and become subjected to punishment themselves (Fidyk 2008; Kato et al. 2004:51). Under the North Korean system of state-controlled job assignment, do guards who comply with their duties do so because they perceive little recourse to alternative behaviors? The repressive structure of prison institutions in North Korea seems to suggest that guards face substantial limitations. But if so, what does their conduct indicate about socially constructed perspectives and relationships? Because guard responses reflect their perceptions of agency, I examine dynamics of power specific to guards; what do they think about prisoners, themselves, and the state to which they are answerable? In sum, I consider how some North Korean guards perceive and respond to working conditions in prisons.

These research questions facilitate analysis of socialization processes to understand how environment and individual perceptions of agency shape prisoner and guard responses within the North Korean gulag system. A number of publications inform this endeavor. I introduce them in the following to offer a brief review of works that provide insight into social life in DPRK prisons.

Chapter 2: Learning from the Current Discourse

Witness accounts have inspired a growing body of scholarship largely centered on assertions of prisoner mistreatment within North Korean penal institutions (Hawk 2003; Kang et al. 1998; Kato et al. 2001; Library of Congress 2007). This focus reflects the shocking nature and subsequent attention that inhumane incarceration merits, but can limit academics' appreciation for broader topics related to the DPRK carceral system. It is easy to forget that the system is situated within a specific historical, political, and economic context. However, methodological challenges to studying an isolated, officially non-existent population shape limitations in scholarly research (Kim, Lee, and Song 2008).[3] Thus, I gather English-language knowledge about North Korean prisons from a variety of sources.

The following review explores power dynamics involved in incarceration. I begin with the historic foundations of the North Korean prison camps, describe general literature on political imprisonment and resistance, memoirs, media and NGO reports, and conclude with theoretical scholarship. These categories provide a panoramic, albeit partial, array of the material from which questions addressed in this thesis emerge. All literature reviewed was originally written or translated to English. These include some of the essential works in current discourse on the North Korean gulag, and contribute to the theoretical frameworks from which this thesis develops.

Prison Context: *Past and Current Conditions*

The North Korean prison system is an important part of its national policy, and reflects a history of regional conflict and military-style governance emulating that of China and the U.S.S.R. (Gause 2006). This can be seen in *sŏn'gun*, or the "military first" policy of North Korea, and the aggressive nationalism associated with the "slave labor conditions of its penal institutions" (Gause 2006; Hawk 2003:9; Park 2007). In the DPRK, those who are imprisoned are considered to have betrayed society and nation; the Kim regime has instigated purges of

[3] According to Hawk (2003:18) "North Korean authorities deny that the kinds of prison camps described herein exist and that human rights violations occur in North Korea."

"traitors" at critical moments of wavering political power (Armstrong 2001:52-53; Hawk 2003; Suh 2001; Park 2007).[4]

According to a former high-level official in the Korean Worker's Party, prison camps modeled after Soviet and Chinese gulag began to emerge after 1956 with the end of the war (Hawk 2003:26; Worden 2008). Pyongyang's adaptation of retributive, incapacitating correctional practices from neighboring U.S.S.R. and China is fairly unremarkable. Features that DPRK, Soviet, and Chinese prison camps have in common include political imprisonment, slave labor, absence of trials, and use for Communist repression (Adler 2004; Applebaum 2003; Hawk 2003; Usher 1999; Wu 1994). Like the Soviet gulag, North Korea's rigidly controlled, closed prisons are distributed throughout its remote mountain valleys; some camps are reportedly as large as major cities (Harden 2012). I thus use the term "gulag" to describe a series of prisons and detention centers purposely created to purge political dissidents and others whom the North Korean state regards as threatening to the regime.[5]

More specifically, two interrelated prison systems exist in North Korea today. *Kwan-li-so* are long-term slave-labor camps for politically threatening individuals and their families (H. Kim 2011). *Kyo-hwa-so* are short-term hard-labor facilities created to punish and "re-educate" felons, meaning those convicted of serious crimes, typically against the state (Armstrong 1995; Armstrong 2003; Liang-Fenton 2007). However, such infractions as accidentally sitting on a newspaper imprinted with an image of former North Korean leader Kim Il Sung are sufficient grounds for political imprisonment (Goldman 2009). Misdemeanor-level incarceration facilities are called *jip-kyul-so*, where repatriated North Koreans are often sent in large numbers for

[4] Martial law is not a new approach to rule on the Korean peninsula; indeed, scholars have argued that militarism is ingrained in North Korean society as part of a defensive, anti-colonial worldview (Armstrong 2003; Cumings 1981; Oberdorfer 1997).[4] The Japanese occupation (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953) stimulated xenophobic post-war zeitgeists. This made North Korea more receptive to the communist installation of Kim Il Sung as North Korea's first president. Born Kim Song Ju, Kim Il Sung was appointed by respective Soviet and Chinese leaders Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse Tung, under the pretense of a democratic presidential election (Suh 1998).

[5] Another label used by academics and the media to describe these carceral locations and the system of which they are a part is "political prison camp" (Byman and Lind 2010; Chang, Haggard, and Noland 2008; Kang et al. 1998; J. Kim 2006; Worden 2008).

shorter terms (Hawk, Won and Kim 2005). It is important to note that the U.S. equivalent of misdemeanors and felonies are conflated in the North Korean system; sentencing is reportedly fairly arbitrary and often dependent on such factors as one's ability to bribe officials (Park Young-Ian 2002). Eun-Cheol Kim (2002) remembers "I was released with the help of my relatives who bribed the local official with one whole goat and some 300,000 won that was hidden in the house."

Liang-Fenton (2007) points out the conflation of treason with relatively minor or accidental offenses in her discussion on famine and the gulag system in North Korea. She argues that North Korea is distinctive for criminalizing minute forms of dissent as a method of social control; most other nations would not consider sitting on newspaper prints of presidents as infractions (2007:4). Yet the North Korean polity interprets minor errors as dissent because it is politically expedient to do so. Liang-Fenton accurately emphasizes that the North Korean three-generation rule of imprisoning offenders' families (including grandparents or grandchildren) is atypical among penal systems. However, her assertion that torturing for confessions, incarceration, and separation of families is unique to North Korea is dubious; these methods have been used by many regimes (2007:4; Buntman 2003; Bauman 1989; Zimbardo 2007). However, its decades of casual indictment and extreme penalties to achieve control and regime maintenance are unusual.

Economics: The Value of Prison Labor

The gulag system should be understood in the context of North Korean economics and politics. There is, however, often a disassociation between punishment and economics, despite their affiliation. Historically, the collapse of North Korea's economy after its rapid growth between 1953-1990 reflects its deteriorating diplomatic ties and significant loss of aid from its two primary allies and financial patrons, China and the U.S.S.R. (Hilton 2011; Lankov 2002; Weathersby 2008).[6] When the North Korean government mismanaged consecutive floods and

[6] When China established diplomatic (and economic) relations with South Korea and the U.S. in 1992, the Beijing-Pyongyang alliance endured despite increased tension (Han 2006; Schaefer 2004). This continuity is largely due to the Kim regime's commitment to self-preservation

drought in the early 1990s, the resulting famine sent desperate citizens fleeing across its border to China (Haggard and Noland 2007; Lim 2005; Woo-Cumings 2002). Exiting the country without government approval is an act of treason in North Korea, and the Chinese government spurns refugees from the DPRK (Kato et al. 2004). Thus, the number of people who were caught, repatriated, and subsequently sent to prison camps rapidly increased (Chan and Schloenhardt 2007; Charny 2004). It was from survivors in the mid 1990s that international media began learning about concentration camps in North Korea; former prisoners and guards continue to seek refuge outside of North Korea today (Haggard and Noland 2011; Kang 2001; Lee 1999). Choon-ae Kim (2002) remembers, "I was recaptured at Namchon in North Korea. Because it is impossible to cross the Tomen during the daytime, I came out at night and was caught by the patrol there." Thus, the destitution and starvation of most North Korean prisoners can be directly linked to their incarceration.

Haggard and Noland (2010a) suggest further that North Korea's prison camp system is driven by extortion, and that citizens bribe officials to evade incarceration. Former prison guard Choi Dong Chul (2002) explained that "The inmates are regarded merely as a labor force." With few exceptions, scholarship generally excludes salient discussion about the economic significance of labor exploitation purportedly taking place in North Korean prison camps (Cha 2002; Kurlantzick and Mason 2006; Lee 1999; Muico 2005; Noland 1997). Nonetheless, tenuous international relationships and economic decline underlie North Korea's approach to penal administration, affecting the lives of prisoners and guards within its gulag.

Power, Control, and Political Prison Studies

Questions about power and control are central to any consideration of social relationships between prisoners and guards. Buntman's (2003) work on prisoner resistance in South Africa under apartheid analyzes opposition promulgated within Robben Island, where prison was intended to end political dissent. Her work traces prisoners' empowerment through their reconstructive approaches to incarceration (p. 58). What is striking about Buntman's

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through key strategic ties and China's incentive to benefit from cheap North Korean labor (Haggard and Noland 2007:50; Neaderland 2004; Scobell 2004).

findings is that Robben Island became a site of opportunity for political education and activism (p. 159). She conceptualizes resistance as "strategic" or "categorical," to describe, respectively, the opposition of political prisoners that is often deliberately obscured or principled and unreserved. Buntman emphasizes "strategic acquiescence," a form of "strategic resistance" whereby prisoners appear to comply in order to elude further subjugation or otherwise advance their goals. I identify Buntman's use of strategic acquiescence as a form of resistance, and build on her "strategic resistance" to describe how North Korean prisoners try to achieve their goals of leaving the camp environment by survival or dignified death. Where Buntman identifies many forms of prisoner opposition that empowered Robben Islanders, I show from North Korean testimonies that resistance can cause prisoners to lose, instead of gain power. Robben Islanders disciplined themselves, highlighting their relative power through resistance and some limits of state power in achieving repression (p. 237). In the far harsher material conditions of North Korean prisons, inmates exercise formidable self-control to seek survival (Kang 2001). The totalizing repression of the North Korean gulag means that aside from escape - a rare possibility - the best means of defying state power is for inmates to "invite" their deaths through open challenge (Buntman 2003:260) and resistance.

Significantly, Buntman explains that prisoners' progress was non-linear; Robben Island prisoners at times experienced severe domination that is similar to reports by former North Korean inmates Hyuk Kim (2002a; 2002b), Eun-Cheol Kim (2002), and Park Young-Ian (2002). Buntman points out that physical abuse and psychological torment were part of a "retributive approach" sometimes used by prison authorities in South Africa (2003:161). In North Korea, however, officially sanctioned abuse of political prisoners appears to be the norm. Indeed, an important difference between apartheid and the DPRK gulag systems is that the degree and frequency of overt violence directed toward prisoners by DPRK authorities is far more extreme and relentless (Buntman 2012). In some ways, the prison camp offers two viable options: survival by escape or release, and death as protest. Unlike Buntman's Robben Islanders, however, North Korean resistance can go awry and cause inmates and guards alike to lose even more power. When they commit suicide, prisoners and guards refuse to obey higher authority

by losing their lives. This is a both a success and a failure, and suggests that loss and gain can be simultaneous, though distinct. The complexity of control is apparent in the North Korean prison policy forbidding suicide but enforcing execution (Lee 1999; Harden 2012).

Applebaum conceives of habitual violence as typical within gulag administration in her history of Soviet labor camps (2003:256-79). She explains daily life in the camps through narratives, showing that unofficial hierarchies within prisoner and guard populations of Soviet gulag enabled a chain of informants to increase cooperation and decrease successful resistance (p. 368). Soviet gulag features that Applebaum articulates include the forced disintegration of families through separation, requisite unskilled hard physical labor, and especially the removal of intellectual and creative citizens from the majority of gulag society (Pp. 121-241). Importantly, these features of control and exploitation are also incorporated into the design of individual North Korean prisons (S. Kim 2008; PoKempner and Jendrzejczyk 2002). Adapted from the Chinese model of imprisonment (itself conspicuously modeled after the Soviet system), the North Korean gulag has integrated many administrative and regulatory features into its penal organizational structures in general (Hunter 1999:5; Wu 1994). Yet structural changes to the social environment of North Korean prison camps cannot be generalized or explained by studying their institutional roots in the Chinese or Soviet context. Several North Korea-centered works expand our understanding of the power dynamics from which incarceration originates (Hunter 1999:5).

A pivotal facet of incarceration is that of class standing prior to arrest. Armstrong attests that in 1946, "the emerging North Korean regime attempted to make social categories *more* explicit by carefully recording the *sŏngbun* (social stratum) of each individual" (2003:72). Three main labels, the application of which is determined by the national government, distinguish inherited social hierarchy. According to Oh (2003), "Kim Il-sung reported to the Fifth Korean Workers' Party Congress in 1970 that the people could be classified into three political groups: a loyal "core class," a suspect "wavering class," and a politically unreliable "hostile class." These are further subdivided into 51 categories (Armstrong 2003:73; Haggard and Noland 2010a; Hawk 2003:27; Oh 2003). The rigidity of this class structure is likely due to

Pyongyang's desire to create order out of what Cumings (1981:15-161) describes as the chaos that surrounded the social upheavals after the Korean War. Class distinctions have important implications; they discern who will have access to such basic resources as food, medicine, shelter, and the jobs that can provide them. Former prisoner memoirs abound with vignettes about dire poverty in North Korea, where the search for resources in neighboring China can result in North Korean prison terms for unauthorized border crossing. Mi Yeong Jeon (2002a) remembered, "Yesterday, this one and their child died. Today, another one and their child dies. It was a dark time when I wasn't sure how long my children would last either. So I just headed for China to seek my relatives." Since the late 1990s, the camp experiences of several former prisoners and guards from different class backgrounds have been published as autobiographies.

Memoirs: Truth Be Told…

The primary – nearly exclusive – source of knowledge about North Korean prisons comes from former camp prisoners and guards who are now refugees. Former prisoner Kang Chol-Hwan (2001) writes of his childhood in North Korea's infamous Yodok, or Camp No. 15. While some concepts may be lost through its multiple translations from Korean to French and then English, Kang shares a rare perspective because he was incarcerated at the age of nine. At the time, three generations of his family were sent to Yodok kwan-li-so, where he grew up in an atmosphere of constant tension, violence, and threat of death (p. 135).[7] As North Koreans returning from war-related emigration to Japan, Kang's family became suspect; despite initially living well in Pyongyang, his grandfather was labeled a spy for having lived overseas and became part of the hostile class. It is important to note that in North Korea, not only are individuals anyone accused of questionable political loyalty punished, but based on the first president Kim Il Sung's "three generation rule," entire families are sent to the gulag in the government's attempt to eradicate dissent long-term and at any level (Martin 2004).

[7] Kang's mother was not incarcerated because she was not a blood relation of Kang's paternal grandfather. He describes his reunion with her after his release, and the estrangement he felt toward her despite her efforts to nurture him as an adult (2001). Kang did not see his mother again.

Paradoxically, this policy assumes that family members hold similar political beliefs, yet "encourages families to police each other" (Belec 2010). Ensuing family divisions are intended to make solidarity within the North Korean populace unlikely. This collective family punishment is one of the ways in which the DPRK has modified the Soviet and Chinese gulag systems.

After 10 years of imprisonment Kang and his sister were released from Yodok. Five years later, at the age of 24, Kang fled from North Korea. He participated in interview testimonies I examined in this study, and he is an outspoken advocate for DPRK prisoners (Kang 2001). As will be reiterated in my discussion, Kang survived Yodok by alternating obedience with subversion, when judging an array of threatening situations. Cultural and linguistic differences shape and often limit interpretations of Kang's memoir. For instance, the difference between a North Korean prison schoolteacher and a U.S. schoolteacher is vast. A prison "teacher" is actually a guard, authorized to maim and kill the children of prisoners (Chul-Hwan Kang 2002b; Hyok Ahn 2002c). Thus, when Kang describes his gulag schoolteacher, it implies great apprehension, though this is not explicitly stated in the text. Rather, it is presumably understood that encounters with schoolteachers are occasions for enormous anxiety. On the other hand, when Western audiences read "my teacher," it is likely that they will substitute whatever knowledge of teachers they have from their own experiences, which are unlikely to include regular beatings. Consequently, certain detailed, contextual features of DPRK prison culture are not communicated, and only partial versions of Kang's experiences are conveyed.

In addition, the account of each refugee is gendered. Kang's testimony is enlightening because it presents the life story of a male youth in prison (2001). But it does not, for example, include any mention of the forced abortions described by middle-aged female former prisoner Soon Ok-Lee (1999). Soon and other women in the prison system can be understood as living in a "matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions" (Collins 2000:26). Lee's descriptions of forced abortions and sexual violence against female prisoners highlights what women know about gulag in North Korea. Her descriptions of infanticide and biochemical testing in Kaechon kwan-li-so show that female prisoners sometimes experience prison camps

differently due to their assumed reproductive capacity. It is significant that in the gulag environment - where detainees are regularly "dehumanized" - gender remains a vital construct. Lee's testimony is also important because women constitute the majority of North Korean refugees (J. Kim 2006; E. Kim et al. 2008). Like Kang, Lee describes meager food rations and starvation. Unlike Kang, she reports infanticide, biochemical testing on human subjects and slave labor sites, including factories producing goods sold overseas after being "washed" through intermediary nations (Lee 1999; Martin 2004:612). These continuities and differences between and among survivor accounts are shaped by a myriad of factors, from gender to specific site and time period of incarceration, to individual factors. As do many other former prisoner refugees, Lee experiences a sense of dehumanization and demoralization with which she continues to struggle after escape (Kang 2001; Lee 1999).

The severity of DPRK prison conditions is emphasized in *Voices from the North Korean Gulag*, where the testimonies of Ahn Myung Chul and Choi Dong Chul join those of Kang and Lee (Kang et al. 1998).[8] Choi Dong Chul is Lee's son. Before his mother's arrest, Choi worked as a prison guard. He was not a prisoner but recalls that "All prison camps raise livestock...One of the camps produces the most popular brand of bicycles made in North Korea, Kalmaegi. Its quality is so good that in the beginning it was even exported to China" (p. 9). Lee describes impossible work quotas, and says that "work begins at 5:30 a.m. and ends at 11 p.m." (p. 6). According to Lee, those who do not meet their quotas are beaten, sometimes to death (p. 6). Choi and Lee thus point out that the prison camps are a means of economic exploitation for the indigent state.[9] When they believed that eventual release is an option, former prisoners like Lee obeyed camp rules. However, this determination implicitly results in further oppression;

[8] Here, the authors are cited as Chul Hwan Kang, Sun Ok Lee, Dong Chul Choi, and Myung Chul Ahn, using the English method of placing surnames last. In keeping with previous uses of some of the same names, I continue referring to these refugees as Kang, Lee, and so on to avoid confusion.

[9] Despite pretexts of communist egalitarianism, the distribution system in North Korea was founded on the basis of social inequality. The hostile class is deprived of government-issued resources such as food, and assigned the least desirable work, such as mining (Hawk 2003; Yong Kim 2002a). Incarcerated people who are not already hostile class members are automatically designated as such upon imprisonment (Kang 2001).

survival with the goal of official release means continued exposure to harsh conditions. Power is inverted in this way, but nonetheless exists among prisoners.

Difficult conditions are also underscored by the testimony of Ahn Myung Chul, who "joined the North Korean army as a prison guard," and worked in four different prison camps before escaping to China (Kang et al. 1998). His hand-drawn illustrations of scenes he witnessed as a guard contribute to our understanding of power dynamics in the camps. Ahn remembered:

> Officers encourage guards to use political prisoners for kicking and beating. Most prisoners bleed from the nose and mouth and they usually receive broken teeth and are not able to walk normally afterwards. I actually witnessed a scene...at Camp Number 22. Casual conversations with my colleagues confirmed that, in fact, this was a common practice at all camps. (Kang et al. 1998)

As Ahn's testimony indicates, prisoner abuse by guards is typical in the gulag and is at least partly due to encouragement from officers. Notably, Ahn learned that such mistreatment is accepted in other camps by talking with other guards. Obtaining such news or knowledge from guards is not something prisoners would generally be allowed to do; this underscores the significance and need for more guard testimonies in works on North Korea and its prisons.

Hyok Ahn is a former prisoner who was detained for three and a half years for the crime of travelling to China out of curiosity at the age of 18 (2002a; 2002b; 2002c). Like Kang, Ahn was released from Yodok; the two escaped from North Korea together in 1992. As refugees explain, constant degradation, terror, and forcible glorification of the DPRK's leadership are meant to subdue and secure North Korea's prison population (Kang et al. 1998). Kang stated that "the feeling of terror among the prisoners did not die down quickly and continued long after the incident...causing them to be further depressed" (2002e). Other former prisoners express indignation at official efforts to quash prisoners' dignity. Choon-ae Kim (2002) did not withhold her feelings when she recalled imprisonment:

> My news reached my sister, and she came to see me. But they didn't allow visits, so my sister and I talked quietly on opposite sides of a high fence. My sister tossed me some shoes, and when I went to morning rounds with them on my feet, the fucking guards yelled, "Where did you get those shoes?"

Instead, state methods of control have motivated survivors to publicly speak about their experiences. They do so in defiance of the DPRK regime's efforts to maintain citizen ignorance or silence about the camps by making prisoners and guards sign sworn statements of secrecy (Lee 1999).

Finally, North Korean prison camps and refugees fit within the broader genre of survival, counternarratives and empowerment through testimony. Examples range from collections of resistance literature (Harlow 1987) and critiques of discourse on resistance and domination (Tilly 1991), to arguments that hidden forms of resistance are sometimes misinterpreted as acceptance or indifference (Scott 1990). Harlow (1987:120) offers the important observation that "writing within the context of...resistance...often entails serious consequences for the writers' very persons and lives." The ramifications of resistance through autobiography, interview, or other expressive measure are germane to North Korean refugees. For example, some individuals sampled for this project requested anonymity to protect themselves, friends, and family. Proclaiming prison camp experiences exposes the government of the DPRK, but also those harmed by its policies. Some refugees have been targeted with threats after speaking publically; others avoid risk of endangerment altogether by behaving in ways that do not attract attention.

Yet, concealment of identity can itself be considered resistance. Scott (1990:20) asserts that "paying close attention to political acts that are disguised or offstage helps us to map a realm of possible dissent." His expansive conceptualization of resistance thus informs my understanding of interview transcripts as texts in which the meaning of opposition is embedded, and neither constant nor obvious. Scott refers to the "hidden transcript" as "subordinate discourse" that is imperceptible or unnoticed by dominant groups (p. 4). As Tilly (1991:597) indicates, Scott highlights that hidden transcripts continue regardless of whether or not dominant groups observe those whom they subjugate. Therefore, Scott argues that the "everyday existence" of oppressed life requires examination in order to discern subtler methods of resistance (1990:597). As the work of Herlow, Tilly, Scott, Buntman, and others

suggest, inmate resistance in North Korea, however subtle, recalls the hidden resistance in many an oppressed group.

Deliberately indistinct opposition is seen in the narratives of some African American slaves who, like North Korean prisoners, often resisted oppression and exploitation. Frederick Douglass, a U.S. abolitionist, orator, statesman, and escaped slave, wrote his memoir in part to correct public misapprehensions at the time that slaves were fulfilled and happy (1995[1845]). He explained that slaves' singing, previously misinterpreted as contentment and apparently an obedient act, was an articulation of deep misery for slaves. This meshed protest, or what Scott (1990) would call a hidden transcript, had important implications for the survival of slaves who sought self-expression and covert communication through song. Their hidden opposition also qualifies as strategic resistance because the goal of liberation is fortified through self-expression and communication - forms of empowerment identifiable in the testimonies of North Korean former prisoners and guards as well. Yet by singing, slaves also increased their powerlessness; White Americans at the time who believed singing slaves were expressing happiness would have been less likely to favor abolishing slavery on grounds of its inhumanity. Like North Korean prisoners and guards, some slaves thus encountered inverse empowerment. Perceiving the dangers of open rebellion, both slaves and former prisoners (and guards) simultaneously protected themselves, unintentionally decreasing their power.

Despite some limitations, autobiographical accounts provide some of the most authentic descriptions of dominated people's experiences. Like Douglass, who used his freedom to educate the public about the inherent abuses of slavery, Kang and Lee frequently give speeches, and write to share their accounts. Former DPRK prisoners and guards also speak extensively with international media, documentarians, and non-profit activists.

A Hollow Scoop? Reports, Documentaries, and NGOs

At a 2010 U.S. Congressional Hearing, witness testimonies that included graphic drawings about DPRK camps were presented in what Bales and Trodd (2008:3) might identify as the use of "emancipatory power as a linguistic weapon of the violated." Part of the significance of Congressional Hearings is that they provide a public and influential arena for

refugees to attest to and corroborate one another's experiences. This can provide a much-needed space to educate others, and try to recover dignity and credibility lost to labels with such negative connotations as "North Korean," "prisoner" or "guard."

Indeed, evidence from previous research shows that former prisoners and guards realize that their experiences are often met with incredulity (Kang 2001; P. Kim 2010; Treston 2004). Reports by former political prisoners and guards consistently note conditions such as frequent beatings, less than 500 calories per day of food rations, and exposure to extreme temperatures. A former prisoner recollected the difficult environment, and a guard whose

> name was Chae Sung Jae. He was very mean although he was a guilty person just like me. He harassed lawbreakers very much and beat them severely. It was very tough due to heavy workload. They forced us to work on and on only giving us a handful of corn. We had to work running instead of walking. They beat us with whip if we walked. (Kim Young 2002a)

The ubiquity of these reports suggests that while no prison is a precise replica of another, regulations and procedures correspond from one camp to the next (Hawk 2003:18; Kato et al. 2004; Min-Bok Lee 2002). In *Access to Evil*, the BBC documents the bureaucratic routinization of camp administration, showing video footage of an officially stamped, "top-secret" document entitled "Letter of Transfer" (Ewart 2004). The document, smuggled out of North Korea, is dated February 2002 and orders human experimentation on 39-year-old Lin Hong Hwa of Yodok kwan-li-so using liquid gas for the purpose of developing chemical weapons. *MSNBC* quotes a senior U.S. official as saying, "All of North Korea is a gulag…200,000 is consistent with our best guess" (2003:1). Thus, while it is critical that media reports increase awareness about issues surrounding North Korea, the language often used assumes something is known, rather than reflects what is unknown; hyperbole and vague citations typify poor evidentiary data aimed toward inciting "moral indignation" that can lead to greater funding and readership (Kempadoo 2005), but might decrease real understanding. Methodical examination of testimony from refugees can attenuate the vague yet extreme descriptions promulgated by many media reports. Data from refugee testimony is specific, varied, and not always shocking; it is the most accurate source of knowledge available because it is "situated" in their personal experiences (Haraway 1991:181). Still, media reports can provide material from which to derive valuable

insights. For instance, although Martin and Takayama's (2008) Bloomberg News report generates inaccuracies through lack of methodological rigor, their article on North Korean women's outspoken outrage at government officials shutting down farmer's market style stalls remains significant. Importantly, it contradicts reports that North Korean people are apathetic to their oppression (French 2005:273; Jo 1986:1103).[10]

Disturbing reports – often corroborated by refugees unknown to each other – have dual implications. Reminiscent of Holocaust testimonies, macabre current events garner readership and even advocacy. However, as with memoir authors, refugees who receive media publicity also exposes themselves to scrutiny by the North Korean polity. This can mean danger for their family and friends who remain in North Korea, in addition to personal risks for refugees in South Korea who may be harassed by North Korean spies or supporters (Fidyk 2008). Thus, while speaking out is empowering, the media presence of former DPRK prisoners and guards can also have the reverse effect, causing an inverse relationship between approaches to empowerment and actual empowerment. This dynamic is a critical influence on inverse empowerment theory, the central finding of my thesis.

Another example of inverse empowerment is some refugees' preference for using pseudonyms, seen in interviews for the report "The Hidden Gulag" (Hawk 2003). Written for the U.S. Committee for North Korean Human Rights, a research NGO, the urgent tone of Hawk's report galvanized public awareness about North Korea's gulag system at the time of its publication. His text includes satellite photos of the camps and witness testimonies from 24 former detainees and guards. By asserting that the North Korean prison system contains about 200,000 inmates, Hawk established an estimate that has since been the most frequently

[10] For example, French contradicts his conclusions when he asserts that "It has been argued that the lack of a revolutionary tradition on the Korean peninsula has meant that North Korean citizens are somehow more passive than people in other countries and also that the effectiveness of the state's security apparatus is more pronounced. Both these aspects are true, though in the past Koreans both sides of the border have shown themselves willing to protest, fight and revolt against what they consider to be wrong. It is also a fact that security forces can only operate with a degree of compliance from the mass of the population" (2005:273). I am not convinced that North Korean citizens are "somehow more passive;" Korea has a strong cultural and historical revolutionary ethos (Armstrong 2003).

repeated approximation (Byman and Lind 2010; Harden 2009; Hawk 2003; Margesson 2007).[11] Despite his thorough research, Hawk explicitly states that his report is not comprehensive. He indicates that interviewees' memories are not "always entirely accurate" and that specifics may have been "lost in translation" (2003:16). He also warns against using the data he reports in order to "project trends over time" (p. 16). Significantly, Hawk notes that only the statements of former prisoners can invalidate North Korean authorities' denial of the existence of political prison and hard labor camps (p. 17).

Consistent with Hawk's assertions, Gordon's (2004) documentary, *A State of Mind*, strives to show that freedom of speech and movement are severely restricted in the DPRK. Other researchers reinforce this point by noting that, "North Korea is surely the one state in the world that most profoundly fails to conform to Western-influenced international norms of 'freedom of movement'" (Medlicott 2005). PoKempner and Jendrzejczyk (2002) notes that

> North Korea's self-enforced isolation, authoritarian repression of speech, religion and political pluralism, and horrendous penal practices have often been noted by political defectors, but now are being articulated by more ordinary migrants and even the expert bodies that consider human rights compliance.

A significant number of people who lived or worked in the camps have refuted Pyongyang's proclamations that there are no such "horrendous penal practices" in the DPRK (Goedde 2010; Hachigian 2002; KCNA 2011; PoKempner and Jendrzejczyk 2002).

Perhaps in response to Pyongyang's official claims of benevolent rulership, *Yodok Stories* introduces seven former camp prisoners and one former guard (Fidyk 2008; KCNA 2011).[12] Named for North Korea's infamous kwan-li-so, the film documents six former prisoners and one former guard who, now in South Korea, direct and produce a musical imbued with their experiences. Trained in North Korea, former prisoner Jung Sun San trains dancers and singers in a staged spectacle designed to mimic the socialist realism style of theatrics favored

[11] Hawk cites these numbers as the minimum estimates, estimated by former prison guards and administrative officials, and plainly acknowledges that his estimate is unverifiable (2003:24).
[12] Subtitles translate former prisoners and guards' interviews and interactions from Korean to English (Fidyk 2008).

by the DPRK government (Fidyk 2008; Myers 1994; Myers 2010; Portal 2005).[13] This documentary provides valuable opportunities to observe interactions between former prisoners and guards and shifts power dynamics between refugees and their former authorities. By using the "language of the oppressor" to speak to audiences, Jung and colleagues co-opt artistic self-expression for political use. But the political is deeply personal for these refugees: throughout the film, they express that it is important to them to tell the world their stories through the musical (Fidyk 2008). Yet, as "North Korean refugees" they experience stigma in South Korea, and garner public exposure that causes some of them to receive death threats from North Korean authorities or representatives (Fidyk 2008). Thus, *Yodok Stories* typifies the inverse empowerment of former prisoners and guards who, in reclaiming and sharing their experiences, deprive themselves of the obscurity that could potentially provide social acceptance in South Korea and anonymity to the North Korean government. Nonetheless, their standpoints challenge official constructions of fact and defy prevailing paradigms about power dynamics operating in North Korean prisons. Inverse empowerment can coexist with empowerment, as when prisoners commit suicide and simultaneously "free" themselves but lose their lives. The concurrent effect of this creates a paradox: one is empowered, but not dominant; resistant through complete yielding. This contrary conceptualization of power is what forms the inverse relationship between response and empowerment. In the following section, I describe several theoretical perspectives that cultivated my understanding of literatures reviewed in this research.

Overview of Theoretical Literature

Postmodernists might point out that modern bureaucratic methods facilitate particular modes of resistance, presented by regimes as prison misconduct - a product of administrative manipulation. Indeed, Bauman (1989) contends that there is a need to be vigilant about the potential development of social conditions similar to those that led to the Holocaust (p. 114). We can infer from his perspective that the efficient use of modern bureaucracy in North Korean

[13] Socialist realism is an official artistic style that praises the virtues of communist style governance (Fidyk 2008; Myers 1994; Myers 2010; Portal 2005).

prison camps enables the mass murder of prisoners. Some sources report technologically based methods of killing such as gassings and biochemical testing on prisoners facilitates the destruction of people within as little as a few days of camp confinement (Chang et al. 2008:10; Myung-cheol Ahn 2002; Yong Kim 2002b). Distance between bureaucratic leadership - such as provincial authorities and the subordinate guards who carry out their orders - enables the state to authorize human rights abuse and avoid witnessing inhumane consequences firsthand. Thus removed from seeing the results of their orders, authorities are shielded from acknowledging their crimes (Bauman 1989).

As Bauman (1989) notes, violence is shaped by particular norms and institutions. This point raises questions about prison guards' agency and actions. He thus suggests that modernity – I would add here even modernity in the North Korean context – and civilization does not remove violence from society, but alters the norms and institutions through which it is expressed (p. 87). But scholarship on guards carrying out atrocities in prison camps presents inconsistent conclusions. For instance, while many Nazi guards committed cruel and depraved acts face to face with prisoners, the aridity of common dismissal of prison guards as "evil" overlooks the nuanced and complex nature of prison guardship (Brunstein 1996; Conover 2000; Darley 1999). Thus, Arendt's (1965) central assertion that Nazi guards were simply functionaries of Hitler's regime posits an absolute explanation for prison guard conduct that Lozowick (2005) contends was actually intentional and calculated. Different sociological approaches help to explaining prison guard behavior. Scholars have questioned about the role and impact of social settings in modifying the interactions between social actors. The use of terms such as "settings" and "actors" has helped theorists to envision ways in which social life is performative (Goffman 1959; Turner 1974; Young and Massey 1977).

A key theme in this literature is the concept of dramaturgy as an analytic tool. In Goffman's metaphorical terms, social relations consist of interactions that take place "front stage" (publically) or "back stage" (privately), whereby setting, appearance, and manner are socially constructed before, during, and after social interaction (1959:22). Impression management exists not only at the micro-sociological level, but in teams as well (p. 66). Group

staging, Goffman posits, can "function to protect the individual" and therefore "public disagreement among members of the team" disrupts the reality that team members contrive in to present unison (p. 86). To the degree that penal institutions in North Korea can be identified as an arena within which social actors adapt and conform to roles assigned by authorities and each other, Goffman's framework situates prisoners and guards as performers with "discrepant roles" (p. 145). For example, his sophisticated delineation of "informer" roles reaches into the heart of Pyongyang's tactical leadership; some refugees describe prisoners pressured into informing on other prisoners at the behest of guards (Tae Jin Kim 2002). The paradox of this rationalization is that many prisoners are accused as spies and incarcerated on counts of treason to begin with (Eun-Cheol Kim 2002; Min-Bok Lee 2002; Yong Kim 2002a).

Zimbardo's (2007) work echoes Goffman in that the setting of social interaction is paramount to the development of social roles. Shifting analytic focus away from the debate between Arendt and Lozowick, Zimbardo emphasizes that situational forces influence and can even dominate the will of social actors; he warns that each of us has the capacity for both good and evil behavior (2007). He argues that officials with the power of authority and subordinates who feel pressure to conform fulfill social role expectations, promoted with what we can call in Goffman's terms costuming, props, and the "scene" (Goffman 1959; Zimbardo 2007:40). As in Zimbardo's experimental prison setting, North Korean penal camps immediately and explicitly dictate power dynamics between guards and prisoners (Myung-cheol Ahn 2002; Young-kuk Lee 2002; Zimbardo 2007:23-257). The North Korean power elite constructs the prison institution settings in which citizens reside, imposing deviant identities upon them; by disseminating negative concepts of the "other," this narrative fosters public fear that can lead to genocide (Zimbardo 2007:10-11). As Pfohl notes "Deviants never exist except in relation to those who attempt to control them" (2009:5). Becker echoes that deviance is not a personal quality, but rather a label used when others respond to an individual's actions (1963:5). When applied to North Korea, Pfohl and Becker's perspectives suggest that the Kim regime is motivated by self-interest, controlling even minor suspicions of citizen disapproval by applying legal and social rules "whose infraction constitutes deviance" (Becker 1963). Labeled as

outsiders within and away from gulag spaces, prisoners especially struggle against negative categorization.

Scholars of deviance and control regularly highlight the relativity and culturally manufactured nature of criminality (Becker 1963; Dombrink and Hillyard 2007; Pfohl 2009; Kitsuse 1963; Weitzer 2011). Brauer and Chekroun's field study examined social control behaviors as reactions to perceived deviance such as littering, vandalism, or interposing in lines (2005: 1524). They found that perceptions of deviance and reactions to it are strongly associated with self-interest. The most negative reactions to violation of social norms were those that came from experiencing personal consequences as a result of others' deviance (p. 1534). Thus, when prisoners and guards assess the potential costs and benefits of decisions they make, they may not only restricted by situational factors but also a sense of social obligation for which they perceive themselves to be responsible (Zimbardo 2007).

In his evaluation of rational choice theory, Green (2002) explains that the "fundamental premise that *the choices made by buyers and sellers are the choices that best help them achieve their objectives, given all relevant factors that are beyond their control.* The basic idea behind rational choice theory is that people do their best under prevailing circumstances" (p. 5, emphasis original). Green's assertion contributes to my conceptualization of inverse empowerment. The objectives of prisoners and guards, given factors out of their control, are to "do their best." But under prevailing circumstances, if their best means obedience, they can increase their subjugation within the prison system, exacerbating their real or imagined powerlessness. On the other hand, if their best means open rebellion, it can mean harsh punishment or death. A significant factor beyond the control of both prisoners and guards is general absence of choice within the strictly structured, perpetually surveilled prison environment. Another feature of prisoners' and guards' disadvantage is their mutual exile.

Thus, a problem faced by North Korean prisoners is, in a broad sense, similar to a problem faced by guards. That is, both are generally confined to the prison institution; although guards and inmates are opposed to one another in terms of the prison power structure. Compared with the larger social body of North Korea, these two groups are confined

to remote and bleak environments with no recourse to leave (Hawk 2003). Sartre's (1976) concept of seriality considers random collections of people who share conditions, and who, though not integrated, recognize their inadvertent relationship to others within a "series" (p. 256). They thus anticipate the actions of these interchangeable others (p. 256).[14] North Korean prison guards, like inmates, submit to the regulation of punitive institutions when they conform to job assignments and duties attached to them. Yet, perhaps the autocratic prison system precludes camp prisoners and guards from recognizing the common conditions that would enable them to resist by taking joint action, and becoming a "group" (Ken 2012). Sartre's theory challenges generalized ideas about oppression (Knecht 1980; Young 1994). But it also supports inverse empowerment theory: separated into the binary prisoner-guard relationship, groups in prison camps engage in action or inaction intended to increase their social power. Instead of improving their condition, however, their oppositional co-existence reinforces the separation that prevents them from establishing a group identity with which they might ultimately overcome the system that dominates them.

Part of the reason for this is the way that physical structures within prison camps contribute to the construction of binary, oppositional relations between prisoners and guards (Hawk 2003; Kato et al. 2004). The presence of guard towers, inmates' quarters, guards' quarters, "schools," factories, and outdoor worksites in demarcated but close proximity emphasizes status differences between prisoners and guards. It also establishes conditions in which guards' and prisoners' continual observation of each other is unavoidable. Foucault's (1975) examination of surveillance as a form of control lends itself to interpreting DPRK prisoner and guard dynamics. The "panopticon" he describes is designed to optimize surveillance by locating prison cells around a central tower; likewise, North Korean prison camp buildings are arranged to construct an environment of total control (p. 208). As former prisoner Young-kuk Lee explained "There were about 1000 prisoners in our district alone. Our districts were divided into 6 groups and each group was caged within a 4-meter high electrically

[14] I thank Dr. Ivy Ken for her insightful connection between Sartre's concept of seriality and North Korean prisoners and guards.

charged wire fence" (2002). Foucault's theory underscores the significance of physical prison structures in shaping the social structure of punishment-oriented relationships. Notably, prisoner knowledge of guards is informed by the same organization of camp premises that facilitates guards' scrutiny of inmates. Inmates are unwilling spectators of their own oppression, and are thus thoroughly well positioned to criticize the prison system and its administrators, but at their peril. Guards, too, describe being unsettled by viewing the abuse of prisoners by other guards. My understanding of dual, conflicting viewpoints that some prison camp residents described is reinforced by the social theory of W.E.B. DuBois.

DuBois' concept of *double consciousness* highlights dynamics of dominance and oppression that many prisoners and guards experience, and the dual nature with which reality can be perceived (DuBois 2003[1903]; Niebrugge and Lengermann 1998). DuBois asserted that dominant imposition of identity on subordinates forces subordinates to view themselves through the perspective of their oppressors (2003[1903]). Indeed, the dehumanization of prisoners forces them to survive with a dual awareness of identity. This awareness stems from the simultaneous incarceration and mistreatment, together with knowledge of their humanity. North Korean prisoner and guard relations fit within this conceptualization: incarcerated North Koreans of diverse classes, genders, ages, political, mental and physical constitutions find themselves officially equalized as prisoners (Hawk 2003; Martin 2004; *Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission* 2010). Yet, resources and opportunities are not equal among prisoners or guards. Researchers have found that those with families, friends, or former work connections, material goods or access to food are advantaged, because impoverished DPRK soldiers and officials are inclined to accept bribes (P. Kim 2010:441-456; Scobell 2006).

Conclusion

This review describes and considers works in the genres of political imprisonment, memoirs, human rights testimony, and theory. I include these to share the "sensitizing concepts" that guided my analysis and interpretation of refugees' testimony (Ken 2012). The literature here makes clear that prisoners and guards in the DPRK sustain, oppose, and administer domination within a complex system of violence. Counterintuitively, their

endurance of and resistance to oppression can result in their continued, even increased subjugation. These literatures thus informs inverse empowerment theory, which can in turn supplement analyses of phenomena beyond refugees in this project, especially in prisons but also in other contexts of extreme domination and subordination.

Findings on Soviet gulag survivors, apartheid prisoners, African American slaves, and North Korean political prisoners demonstrate some similar patterns of resistance to persecution (Adler 2004; Applebaum 2003; Buntman 2003; Daniels 1981; Eyerman 2001; Hawk 2003). Notwithstanding the diversity of these contexts and histories, such comparisons can provide us with frameworks for understanding social life in the DPRK gulag. But these works do not sociologically articulate how prisoners and guards respond to their circumstances, nor the meaning of conflicting power dynamics that underlies and begets their interaction. In the following, I strive for a more thorough understanding of these relationships and motives through sociological examination, using methods designed to ascertain the meaning that former prisoners and guards give to their experiences. In what follows, I detail my approach to collecting the information I believe is most appropriate in order to answer the questions of how and why prisoners and guards respond to the DPRK gulag environment. Like much research on North Korean prisons, this method began with personal stories from refugees.

Chapter 3: Gathering Meaning through Method

To examine how some North Korean inmates respond to their imprisonment and how some guards respond to their assigned employment, I used a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. In this section, I review my data source and describe the sample. Then I describe the coding scheme and grounded theory methods I used to inductively build new theory. Lastly, I consider the limitations of these methods, and clarify why their strengths make them valuable to an analysis of North Korean gulag life.

In this research I used publically accessible records of refugee testimonies based on others' interviews with former DPRK prisoners and guards, now refugees, mostly in South Korea and China. This study's core source of information is from interview transcripts collected and made available online by The Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR).[15] NKHR's Witness Accounts and Testimonies collection includes refugee testimony in general, not only that of former prisoners or guards. I chose, however, only interviews describing personal camp experiences or relevant knowledge about camps through close family members for inclusion in the sample. In other words, specific mention of experience or observation within a prison camp was requisite for testimony inclusion. I use the terms "prisoners," "guards," and "non-carceral witnesses" to refer to North Korean refugees who were imprisoned, employed, or observed the prison system between 1970 and 2007. The testimonies come from 44 North Korean refugees. These include 37 former prisoners, two former guards, and five non-carceral witnesses who visited or had family members in prison. Refugees shared anecdotes about 75 other individuals in addition to stories about themselves. While the sample cannot be generalized (and does not necessarily represent the estimated 200,000 prisoners in North Korea), generalizability is not my goal. Rather, I attempt to derive the meaning that former prisoners and guards give to their camp experiences; how did their perceptions shape their decisions and behaviors in the carceral environment? In what ways did prison conditions affect them socially, and what effect did this have on their lives?

[15] The Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights is a South Korean research and advocacy NGO begun in 1996, advocating for human rights in North Korea through peaceful international involvement and ultimate reunification of the Korean nation (NKHR 2002).

This sample was not randomly selected. It is comprised of North Korean prisoners and guards who (1) survived famine, (2) left the prison environment alive, (3) illegally traveled within North Korea to access border regions, (4) successfully navigated out of North Korea into China, (5) lived in China or South Korea long enough to be identified and contacted by NKHR, and (6) consented to interviews. Thus, the sample appears to be unique because, as refugees explain, North Korean prisoners and guards rarely leave the prison camps or North Korea alive:

> about 100 in total, were ordered to line up to witness the end of a failed escape attempt, Choi was black and blue where his blood had not covered him already. (Park Young-lan 2002)

> Article 47 of North Korean criminal law states the following: If a North Korean leaves the nation without the government's permission, he or she will get a sentence of seven years or less. If a person escapes in order to surrender to enemies, he or she will receive the death penalty and all property would be forfeited. If it is clear that the person left the country to obtain food, he or she would have to spend six months to two years at a labor-training corps. (Jeong-ai Shin 2002)

Recall that it is dangerous for refugees from North Korea to speak about their experiences. The DPRK not only prohibits citizens from emigrating ("defecting"), but surveillance and punishment of remaining family and friends impels some refugees to refrain from openly speaking about their experiences, whether with academics or the media (Ko, Chung, and Oh 2004).[16] Some names of refugees were changed by NKHR (2012) to protect their family and friends still in North Korea from repercussions from the state. North Korean refugees also experience stigma and discrimination in China and South Korea; thus, many refrain from sharing their testimonies. As well, incarceration and illicit migration are painful experiences to recount. These are some of the reasons that a relatively small number of interviews and testimonies are readily available to researchers at present.

For most former prisoners, guards, and citizen witnesses, I was able to identify age, sex, area of origin within North Korea, family political or socioeconomic status (i.e. official class

[16] Jeon, Hong, Lee, Kim, Han, and Min (2005:148) successfully conducted face-to-face interviews with 200 North Korean refugees, though the researchers note "oral rather than written informed consent was obtained in consideration of the refugees' general reluctance and fear of putting their signatures on a paper or a document." This alludes to refugees' being accustomed to torture by state powers as punishment for divulging information to non-North Koreans.

background), educational background, military training, time spent in camps, type of detention center or camp, location of camp, and reason for incarceration. North Korean refugees in the sample ranged in age from 22 to 86 years of age, though they referred to other inmates as young as newborns. At least 45% of the refugees were women; the 16% of interviewees whose sex was unidentified may also have been females. Regardless, former prisoners in this sample span a range of age, sex, class, and other backgrounds linked to status, which I examine in more complex scope after presenting results. "Former guard" refers to individuals who were employed in prison camps, regardless of rank and whether or not they interacted directly with prisoners. "Citizen Witnesses" directly observed incidents and their repercussions inside camp premises, or shortly before and after prisoners' incarceration. Therefore, Citizen Witnesses include those describing experiences that imprisoned family members, friends, or strangers shared or could not hide e.g. malnutrition (Hyuk Kim 2002; Kim Min Hee 2002; Kim Seung-Chul 2002; Kim Young 2002b; So Yun 2002). Notably, more refugees were former prisoners than either former guards or "citizen witnesses." There may be shame or stigma among refugees associated with former guard status that prevents some former guards from speaking openly about their experiences. This disparity may also be because prisoners generally outnumber guards, or because guards leave North Korea less frequently. The citizen witnesses in the sample were those who describe the prison experiences of close family members who were incarcerated, though they were not personally employed or incarcerated in the camps. Citizen witnesses are also individuals who observed camp life firsthand because of their short-term exposure to it during temporary, local work assignments.[17] The testimonies of individuals who never met one another were consistent with the experiences of other refugees in other research samples sketching discernible patterns of experience (Hawk 2003; Kang 2001; Kato et al. 2004; Lee 1999). Their testimonies are also commensurate with the literature findings of activists, academics, and governments; this increases confidence about sample reliability.

Echoing previous findings, there were more female than male refugees in the sample.

[17] For example, Kim Seung-Chul, who witnessed a "relentless beating" while assigned to design a power plant partially running through the prison grounds (2002).

This result parallels other research findings that more females than males comprise the North Korean refugee population (Chang et al. 2008; Human Rights Watch 2002; International Crisis Group 2006). The preponderance of female refugees may be due to cultural norms: women are responsible for preparing and serving meals to their families, while men are expected to provide income (Library of Congress 2007; Savada 1993). Despite men's unemployment, women were still expected to feed their families - possibly, women would have tried to accomplish this regardless of custom. Indeed, female refugees described transgressing North Korean law by crossing into China in search of food because they felt ashamed of not being able to feed their children, though no male refugees talked about this directly (NKHR 2002).

As mentioned, the class system in North Korea can be organized into roughly three strata: the core, politically trusted class; the wavering, or potentially traitorous class; and the hostile, or politically threatening class. While the majority of the sample class background is unknown, it is compelling that among refugees whose class was identified, most were core class members, while fewer were hostile and the almost none were known to be wavering class members. This relatively greater imprisonment of trusted individuals is counterintuitive and suggests that the relationship between class and advantage in North Korea may be linked to whether the government regards core class citizens as potential rivals. Regardless, class status has important implications that appear to be associated with the relative likelihood of imprisonment in North Korea.

Collection Strategy

In order to begin addressing how North Korean inmates respond to their imprisonment, it is important to identify such fluid concepts as prisoners' rebellion or passivity. Likewise, understanding guards' response to orders requires clarity about what constitutes shrewd compliance versus genuine espousal of alleged abusive practices. To determine the meaning of these terms, I use the interview texts as a frame of reference so that responses constituting *rebellion* are identified in the context of the broader stories refugees share.[18] For example, a child prisoner who hides five grains of wheat in her pocket can be said to have *strategically*

[18] For simplicity, I have italicized codes throughout this and subsequent sections.

resisted her imprisonment because she knew that her act broke a prison rule.[19] I analyze interviews using the qualitative method of grounded theory to find meaning in the data. This approach facilitates a richer understanding of the significance refugees give to events, behaviors, and other details they related in interviews. In addition, handling the data in this way allows me to discern how features of the phenomena are related and what they mean sociologically.

I began this process by using line-by-line open coding to build categories of codes. This method of coding showed me what transpired according to refugees. Then, I looked for interrelationships between and among concepts that emerged from the texts (Strauss and Corbin 1998). I recorded my questions and impressions about the interview data in memos, developing theory and arguments as I sought to discern how the prison experience shaped the social lives of prisoners and guards within the sites of confinement to which they were condemned or, in the case of guards, bound by duty. Throughout, I strove to generate theory grounded in what gulag escapees' experiences mean to them, and how they interpret their life histories.[20]

I coded the data by hand, and categorized refugees' experiences based on patterns emerging from the texts. Then I created a code list based on the frequency of key words, phrases, and concepts. Data from coding show a clear imbalance of power in the camps, where 74% of codes refer to *control* and 26% describe *rebellion*. I focus on these two codes in order to more clearly explain the process by which I identified, organized, and applied codes from the testimonies. The emergence of these dominant categories suggests ways in which prisoners and guards within the gulag system primarily interpret their experiences, which can be understood in terms of such categories as *obstacles* and *immobilize* (the reaction to perceived lack of control over one's environment or future). On one hand, refugees encounter *control* in terms

[19] This incident is explored in greater detail later in the discussion.
[20] I use the term "escapees" to refer to the entire sample of 44 North Korean refugees who escaped from North Korea, only some of whom escaped from its prisons as well. The similarities and differences of resistance in both cases merit further examination, but for the purposes of this thesis, I use the word "escapee" to draw attention to the sense of control that former prisoners, guards, and citizen witnesses (now all refugees) felt in the custodial environment of the prisons.

of *obstacles* and lack of personal influence, which made their *futures insecure*. On the other hand, they compensate with *rebellion* in the forms of *explicit resistance* or *strategic resistance*.

One of the most frequently identified codes was *physical debility.* This was linked to such camp policies as authorizing food portions estimated to be "66 grams" (2.3 ounces, or about 56 calories) of "processed corn ears" once daily (Lee Baek-lyong 2002). Indeed, physical debility often overlapped with other codes related to *incapacitation* within the prisons. Examples of these are *starvation* and the resultant malnutrition and predisposition to *illness*, injury from *beatings* or *torture*, and *exhaustion* due to *slavery* or *prevention from sleeping*, which were linked to what I call *temporal incapacitation*. The dominance of control-related codes that is consistent with other findings on North Korean prison conditions (Hosaniak 2005; Martin 2004).

While control dominated, codes categorized under *rebellion* also emerged from rich descriptive narratives. *Strong support/connections* was common and this included such acts as nursing a sick family member in the dilapidated sheds that constitute family housing in camps (Eun-Cheol Kim 2002). Relatedly, *edify/rumor mill*, wherein prisoners communicate, share information, and even educate one another secretly, is one way in which strong support/connections can be maintained. While edification and rumor circulation have respective positive and negative connotations, both entail communication, information, and the power to impart and be worthy of receiving knowledge. Group gathering or communication is sometimes manifested in *assembly*, which can lead prisoners and guards to *identify with others*. In turn, *identify with others* may be associated with instances of *pity/concern/aware for others* that can develop into actions qualifying as *strong support/connections.*

I also used *in vivo* codes - words used by interviewees - to evoke the symbolic meaning with which inmates and guards imbue their experiences. *In vivo* codes revealed specific concepts refugees used to interpret events, the significance these events had in their lives, and how they felt about what they described (Taylor and Gibbs 2010[2005]). The literal language that refugees used to express themselves construct *in vivo* codes; the meaning they give is

symbolized by their choice of words to describe events and feelings (Strauss 1987:33). To illustrate, former guard Myung-cheol Ahn (2002) recalled, "When I joined the Army, I took an oath of loyalty to the party and the leader. Thinking back to those days now, I realize now that I was a mere child." Here, the *in vivo* code *realize* comes directly from Ahn's interview data. This method further focused my analysis of apparent social processes. But not all codes are verbatim descriptions by refugees; I named codes myself in instances when applying *in vivo* codes might have been confusing because they lacked context. For example, from Ahn's quote I also coded *former trust in regime*, to generally summarize that despite his patriotic oath to fulfill his guard duty, he reflects on this time in his life as one of "mere" youth, and implies his naïveté. More often, however, the labels that refugees used to explain their social encounters were suitable; in these cases I did not elaborate on them.

Open coding through the texts yielded 334 codes. These included such general concepts as *control*, *rebel, obstacles,* and *motive*. I used the constant comparative method which involves comparing codes with one another throughout the coding process to ensure that coding is consistent, and to recognize when and how codes are applied differently (Taylor and Gibbs 2010[2005]). Doing this enabled me to find errors in my coding method. When comparison showed that I had created overly broad codes, I narrowed their description. I then created and applied new, more detailed codes. I stopped coding when it appeared that data had been saturated; that is, when no new information seemed forthcoming.

After listing the 334 codes and designating them into 14 categories, I returned to each testimony and checked that all documents were coded uniformly. I then noted demographic details about certain codes to determine the circumstances under which they tended to appear. For instance, *strategic resistance* undertaken by six-year-old girl who was killed for hiding food can be compared with tactics used by adult men who also describe *physical debility* as a result of *starvation* (Chul-yoon Kim 2002; Shin Dong-hyuk 2002).

I cross-coded throughout this process by noting which codes applied to more than one heading and why they were linked or related. For example, one prisoner's *altruism* can be a tacit form of *encouragement* and *fortify* the *will to live* of another prisoner. Many of the codes

had more than one meaning because they appeared in different contexts. While the code *separation from family* is under the category *immobilize* because isolated prisoners have less social support, it is also true that prisoners who were incarcerated as families were able to assist each other, despite *worrying about family wellbeing* and feeling *responsible* for *family torture/punishment*. So prisoners were both helped and harmed by *separation from family*.

I further collapsed the 14 categories into two selective codes: *control* and *rebel.* These represent an important dynamic in the camps. Guards and prisoners both endeavor to empower themselves while rejecting subjugation from authority figures.[21] However, camp conditions and social interaction conspire to leave both groups feeling relatively powerless. It may be difficult to imagine how a prison guard feels powerless, but a central finding of this research is that prison guards are strongly limited by the constraints of their position. Threatened by the prospect of becoming prisoners, camp guards experience a different type of powerlessness, in lesser degree. In some guards' experience, pain and control are indirectly, if not symbolically administered. Within the camps, guards too, are surveilled and exist within an environment of compulsory violence. Thus, prisoners and some guards perceive themselves to lack the power to influence much of their lives and futures. Therefore, the circumstances in which prisoners and guards operate are captured in the core category of *perceive no choices*. Perceived no choices is determined by regulation and control, and describes gulag residents' domination by limitation. This category encompasses many of the behaviors and decisions made by prisoners and guards in the prison camps.

While creating individual code lists for each testimony document, I demarcated pre-camp, in-camp, and post-camp settings, depending on when codes appeared in the testimony. I referred to these experiences as "pre-custody," "in-custody," or "post-custody" to discern whether experiences tended to follow a linear pattern of progression, and if so, in what way. While I found noteworthy data in the sequential ordering of events (such as border crossing

[21] I base this assumption on my reading of the interviews. Even when inmates and guards appear not to act in the pursuit of empowerment, they do so to mitigate threats to themselves and ultimately survive. This is technique is empowering, and reflects contradictions in the camp atmosphere.

prior to arrest) this research concerns only the in-camp stage. The reactions of inmates and guards to the camps are shaped by pre-camp and post-camp events, but their experiences within the camps is the main focus.

I relied on a hermeneutic approach to emphasize how refugees interpreted their experiences, distinguishing between the myriad ways in which one refugees' testimony differed from the others. Perhaps just as importantly, I drafted memos about why I thought this might be; what social features may have informed their statements? Hermeneutics underscores the meaning that former prisoners, guards, and observers give to their experiences (Berg 2007). Although memory can be erroneous, the advantage of subjectivity is its expansion of what constitutes historical truths. For example, female prisoners might report that rape is very common in the camps because of their greater exposure to these acts. Male prisoners, by contrast, may report that rape occurs but perhaps less emotionally, or not at all. Alternatively, male prisoners may know about the frequency of rape or may have been raped, but leave this knowledge out of their accounts because of stigma associated with male rape victimization (Scarce 1997). The difference between the experiences of men and women, old and young, core and hostile classes can make the difference between partial and more complete empirical data. These accounts provide some of the most authentic descriptions of prison refugees' experiences available (Haggard and Noland 2010b). I connect their perspectives with the confluence of structural factors shaping North Korean prisons to explore this phenomenon.

Critics of hermeneutic approaches point to their micro-level focus at the expense of broader social structural considerations (Marshall 1998). Therefore, I situate analysis of detailed, first-hand accounts within the broader structural context of the prison camp environment. What refugees tell us is particularly important given the Kim regime's intense efforts to deny accusations of human rights abuses within North Korea's penal system. Thus, I study testimony to gain empirical, analytical, and theoretical insights from the meaning former prisoners and guards give to events.

The coding process that I previously mention and interrelationships between codes are exemplified by an event in which a six-year-old girl was beaten to death by a guard for having

five grains of wheat in her pocket (Shin Dong-hyuk 2002). Ultimately, the child had the "food" in her pocket because she was starving and *perceived no choices*. Both *control* and *rebellion* contributed to her perception that she had no choices. What I call *control* was caused by several factors. Firstly, prison camp policies imposing starvation-level food rations and overwork on prisoners contribute to their *physical debility*. Secondly, being *beaten* to death is also *control*; I call death in the camps *never exit 1*.[22]

The little girl's act of *rebellion* can be traced to her *strategic resistance* by hiding food. As Buntman (2003) explains, when resistance is strategic, it is because prisoners (or guards) have adroitly opposed their domination; the goal is to tactically maneuver in defiance of authority. I build on Buntman's concept here, having found that those who practice *strategic resistance* do not always improve their conditions. Instead, they may compound their powerlessness. While *strategic resistance* is a form of rebelling that indicates choice, it can also mean no choice. For instance, the little girl's rebellion (hiding food) resulted in her punishment. Typically, punishment decreases perception of choice; when one is beaten to the point of death options seem limited. But perception of no choice (starvation) also increased the likelihood of her rebelling (hiding food). Thus, rebelling can mean no choice when attempts to survive by behaving obediently will not succeed. Compliance does not guarantee escape or survival. Realizing this, inmates may then be more likely to rebel, co-opting state control through their own rebellions and consequent deaths.[23] The relationship between *rebellion* and *perceived no choices* is one of mutual interaction; each has an effect on the other that can decrease power.

Effects of responses (and responses to effects) can also be simultaneous. The little girl's action derives from her *physical debility* and her *strategic resistance*; both show how *control* and *rebellion* can concurrently take place. The relationship between these two categories is

[22] I distinguish between the types of permanent damage caused by corporal and capital punishment in the camps. *Never exit 1* is death, *never exit 2* represents refugees' haunting memories and post-traumatic stress, and *never exit 3* constitutes permanent physical damage, such as impaired sensory ability or non-functioning limbs.
[23] And while prison authorities reportedly torture and kill otherwise healthy inmates, the death of a prisoner deprives the regime of a slave (Choi Dong Chul 2002).

seen in her simple act, illuminating how some prisoners respond to prison camp conditions and why they might ultimately *perceive no choices*. Shin did not describe the little girl as making explicit statements about feeling besieged by her oppressive surroundings, nor did he express what he believed her thoughts about hiding food might have been. My inference that she *perceived no choices* and therefore hid the food comes from supporting literature on children's experiences in DPRK prisons (Kang 2001; Harden 2009).

Limitations of Methods and Data

Conflicting evidence in the literature reflects methodological challenges to data collection, the main one being population inaccessibility, and to a lesser extent, language barriers and inadequate research funding (Han 2008:137; Lankov 2004). Despite China and South Korea's proximity to North Korea (thus, access to refugees), the prison population is confined well within the insular DPRK. In addition, some of the current fieldwork has not been conducted by trained academics or interviewers, but by advocates of North Korean refugees who work in the China-DPRK border regions. In an Al Jazeera radio interview, Chang (2010) observes that "because there's so little news about NK everybody latches onto these reports and it becomes accepted gospel very quickly whether it's credible or not." Translation poses another challenge. The English-language data used in this thesis does, however, reflect the dominant trends in scholarship and other information concerning North Korean penal institutions.

As noted, perhaps the largest deficit in data for this and other research on North Korean prison camps is the collection of testimonies from former guards. Since their appointment to the position of prison guard is not a choice, and refusal to accept the job would be viewed by the North Korean government as an act of sedition, it is important to be aware of the conditions of their employment.[24] More guard accounts are needed to learn about the ways in which guards are complicit in and victimized by the work they do on behalf of the state.

[24] Hawk explains that prison guards are assigned to jobs within camps as part of their military service (2003:40).

The use of secondary data poses some limitation. Little methodological information is known about how, where, when, or by whom interviews were conducted.[25] Nevertheless, my sampling choice reflects more than the dearth of accessible and willing refugees in the U.S.; an in-depth interview with hundreds of refugees is an impractical research goal. Wide-scale surveys have been collected on refugees' political opinions of the North Korean regime, but such methods inevitably omit more intimate, individualized data. For example, while Chang et al.'s (2008) collection of survey data from 200 refugees may be generalizable, Hawk's (2003) qualitative interview data with 30 former prisoners and guards offers more detailed information. Likewise, this thesis is informed by but does not emulate research using larger, quantitative research of North Korean refugees. Through the literature review, research material using larger, quantitative samples of North Korean refugees informs this thesis about the broader social climate and conditions in which individual refugees are situated. By actively reading or viewing about15 books, articles, government and non-governmental reports, documentary and hidden camera films about North Korea, especially prison and penal camps, I adopted methods that were economical, flexible, and enabled me to spend time exploring nuanced text (Babbie 2010:120).[26] Because transcripts from the database did not explain the cultural significance of concepts such as age veneration, I clarify context where necessary to understanding implications of events or behaviors.

Transliteration was a minor issue; names used in NKHR accounts vary in spelling depending on the testimony number, but can be identified as the same individual based on clues within the story. Thus, Li Sun Ok is also Lee Soon Ok, and Myung-cheol Ahn is also Ahn Myung Chol.[27] While these names are sometimes written differently throughout the interview

[25] Some of the interviews were done in secret while refugees were still in China (NKHR 2002). Testimonies in the database do not elaborate about general research methods used to collect them, other than to occasionally and arbitrarily note such details as the names of translators or the year of interview (NKHR 2002).
[26] Active reading involves critically analyzing text and writing memos.
[27] Korean names are written in order of last name, first name, middle name. NKHR translators appear to have been flexible in the order of name presentation. Thus, names are somewhat unsystematically ordered in the database such that the same individual might be referred to with different name order or spelling.

transcripts, I refer to individual testimonies using the same names that NKHR lists to simplify source identification.[28]

Conclusion

The methods I used in this research reflect the topic itself: NKHR's database makes accessible a population that is otherwise geographically distant and for political reasons, isolated. To understand how prisoners and guards respond to their social positions within the gulag I examined the accounts of refugee witnesses, because those who have been inside its prison camps are most able to answer questions about North Korean gulag life. I used the constant comparative method, returning to the testimonies throughout data collection (Glaser and Strauss 2009[1967]:102). This enabled me to build theory about socially constructed meaning in which prisoner and guard responses to conditions are based (Charmaz 2006:150; Swedberg 2012). The inverse empowerment theory I present in this paper is a product of the coding, memo writing, and analysis that facilitated my having identified general principles about North Korean prisons. I found that some prisoners and guards attempt to influence their circumstances for the purpose of increasing their power. However, by their very actions or inactions they decrease their power. Symbolic meaning is key to understanding inverse empowerment. A prisoner may view her suicide as an empowering act of resistance, but her *never exiting* the camps exemplifies the ultimate loss of power; it is self-destruction due to *perceiving no options*. Paradoxically, suicide also harms prisoners' adversaries: the officials responsible for controlling them cannot do so if prisoners no longer exist. Grounded theory methods enabled me to discern such nuances from the interviews, and construct inverse empowerment theory to explain these phenomena.

The interview data used in this research are sociologically and methodologically important for several reasons. They are some of the only qualitative, English-translated, freely accessible empirical observations available. The interviews also challenge North Korean

[28] In cases such as Mi Yeong Jeon, who is also listed as Mi Yeong Jeong in the database, I use as constant the earliest version of name presentation (Mi Yeong Jeon 2002a). When the same names are spelled differently in other texts (that are not from NKHR), I follow the spelling in the publication to which I refer.

governmental denial that the camps exist. The DPRK's policy of forbidding gulag residents from speaking publically about their experiences made the voices and opinions of refugees critical to this research. Frank, public disclosure can empower those who are censured (Bourdieu 1992; Gready 1992). The vivid, nuanced, and thorough nature of information gleaned from the grounded theory approach facilitated understanding the sociological implications of some prisoners' and guards' struggle for agency (Geertz 1973).

In what follows, I explain what these methods led me to recognize about the responses of former prisoners and guards interviewed. I discuss associations between codes to show how when considered together, the prison situations that individual refugees describe form a history of endurance to live and courage to die. When they *perceive no choices*, DPRK inmates and guards respond to camp life in ways that impede their empowerment. This response is due in part to social characteristics of former inmates and guards. Thus, I share my findings here by beginning with brief descriptions of the sample. Surprisingly, of those who testified and shared their class identity, more were former trusted "core class" members. Not surprisingly, former prisoners and guards asserted that far more *control* than *rebellion* took place in the camps. Finally, I link my main findings about resistance and conditions with one another, to show how they are interrelated.

As I describe these findings in the discussion that follows, I focus on the ways in which prisoners and guards are subject to coercion within the camps, and how their methods of resisting are so circumscribed by material conditions that the outcomes often antithetical to their interests. Inverse empowerment results when subjugated individuals who try to regain power can decrease their power instead.

Chapter 4: Discussing Inverse Empowerment Theory

Understanding how prisoners and guards respond to their circumstances in North Korean prison camps can illuminate power relations at those and other sites of acute domination. Such focus is significant to understanding how agency operates within structure more broadly. I find that, paradoxically, prisoners and guards tend to reinforce their powerlessness when attempting to resist domination in the restrictive prison environment. Inverse empowerment theory encapsulates this phenomenon. In this section, I explain how the refugees interviewed responded to prison camp repression in ways that were antithetical to their empowerment, despite their attempts to defy authoritative domination.

But prisoner experiences of control and rebellion are specific to them and different from those of guards; some prisoners use *strategic resistance* to develop and strengthen opposition, while some guards *explicitly resist* their duties and de facto confinement as employees. In many ways prisoners and guards are both subject to coercion. This connection is explored through analysis of camp socialization processes that considers the sociological relevance of North Korea's political system and cultural norms. These dynamics lead to my conclusion that inverse empowerment takes place when inmates and guards inadvertently play instrumental roles in their own harm. I disagree that Korean cultural traditions of reverence for authority leads to inmates and even guards accepting and not resisting their oppression. Rather, I argue that Korea's history of resistance is embedded in group-oriented culture which prioritizes both dignity and liberation. These themes emerged from the testimonies and can be seen in other literature on Korean culture and history (Seth 2011).

While particular focus is on inmates because more data is available about them, guards are a fundamental part of this discussion. Analysis of power relations in North Korean prisons would be incomplete without considering the role and function of guards, whose strict obedience is socially acquired and economically reinforced. Because micro-social, or individual and small group power dynamics occur within larger, macro-social hierarchies, oppressive conditions in the gulag impress upon prisoners and guards that they have few, if any options. As former North Korean prisoners and guards report, this perception motivates their behaviors,

choices, and interactions within the camps. Their responses to imprisonment and employment at the camps reflect prisoners' and guards' recognizing themselves to lack almost all recourse.

Prisoners

In the following section, I discuss the forms and mechanics of resistance pertaining to prisoners in the DPRK. The dynamics of punishment through which they navigate are thematically arranged; where refugees recount their personal histories, I analyze how food, torture, and obedience are connected. By also examining links between hope and hard labor, sexism and collective punishment, I attempt to identify the nexus between social processes and responses. The crux of this discussion is that there are different ways in which some prisoners invert their power. This inversion of power appears to contradict their interests in surviving. Survival is not their only recourse, or goal; reclaiming dignity through means that may include death is a fundamental response and motivation for prisoners.

Social conditions external to the prison environment influence policies and conditions within prison, which can have significant ramifications on inmates' chances of survival. Since the sample includes refugees who were incarcerated or employed in North Korean penal institutions between 1970 and 2007, the year of incarceration within this 37-year period affects their experiences and life chances. For example, because the intensity of the famine in North Korea peaked in 1994, it is noteworthy that 1994 was the median year of incarceration among those interviewed by the human rights organization. As a result, already poor food provisions in the camps were aggravated, transforming prisons into locations where starvation was a rapid process for many prisoners, and where "even the soldiers are starving" (Hae-Nam Ji 2002).

Food

Because food maintains life and growth, withholding it can be a coercive tool.[29] My findings echo this concept; food is one of the ways in which prisoners are *prevented from protesting*, a general method of *control* in North Korean prison camps. When ex-camp inmates' recollections of *starvation* outnumber those of illness or *torture*, we can understand lack of food to have

[29] I am indebted to Drs. Buntman and Ken for sharing their interpretations of food as sociologically significant, particularly in the context of power relations.

been a tremendous impediment to their endurance, and consequently, their resistance. Former prisoners from the sample recounted:

> I can never remember not being hungry. One day, I discovered 3 kernels of corn in a small pile of cow dung, picked them up and cleaned them with my sleeve before eating. As miserable as it may seem, that was my lucky day. (Shin Dong-hyuk 2002)

> Because I suffered from malnutrition at that time, one side of my eyes and ears didn't work well and I couldn't walk well either. One day...I almost lost my senses into a fit of frenzy for anything edible. I only wanted something to eat. (Chul-yoon Kim 2002)

Restrictions on already meager and undernourishing food rations can literally prevent prisoners from running (or even walking) away from the camps.[30] Yet to the extent that they can, prisoners avoid compliance with rules that impose *starvation* upon them. They do so by appearing to comply; by giving the appearance of compliance, prisoners are better able to contravene prohibitions on eating. Shin's ingestion of the corn kernels he found in fecal matter exemplifies prisoners' *will to live*, an act of resistance despite extreme hunger that prevented him from protesting in other perhaps more obvious or traditional ways.

There are several reasons that prisoners or guards might behave in ways that could increase powerlessness. They may do so knowingly, because they feel that they have nothing left to lose, or to exact vengeance on those who claim authority over them. Prisoners and guards may wish to regain the dignity of having an influence on their condition or environment. Or they may not realize that even careful opposition in the form of obedience can have the reverse effect of further repression. Instances of *strategic resistance* reinforce the principle concept of inverse empowerment theory. That is, a decrease in power takes place when individuals act, or refrain from action, in attempting to regain power lost to dominant groups. By trying to empower herself by hiding grains (action), the little girl increased the likelihood of being caught during inspection, and was ultimately killed. This is the paradox inherent in inverse empowerment.

[30] Some North Korean prisoners report frequent cases of pellagra in the camps, brought on by all-corn diets and no meat or fruit (Hawk 2003).

The incident of the six year old killed for having five grains of wheat outlined in the methodology section above is another example of disobedience precipitated by hunger. Shin described the *strategic resistance* of a six-year-old girl who was subsequently beaten to death when she was searched by a "schoolteacher" (guard) who found five grains of wheat in her pocket (Harden 2012; Shin Dong-hyuk 2002).[31] I would not argue that she was making a statement against the regime. Although the general problem of inferring understanding and intent from behavior is exacerbated in a small child, the fact of her resistance should not be discounted. She was a hungry or starving child who risked punishment for food. *Strategic resistance* is recognized in her action for two reasons. Firstly, it was strategic of her to keep the "food" in her pocket knowing the rules against doing so. Secondly, since having unauthorized food is considered an act of resistance by the guard who killed her, we can think of her decision in terms of resisting the imposition of rules that force *starvation* on prisoners. The resistance of children does not involve the same agency as that of adults, and the two cannot be compared fairly. Yet the child Shin describes had achieved a degree of understanding about rules and survival in the camps. Her young age did not detract from her agency, or the quiet but purposeful response of her *strategic resistance*. Prisoners of all ages frequently *disobey because hungry*. In this way, food is part of a greater, overarching theme wherein prisoners try to withstand severe prison restrictions in spite of feeling paralyzed by fear of repercussions should they be caught.

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[31] Children in prison camps attend "school" from ages six to 16 or 17, where they learn basic reading and arithmetic (Harden 2012). However, actual knowledge acquisition in camp schools is not the objective; school days also involve hard labor, and teachers (who are actually guards) are commonly cited as punishing children to death, e.g. through beating or forced exposure to extreme weather conditions (Won-Chul Kang 2002; Shin Dong-hyuk 2002). Children who survive through school are "'promoted' to worker. This means that they have to accomplish an adult's work quota and are subject to discipline as adults" (Hyok Ahn 2002).

reverse effect of further repression. Instances of *strategic resistance* reinforce the principle concept of inverse empowerment theory. That is, a decrease in power takes place when individuals act, or refrain from action, in attempting to regain power lost to dominant groups. By trying to empower herself by hiding grains (action), the little girl increased the likelihood of being caught during inspection, and was ultimately killed. This is the paradox inherent in inverse empowerment.

Open protest is a form of *explicit resistance* that typically means death in the camps; former prisoner Lee Baek-lyong (2002) talked about the "unjustified death" of Hahn Shin-ok, a woman who "protested against physical abuse by the camp director who beat her in shackles. For her punishment she was deprived of food and water for five days. She died from thirst and hunger." Hahn's death is critical to understanding how protest as resistance operates, but it is equally important that Lee knew about this incident - whether having seen it firsthand or hearing about it from others - because knowing influences prisoners' perceptions and thus, responses to prison conditions.

Torture

A related instance of regime repression is *physical debility*, which occurs when camp policies or the unregulated, discretionary behaviors of guards cause prisoners to become so physically weak that they are prevented from functioning normally.[32] *Torture* is a camp policy causing *physical debility*, and is generally undertaken by guards attempting to extract a confession of unlawful words or deeds from prisoners. The question of innocence appears to be insignificant to prison officials; in North Korean prisons, a confession given under conditions of torture suffices as verification of wrongdoing.

From a functionalist perspective, the objective of such torture can be understood as an attempt to send messages of deterrence, morality, and practice of norms by identifying and excluding deviant individuals (Mathiesen 1990:58). Regimes have attempted to justify torture as a means of enquiry, but commentators on torture understand that communicating messages of power or humiliation via interrogation - not ostensible investigation - are more important

[32] Guards' discretion is discussed further in this section.

authority objectives (Arendt 1970; Carrabine 2011; Scarry 1985). When systems of law enforcement are viewed as "having the purpose of communicating this message to the people," it becomes clear that at least one of those messages is that solidarity among law-abiding citizens must be maintained to keep social order (Mathiesen 1990). Indeed, several former prisoners and guards described prisoners as being considered "enemies of the people" (Choi Dong Chul 2002; Yong Kim 2002a). In his discussion on labeling theory, Erikson (1966) emphasizes that the "audience" and not the "actor" is the "critical variable" in determining what is deviant (p. 11). Tortured prisoners then, are not the only central focus of *torture* as far as the government and society are concerned. Rather, guards' participation is part of a "dual oppression" inherent in the act of *torture*: captors are responsible and expected to procure a confession, thereby providing the state with proof that treasonous citizens exist, are a threat to national security, and are even culpable for the dire food shortages (Collins 2000). Because *torture* and *interrogation* "communicate" the power of state sanctions, it is irrelevant to guards whether prisoners are innocent or not; their task is to convey state power such that the verity and accuracy of confessions does not really matter (Mathiesen 1990:59; Scarry 1985:20; Yong Kim 2002a). Former prisoner Eun-Cheol Kim (2002) said "I wrote down whatever they made up, whether they were true or not did not really matter…they would not leave me alone and continued to beat me up."

This retributive focus has implications for how guards and prisoners regard incarceration and punishment. Guards are pressured by supervisors to procure confessions from prisoners because doing so legitimates the state as capable of identifying deviants through its penal system. The process of *torture* however, is one in which guards also become burdened. State expectations of what a guard should do – in contrast to guards' individual assessments of prisoners' guilt – override guards' understanding of how they should behave in order to be considered competent by superiors. Indeed, even prisoners in the sample appear to have condoned corporal punishment generally, including torture and execution if they felt such punishment was deserved because they believed that victims were guilty (Choon-ae Kim 2002;

Kim Young 2002b; Shin Dong-hyuk 2002).[33] However, some refugees contradicted themselves when they took issue with the question of their own innocence. They typically felt that since their imprisonment was unjustified, the punishments to which they were subjected were extreme.

Regardless of whether those arrested can be "proven" to have committed any crime, the torture that takes place without due process is partly why prisoners experience *fury* about their *physical debility* (Farrall 2007:217; Neher 1994). Bang Seong-un (2002) divulged "whenever I think of North Korean politicians, I become furious." Others expressed frustration and hatred toward their oppressors:

> They tortured me for answers that I had no way of giving. The different forms of torture are too numerous to recount. Sometimes they put a wooden stick 1)[*sic*] with sharp edges behind my knees, made me kneel, and then trampled my body with their heavy boots. At other times, they would hang me by the shackles on my wrists, high enough so that I was forced to stand on tiptoe. At night water would fill the solitary cell up to my stomach, depriving me of any sleep. During the long hours under water my body would gradually swell up, making it difficult for me to keep my balance. If I fell, the guards kicked me until I scrambled up again in extreme pain and fatigue. (Yong Kim 2002a)

> In situations like this, I had been taught to face the wall, put my hands on the back of my head, keep my forehead glued to the ground, and remain motionless until the security agent had passed by. And I was doing just that when suddenly I was knocked unconscious. When I finally regained consciousness, blood was flowing from my head and down my neck. A security agent had hit me with the back of his pistol and was making me an example of an unproductive worker who deserved no better than death. To this day, I bear the scar of hatred on my head. I recall the anger and desire for revenge that exploded inside me. (Yong Kim 2002b)

Although prisoners are *prevented from sleeping* while being tortured during interrogations, their *exhaustion/overwork* is a more everyday matter. However, both lack of sleep and overwork constitute and exacerbate their *physical debility*, often through *labor exploitation*.

Incapacitation and Obedience

Forced labor is a major feature of North Korean prisoner life. As many former inmates explained, withholding or decreasing food rations is a punishment used on prisoners who do not

[33] Former prisoner Chul-Hwan Kang (2002) said "Ki-un Kim, my teacher, told us about missing children in the class and told us quietly, 'Don't think about these things seriously. They all committed grave crimes against the party and state. They deserve to be punished. Therefore, none of you should talk about it any more.'"

meet labor quotas. The seriousness of *no/lower food ration* cannot be overemphasized since the weakness that results from missing one day's ration compounds prisoners' fatigue in what they say can become a vicious cycle ending in *starvation* (Eun-Cheol Kim 2002). As previously mentioned, being caught eating unauthorized food resulted in their receiving no or lowered food rations. Unauthorized foods typically include wild flora and fauna such as frogs, rats, insects, grains, tree bark and grasses. These are gathered as imperceptibly as possible, on work shifts or when going to and from other camp locations.

It is noteworthy that breaking camp rules – such as unmet labor quotas and eating unauthorized food is a method of resistance. Initially, prisoners among the sample attempted to abide by regulations in order to circumvent confrontations with guards and the ramifications of being caught breaking rules. By giving authorities the impression of complete submissiveness, prisoners *comply to minimize risk of death*, a circumstantial and subtle form of *rebellion*. When prisoners appear to respond to oppressive camp conditions with obedience rather than open defiance, it is for two reasons: to get out alive or die with dignity. When death is particularly imminent, prisoners may resign themselves to never getting out of the camps alive and concentrate their energies on subversion. An example of this is the open rebellion that took place during the 1974 prison riot at Yongpyong. A former prisoner recalled,

> We were told[by other prisoners] that there was a big riot started by prisoners in Yongpyong in 1974…prisoners protested against starvation, hard labor and cruelty…They rioted because they knew they were going to be killed anyway and thought there would be no difference whether they died now or later. The riot was brought under control by armed forces. Many prisoners fled to the mountains but they were all hunted down…The leaders of the riot were young men and women. In Yongpyong, therefore, any prisoner over the age of 16 is separated from the rest of the family and sent further into the valleys for harsher work. (Chul-Hwan Kang 2002e)

Therefore, prisoners' main objective is not always to survive – sometimes, sheer opposition is their goal. This is in spite of prisoners' understanding that subversion takes place upon threat of death in the camps (Shin Dong-hyuk 2002).

Perceiving No Choice and Rioting

If prisoners believe that they will eventually die in the camps, the option of emerging from prison alive becomes lost. The futility of hope thus realized, prisoners *perceive no choice*

and instead prioritize dying with dignity. This often means their *explicit resistance*, whether in the form of riots, suicide, or other overt confrontations with authority.

Part of prison guards' ability to manipulate inmate beliefs about leaving the camps lies in guards' power to shape expectations. By enacting the social "role" of the volatile, *unpredictable other*, camp authorities make the *future insecure* for inmates, controlling them by increasing the likelihood of prisoners' confusion or hopelessness (Goffman 1959). Prisoners respond by *planning for the future*, and they determine what that future will be through riots, escape attempts, or more subtle methods of *avoiding being controlled.* Such acts as *lying to guards* or *increasing risk of death* enables prisoners to circumvent being controlled by shifting who possesses power, whether it is in the form of knowledge (lying) or deciding when life ends (suicide) (Gwang Soo Kim 2002; Won-Chul Kang 2002).

Thus, prisoners sometimes recover power by controlling situations that they initiate, and in which they rebel; perhaps even in order to rebel. The riot is an example of *explicit resistance*, which can simultaneously occur with *compliance to minimize risk of death* given that at least initially, prisoners attempt to survive by following rules. Despite their *anguish* and *rage*, many prisoners feel compelled to restrain themselves rather than engage in conduct that further threatens their lives. One former prisoner remembered:

> Security officers commonly beat prisoners to death in the settlement and this is accepted as normal. If, however, a prisoner kills a security officer, this is a most serious crime. As usual, grandmother told us..."You must be patient and be prepared to take all the insults. Never resist them and always be patient and patient. I cannot emphasize this enough. We must survive this ordeal and get out of here alive, OK?" (Chul-Hwan Kang 2002e)

In this example of a prisoner advising her grandchildren, being "patient and patient" is a survival strategy based on the belief that to "never resist" is to live another day and ultimately leave the camps alive. In fact, Chul-Hwan Kang did not resist on many occasions and lived to be released 10 years after he and his family were first imprisoned (2002e). However, not all prisoners are eligible for eventual release; more serious political crimes such as criticizing Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il mean life-sentences (Soon-I Seol 2002). It is significant that such self-

restraint seems to end when prisoners perceive themselves to be merely awaiting death and thus become *hopeless*.[34]

The forced labor to which they are subject constantly erodes that hope. Conditions of forced labor are likened to *slavery*, and a former guard describes prisoners who

> are spurred on to engage in hard labor from 5:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. They are treated as enemies of the people, but the camps try to keep them alive in order to exploit their labor…inmates are spurred on to work like slaves. Most of the products are carried away by the State Security Ministry. (Choi Dong Chul 2002)[35]

Self-restraint buoyed by *hope* is a reason that prisoners can be "spurred on." Hence, prisoners frequently respond to conditions of *labor exploitation* with *obedience*. Although this reaction may seem paradoxical, for prisoners beset by *life-threatening conditions*, strict compliance can be a form of expressing the *will to live*. This degree of self-restraint requires fortitude; the concealment of such endurance among prisoners lends potency to their resistance. Thus, self-restraint is part of *hiding knowledge* that should not be misconstrued as non-resistance; rather, it is strategic resistance. Cooperating with their enslavement not only allows prisoners to persevere from day to day, but enables them to observe their environment in ways that can empower them (such as becoming familiar with the austere landscape to learn about *topographic obstacles* standing between them and a successful escape).

Gender and Labor

In addition to forced labor, prisoners are sometimes separated by sex or age. In other cases, however, officials expect women, men, and children to fulfill identical work quotas. Thus, *no division of labor* sometimes compounds the oppression of prisoners through hard labor. Work typically involves such physically demanding tasks as carrying heavy logs by hand for long distances (Lee Baek-lyong 2002; Oh Soon 2002; Young-kuk Lee 2002). Former prisoner

[34] By contrast, prisoners also frequently mentioned wanting to die from the *shock*, *humiliation*, and *despair* they experienced in the camps (Won-Chul Kang 2002; Mi Yeong Jeon 2002). While this and cases of attempted suicides among refugees seems to contradict the argument that prisoners contemplate death only when hopeless, I re-emphasize that prisoners consider suicide a form of dying with dignity, when leaving the camps alive is not perceived to be an option.
[35] North Korea's Ministry of State Security oversees the identification and arrest of political criminals, and manages the gulag (Library of Congress 2007). The U.S. government alludes to its infamy by referring to it as the "secret police"; the Ministry of State Security routinely sends individuals to prison camps without trial (Library of Congress 2007).

Hyok Ahn relates that camp administrators do not discern between the ages and sexes of prisoners in allocating work. Firstly, when children are imprisoned with their families they are expected to perform hard labor; they, "have to accomplish an adult's work quota and are subject to discipline as adults" (2002c).[36] Secondly,

> Girls were never cleaner than boys…They did not look like girls…they had such hard muscles in their hands and feet…Girls had the same work quota as boys. Yet, they are so used to the harsh work in the camp that they work more efficiently than the newly arrived male prisoners. (2002c)

Despite being required to produce the same amount of hard labor output as males, female prisoners are nonetheless subjected to extreme sexism. Sexual harassment at work sites, rape, and misogynistic forms of torture appear to largely target women.[37]

> When these high level officials come to the camp, attractive female prisoners between the ages of 21 to 25 are picked out to serve them as sex slaves. To conceal such practices, documents are forged convicting the ravished women of escape attempts, who are clandestinely murdered afterwards. This practice is repeated whenever a cadre comes visiting from Pyongyang. I am sure you find this hard to even imagine. (Yong Kim 2002b)

> The women were not provided with proper uniforms, so their breasts were easily exposed to the prying eyes of SSA officers.[38] Seven good looking women are selected to do the cleaning of SSA camp offices. Not surprisingly, many women vie for this position because they are able to escape the normal kickings and beatings while at work. Even the risk of occasional sexual abuse is considered profitable…[to avoid] the usual violence and wrath of SSA officers. (Shin Dong-hyuk 2002)

Thus, female prisoners who compete for office cleaning work (which implicitly means being raped by guards and higher-level officials) can be understood as *strategically resisting* the "usual violence" of their captors. This is a gendered mechanism of resistance that reflects the sexist conditions of female prisoners' oppression. Although they sacrifice some power by being

[36] In contrast, former prisoner Yong Kim (2002a) said "families are broken up by sex, with the exception being boys under twelve who are allowed to stay with their mothers." The difference in refugee testimonies may reflect the specific prison or time period.

[37] Lack of mention about homosexuality in the camps (or North Korea generally) may be due to the conservatism of Korean culture and as a result, refugees' discomfort in acknowledging that sexual minorities exist in North Korea. The Korean Friendship Association – a public relations representative of the DPRK – presents North Korea's official stance, which states that sexual minorities are not repressed, but are "not recognized" (Korean Friendship Association 2012). Reports of a lesbian couple having been executed however, suggest that sexual minorities are recognized and discriminated against (*The Korea Times* 2011).

[38] State Security Agency (SSA) offices are administrative prison offices responsible for national internal security. The official title has been changed to the State Safety and Security Agency (Lintner 2007).

complicit in their own victimization, the women recognize being chosen for rape as an opportunity to distance themselves from possibly being beaten to death during regular work activities. Female prisoners thus engage in a transaction in which they economize power. Those who manage to exchange rape for reprieve from beatings willingly participate in short-term social interactions with guards because such interactions increase their long-term chances for survival. At the least, female prisoners risk being raped with the knowledge that even if they never leave the camps alive, they may secure for themselves a more empowered, dignified death in the private offices of SSA officers than they would have in the factory setting.

Punishment and the Resistance Process

It appears from the testimonies that very few acts of known rebellion go unpunished in the camps.[39] The punitive purpose of incarceration in North Korea is exemplified in *senseless labor* such as running in circles with stones (Kim Young 2002a; Young Soon Kim 2002). Punishment is also collective, which is a long-established method of creating and maintaining divisions among oppressed groups. In the camps, joint responsibility for fulfilling work quotas enables camp administrators to use *collective punishment*. A former prisoner explains

> If a team member failed to finish his quota by that time, he will be hated by the rest of the team members, whose work hours will be extended until the whole quota is met. Each team comprises 5[*sic*] prisoners and a team leader...prisoners are so hungry and exhausted that, when they are collectively punished...they do not sympathize or understand the prisoner and always blame him, "Hey! Don't you see we are getting punished because of your fault?"...In retrospect, the absence of sympathy or understanding of the fellow prisoners in these situations was harder and more painful than hard labor, beatings or hunger itself. The purpose of collective punishment was to make prisoners hate and watch each other and work harder. Prisoners are so exhausted and tired at the end of the days' work that they find even walking home difficult. (Hyok Ahn 2002c)

According to this account, prisoners respond to collective punishment with *obedience* to the guards and disunity among themselves. This *weak support* among prisoners *immobilizes* them

[39] Interview data predominately includes examples of control. This may be because more control than rebellion actually takes place in the camps (likely), or because refugees express the compulsion to describe their sufferings while incarcerated (Mi Yeong Jeon 2002; Won-Chul Kang 2002). As one refugee said, "I would like to expose the human right[s] abuses inflicted by the North Korean government to the world so that the people in North Korea could escape from a life of humiliation and live freely as soon as possible" (Hae-Nam Ji 2002). Hence, focusing primarily on their rebellion within the camps may not best serve the agendas of former prisoners and guards who speak out.

from achieving the kind of *encouragement* and *cooperation* they need to initiate formidable group opposition to camp authorities. Thus, in some cases, guards successfully thwart bonds between prisoners.

Differences between responses of *immobilized* and *explicitly resistant* prisoners may be traceable to their pre-camp social statuses. Prisoners' sense of whether or not they are entitled to act is likely to be associated with the social position, identity, and relationships they held prior to imprisonment (Bourdieu 1994[1987]; Bourdieu 1992; Laurin, Fitzsimons and Kay 2011). Deviant labeling in the camp does not appear to cause prisoners to abandon ways of relating to others that have been socially ingrained in them. This can account for inconsistencies in responses when some prisoners are *immobilized* while others *explicitly resist.*

However, other accounts show great unity in prisoner responses to shared oppression. Notably, Hyok explains that animosity between prisoners was more distressing than physical pain. This shows that prisoners emotionally value trust and community bonds that sometimes develop from their *identification* with one another. Prisoners have *rehumanized* each other through open resistance to *control* in the form of *public execution*.

Public execution is a particularly insidious form of *collective punishment* for several reasons. Firstly, a public death means that a prisoner will *never exit* the camp alive or with dignity reclaimed through rebellion. Secondly, premature death as lack of control epitomizes the ultimate power of the state. Thirdly, prisoners can be understood as constituting an "audience" which is simultaneously *forced to observe* and *threatened* by the execution being "staged" by camp officials (Goffman 1959). The possibility of being personally victimized in this way increases the likelihood that surviving prisoners will *comply to minimize risk of death*. Most prisoners seem to do this by remaining silent and watching the execution as guards order them to do (Lee Baek-lyong 2002; Young-kuk Lee 2002).[40] Such compliance can constitute

[40] However, others are *forced to participate* as well. Kang Chol Hwan recalls being made to participate in stonings, telling documentary filmmakers "You were ideologically unsound if you didn't join in throwing stones. There was *no other option*" (Garapedian 2001; emphasis added).

prisoners' *strategic resistance*, a form of *rebellion*.

Alternatively, viewership may make prisoners more likely to *internalize their oppression,* since watching the execution embodies a *repetition of messages*. The fundamental message of executions is that consequences of resistance are dire in prison. The *internalization of oppression* thus *represses* prisoners causing them to *perceive no choices* because if they look away, walk away, or openly object to the execution, they will be shot to death by guards (Lee Baek-lyong 2002).

Yet the *perception of no choices* can also increase the likelihood of *rebellion*. Some prisoners have challenged threatening messages displayed through executions, *rehumanizing* themselves and each other in the process. Two former prisoners separately witnessed protest as *explicit resistance* by Ahn Sung-eun, a 60-year-old man who was executed for protesting the death of a fellow prisoner who was dragged behind a vehicle while other prisoners were made to watch (Lee Baek-lyong 2002; Young-kuk Lee 2002). A former prisoner explains

> The horrible scene of Hahn's death was too much for the old man to endure without protest. He rushed out in front of the unwilling spectators and shouted: "How could you kill a man for a handful of salt in his pocket? And in such horrendous ways? On top of all you made us watch it all and dip our fingers in his blood!" The old man had obviously been shocked to insanity by Hahn's execution and was *unable to control himself*. Shots rang out in the middle of his protest and the man fell dead. Six to ten people per month were victimized as the old Ahn Sung-eun. (Lee Baek-lyong 2002)

That Lee believes Ahn Sung-eun to have been insane – therefore, unable to control himself - indicates the common view among refugees that prisoners who patiently comply can survive (Chul-Hwan Kang 2002e). But Ahn Sung-eun disregarded his role as a passive audience member at the scene of the execution and openly objected to the idea that the state, and their proxy, the guards should have unmitigated, absolute control over prisoners' lives. By thus disputing Hahn's death, Ahn Sung-eun shifted other prisoners' focus from threat of death to the question of whether death in the camps is justified. In other words, he exercised an opinion that rehumanized "the prisoner," impugning his own and others' dehumanization and objectification in the camps (Chul-Hwan Kang 2002e; Myung-cheol Ahn 2002; Young Soon Kim 2002). By publically denouncing his persecutors, Ahn Sung-eun interfered with the *transfixion*

that *immobilized* fellow prisoners at the scene. He was killed in order for guards to preserve complete control over prisoners in the camp. Such prisoner recollections demonstrate the uncompromising severity of conditions to which prison inmates are exposed.

Yet prisoners also respond to their harsh environment with pro-social beneficence, indicating that kindness or dignity is not always eradicated among recipients of cruel treatment. Despite sometimes incongruous interests and the consistent, systemic maintenance of hostility within camp life, prisoners retain agency and perform *altruistic* acts among themselves. Throughout the testimonies, refugees share stories that epitomize the overpowering harshness of conditions to which prisoners are exposed. Former prisoner Park Young-lan describes *infanticide* of prisoners' offspring as a general rule in the camps (2002). At the scene of one birth, however, all of the prisoners who were present tore off and gave some of their clothing to make a blanket for the baby before guards ordered one of them to kill the newborn. Preceding their having to smother the baby, prisoners gathered around to bless the baby and mother. That prisoners would offer parts of a vital resource (clothing) to welcome the child of a fellow prisoner into the world shows solidarity and *strong support* among them. Through *altruistic* acts, prisoners fortify themselves as a social group. This reaction not only rehumanizes, but is a source of empowerment; it shows that prisoners recognize and use their agency even in conditions of extreme oppression.

Again, this is why prisoners are expected to fulfill work quotas as a team; they are threatened with joint punishment intended to create an "absence of sympathy" between them (Hyok Ahn 2002c). Hence, *collective punishment* is contradictory: the collective ethos of socialist and communist societies is distorted by group-oriented punishment. Faced with incompatible rules and expectations, prisoners have equally contrary reactions such as opposing the camp system by surviving through compliance, or rebelling by refusing to cooperate and committing suicide. Even when prisoners *explicitly resist* by attempting to escape, they often die by this route. Yong Kim stated: "Everyone knows that venturing even a small step away from the workplace will be considered an escape attempt, and would certainly mean an immediate death" (2002b). Thus, when prisoners *perceive no options*, they are more

willing to advance their own demise in attempting to recover agency lost to guards who have almost absolute power and control in prison camps.

Other inconsistencies in prisoner responses relate to the politically configured milieu of North Korean prison camps. The collective lifestyle permeating North Korean society tends to unremittingly emphasize revolution, despite demanding compliance and conformity to achieve that end. Thus, it is not surprising that children - made to sing the "Song of Revolution" when marching to the camp school - are not exempt from the *collective punishment* described by a former prisoner:

> All the children were skin and bone from undernourishment and looked so weak that they might fall at the slightest push, and I couldn't figure out how they came up with such power when they sang. The children sang the song very loudly because they would be brutally beaten in collective punishment if they failed to sing in unison or sing loudly enough. (Chul-Hwan Kang 2002b)

Under the regime's "three generation rule," the government sends "innocent families of the offenders" to achieve the "'elimination of all bad seeds.' In other words, children and all offspring of serious offenders must be wiped out completely, generation by generation" according to this penal policy (Won-Chul Kang 2002). The three generations to which this rule applies can include grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, children, grandchildren, and spouses. The potency behind such an approach to incarceration is that prisoners experience *anguish, heartbreak,* and *despair* when *forced to observe* the *family torture/punishment* that authorities tell them is caused by their personal deviance (Eun-Cheol Kim 2002; Hyok Ahn 2002b). Whether they believe themselves to be innocent or not, prisoners feel tremendous *guilt/regret* when they witness their family members being subjected to harsh conditions in the camps.

Importantly, former inmates described *despair* and *guilt* over the incarceration of loved ones precisely because of the attachment and devotion that characterized their relationships with family members, and even friends. Indeed, some prisoners' commitment to those with whom they shared intimate bonds occasioned moments of enormous sacrifice. According to one refugee, a man named Yong-il Heo made tremendous efforts to help his wife Yong-sil survive:

> ...in such horrendous circumstances as to not even know about one's own fate, it was likely that you had no strength or the piece [*sic*] of mind to care for your spouse. Nevertheless, he would leave what meat that was distributed at national holidays hidden, not eating it for himself and instead feed his poor wife. He would rush to her after his work is done and wash her and stay next to her for about an hour. In her final days he would take care of all her urination and defecation and take care of her so much sparing no pains whatsoever. Despite such sincerity on the part of her husband, she couldn't make it but passed away. It was really the saddest moments in my life to bury someone who has shared so much of the journey. (Eun-Cheol Kim 2002)

Altruism/shared resources and *love* as prisoner responses to state sanctioned oppression and manipulation is a salient example of resistance. By actively taking steps to help his wife either leave the camp alive or die with dignity, Yong-il Heo was altruistic and provided *strong support*. Prisoners who establish agency in this way can potentially counteract inverse empowerment. Although Yong-sil did not live through her imprisonment, she departed from the camp with the consolation that her humanity was recognized, as evidenced by the decency with which her husband treated her. Moreover, Yong-il Heo's resistance to losing his wife to the punitive camp environment elevated his social power and value among other prisoners; Eun-Cheol Kim described him as "one of the nicest men I could recall" (p. 6). In his exploration of altruism within sociological theory, Wuthnow writes that

> altruism is not an end in itself, but a way to show the power of a new charismatic form of authority....It stands over and against the norms governing ordinary behavior, presenting a radical polar alternative...And yet, altruism is more than opposition alone; it specifies an alternative to ordinary behavior, but does so in an extreme way that opens up a space, as it were, for the individual to engage in self-reflection, and it is generally framed in narratives that provide the individual with role models who illustrate how to be good and decent in the real world. (1993:355)

Yong-il Heo's *altruism* was a crucial form of defiance, one in which he created and maintained an expression of personal power. By doing so, he showed himself and other prisoners how survival is not promoted solely by self-preservation; it is also sometimes advanced by concern for others. This "opens a space" for new forms of authority. Yong-il Heo countered inverse empowerment by enabling his wife to die under his own, watchful care; it is his loving vigilance that Eun-cheol remembers as Yong-sil's prison experience, and not the controlling surveillance of the prison regime. Prisoners who observe *strong support* among themselves provide role models for each other; their *pity/concern/awareness for others* has the potential to

rehumanize and therefore *fortify.* When *morale* is lost to *hopelessness*, supportive relationships and identification with others can be a prisoner's salvation. After Yong-il Heo's wife died, other prisoners became his social support in the confines of prison.

Not all camps incarcerate families, however. Soon Ok Lee and Kim Young said they were individually incarcerated, while others, such as Shin Dong Hyuk and Kang Chol Hwan were incarcerated with several generations of family (Li Sun Ok 2002a; Kim Young 2002a; Chul-Hwan Kang 2002a; Shin Dong Hyuk 2002).[41] Prisoners respond to being incarcerated as a family by feeling relieved at not having been separated and being able to emotionally and materially support each other (Chul-Hwan Kang 2002e). But prisoners concurrently *despair*, feel worried about the wellbeing of family and suffer deeply when family members *never exit*, perishing in the camps.

The hope of someday exiting prison sustains many prisoners, who have rarely been able to escape from the camps despite *temporal incapacitation* (no time or escape/uprise), *camp premises obstacles* (electric fences, pits with spikes) and *topographic obstacles* (physically challenging features of mountainous terrain). Kang recalled that traps were set around the camp to catch escaping prisoners: "we often heard about unsuccessful attempt for escape by desperate prisoners. Often prisoners are found at the bottom of the trap, badly disfigured, spikes throughout the body, making it very difficult to pull up the dead bodies" (2002e). Making prisoners responsible for retrieving dead prisoners from these traps is another way in which prison policies ensure that prisoners are *forced to observe* the consequences of *explicit resistance* in the form of *escape.* A former prisoner remembered Mr. Choi, a fellow prisoner who

> somehow made his way through the iron barred fence of the detention center establishment. Six inmates and two security officers were assigned the task of capturing him. The officers threatened the six[prisoners] that they would be punished for Choi's escape if he was not brought back. Several hours passed and Choi was caught. He was tall and showed hints of a good build, but malnutrition and physical abuse had reduced him to a condition that failed

[41] Similarities and differences across prisons and time periods is an area for future research. Soon Ok Lee and Kim Young were incarcerated without their families in 1987 and 1998, respectively, whereas Chul-Hwan Kang and Eun-Cheol Kim were imprisoned along with their families in 1977 and 2000.

> him. Seeing the unfortunate Choi, a security officer said to the six who captured him: "You know what to do with him." In no time the six men were on top of Choi beating him to a pulp. This went on for hours and the victim was too weak even to squeal. When this was done, all the inmates, about 100 in total, were ordered to line up to witness the end of a failed escape attempt. (Park Young-lan 2002)

Because prisons are built in remote valleys surrounded by mountains, literal escape is a rarity (Kang 2001; Kato et al. 2004; Lee 1999). Even when escape is a possibility, some prisoners choose not to attempt escaping, believing themselves to have better life chances if they stay. A former prisoner said

> There was a bean field at the labor training corps...While working there, there were chances to escape. But if I had escaped from there, I would have had to stay in hiding or continue a life on the run. That is why I decided to serve out my term to the end, no matter how difficult it was. (Kim Young 2002b)

Thus topographic obstacles and forced observation of the deadly consequences of failed escape attempts combat prisoners' hope, and direct them to focus on obedience with the alternative hope of eventual release by authorities.

In trying to regain power lost to officials in the camps, former prisoners recall *hiding knowledge* from interrogators, or attempting *suicide* to evacuate the captivity they despise (Lee Min Sun 2002; Park Young-lan 2002). Both of these responses are prisoners' attempts to recover some control over their lives after the camps eviscerate their power. *Hiding knowledge* is somewhat akin to the Scott's "hidden transcript," which is created by "the practice of domination" and which he defines as "the repository of the assertions whose open expression would be dangerous" (1990:27-40). Such peril was seen in the story of Ahn Sung-eun, the 60-year-old man who outspokenly protested the death of a fellow prisoner. Alternatively, when prisoners hide knowledge from guards, they co-opt surveillance; prisoners use the power of viewing to *strategically resist*, whereas guards use observation as a disciplinary method (Foucault 1995[1975]:177). To "watch" their oppressors while concealing their thoughts and feelings enables prisoners to shift their position as subordinates. Through *hiding knowledge*, they can potentially see and therefore, know more than guards do about circumstance and power relations in prison camps (Collins 2000:107). In this sense, the "double-consciousness" that DuBois (2003[1903]:5) elucidated as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the

eyes of others" can permit those dominated by social relations to distinguish between actual and perceived realities.

Like *escape*, *suicide* is one of the most potent forms of *explicit resistance*. By using self-destruction as a form of release, some prisoners are able to simultaneously end their *degradation* and "leave" the camps. The *perception of no choice* leads prisoners to attempt to transcend the limitations of prison camp life. Prisoners achieve this either through literal survival and escape, or figurative liberation through death. Both options demonstrate the creation of alternatives by prisoners. When they produce potential courses of action for themselves, inmates empower themselves within a prison system designed to limit their options:

> I was subject to extreme brutality and the most degrading and cruel treatment during the investigation at the center...I know of cases of attempted suicide brought on by the severe hardships perpetuated in the prison. (Min-Bok Lee 2002)

> I still don't have any feeling left in my hands. It would also get so terribly cold but we are still left out in the cold tied up on to a post all day with bare feet. It was just so unbearably degrading, just so hard to endure. I and other inmates would talk about exploding the prison when we get out. (Lee Min Sun 2002)

To have discussed detonating the prison among themselves indicates these prisoners' *fury* and *planning ahead*. The intensity of prisoners' hostility and *fury* toward guards is represented by *prisoners' consideration of guards as subhuman* (Eun-Cheol Kim 2002). That prisoners judge guards to be less than human is somewhat ironic; their opinion manifests from harsh treatment by guards who were trained to regard prisoners as subhuman too (Myung-cheol Ahn 2002). Compare these statements by former prisoners about being treated like animals by guards and likewise, former inmates viewing guards as beasts:

> There I was treated like a beast and experienced things that you cannot even begin to imagine. (Yong Kim 2002a)

> The strong belief of the children that they can survive in the camp only by eating anything they find made children to be like wild beasts. (Hyok Ahn 2002c)

> "Don't you know that security officers are beasts, not human beings. They do everything according to their wills, don't they?" my uncle responded. (Chul-Hwan Kang 2002e)

> The guards of the camp treated all inmates like beasts, calling them by the name of "tailless beasts" and beating them at random. (Li Sun Ok 2002a)
>
> It was almost as if we were no longer human beings, but more like goods being exchanged. I agonized over what would lie ahead. A worse feeling was realizing that the regime which virtually created our crimes to cover its own faults was treating us like beasts. Who made criminals of us? (Hyuk Kim 2002)

In Hyuk Kim's statement above, former prisoner Hyuk Kim astutely draws attention to processes underlying the socialization of prisoners and guards. An important source of guard behavior toward prisoners and each other is the prison camp training they receive. However, the negative perception of prisoners that the state reinforces through guard initiation into camps does not always adhere. And while most guards appear to use the camp system to their advantage, some begin to doubt state justification for mistreating prisoners, even becoming complicit with prisoner resistance (Hyok Ahn 2002c).

Guards

Although most of what is known about guards comes from the testimonies of prisoners, this, in combination with two testimonies of former guards provides a clear representation of how some guards operate within working conditions (Choi Dong Chul 2002; Kang 2001; Kato et al. 2004; Myung-cheol Ahn 2002). Because guards are stationed in camps as part of their military duty, they often seem to perceive themselves to lack agency regarding camp policies. Guards typically have little or no choice but to act out state control, though there are exceptions (Buntman 2012). Such policy as torturing prisoners to obtain confessions requires self-comportment to which some guards respond with *shock* or *terror* (Kato et al. 2004). Other guards performed their duties with reported relish; Ahn Myong Chol once shared with a news reporter:

> Sometimes I used to drink alcohol together and chat together with the people in the division of torture, and when the officer in the division is in a good mood, the prisoners will be treated mildly. And when he had an argument with his wife at home, then the torture will be severe...I saw that by beating the person, the muscle was damaged and the bone was exposed, outside, and they put salt on the wounded part. At the beginning I was frightened...but it was repeated again and again, so my feelings were paralyzed.
>
> I was instructed to beat a disabled person by my superior, and I had no choice but to obey...I thought it is natural to punish or beat a guilty person. Because I was a driver, and I was a guard. But in the course of time, I had the

> opportunity to talk to the prisoners and found they are not guilty. And when I see the senior citizen kneel down in front of young guard, and he was treated badly, then my heart was breaking. And I thought this is not a humane thing…I wished to get out of this guard job…I didn't change my way of thinking here in South Korea, in order to buy people's hearts. (*MSNBC News* 2003)

Both former prisoners and former guards described most prison camp guards as especially *cruel* and *lacking remorse*; yet some others were remembered for their compassion (Hyok Ahn 2002a; 2002c). Regardless of their characterization by refugees, guards actually wield and exercise substantial power to decide not only the fates of prisoners, but of themselves as well.

For example, guards are technically prohibited from killing prisoners indiscriminately (Kato et al. 2004). The problem with this rule is that prison camps also administer a reward system that encourages guards to circumvent protocol, resulting in an arrangement in which guards (but not the state) may either be held accountable or rewarded for arbitrarily killing prisoners. This distancing of responsibility by the DPRK invokes Bauman's (1989) perspective. The bureaucracy in which the gulag is situated facilitates state use of "modern" and "efficient" means of disposing human life (1989:114). To achieve this, the state manipulates guards in at least two ways. Firstly, guards fulfill mandatory military service through their camp assignments. Their work supposedly makes them patriots. Secondly, guards who kill escapees are "entitled to study in the college. Because of that some guards kill innocent people[by forcing prisoners to climb electric fences]" (Kang et al. 1998:6). Hence, contradictory regulations make the camp environment conducive to disorder and highly vulnerable to guard misbehavior. Guards' negotiation of power within the larger system of stratification is thus reflected in the "rewards" approach to control used by the North Korean regime (Windram 2003).

Duty and Threat

However, with potential advantages of guard work come potential dangers. Guards are highly aware of liabilities associated with responsibility for prisoners. Those who fail to comply with duties could become prisoners (Myung-cheol Ahn 2002). This is salient (if rare) because it helps to explain that some guards' particularly violent conduct toward prisoners may be a method of defense through offense, in addition to guards' being persuaded by propaganda and

ideology training. The response of some guards to the oppressive work environment in prison camps.

As noted, during *orientation and training* guards are pressured to *dehumanize* prisoners. Similar to Zimbardo's (2007) findings, the coercive initiation that DPRK guards experience lays the foundation for their terrorizing prisoners. The inculcation of brutality largely depends on the state's ability to successfully label prisoners as deviant and hostile (Becker 1963; Pfohl 2009). Such menacing social characterizations are made more persuasive by their proximity: guards are *forced to observe* the repercussions of imprisonment when they see how allegedly aberrant prisoners live and are treated. In addition, part of guard training involves being personally *threatened*, as one former guard explained:

> We were told from day one that the prisoners in the camp were the enemy of people and we must not show any sympathy toward them. If we did, we would become like them. In other words, we were told that they were not human...However, I realized that the political prisoners were human...but I couldn't do anything to help because my duty was to guard them. (Myung-cheol Ahn 2002)

A key detail issuing from Ahn's testimony is his sense of having been unable to help prisoners because doing so would violate his responsibility as a guard. Hence, his *compliance to minimize death* involved doing his "duty" by guarding prisoners. This compliance increases the likelihood of both *perpetual vigilance* and *realization of truth*. Were Ahn to have been caught by fellow guards or his supervisors showing sympathy to any prisoner, he too would have been imprisoned. Foucault's (1997[1975]) assertions that institutions use surveillance to *control* apply to North Korean prison guards, who not only surveil prisoners but also each other. Supervisors and experienced guards might particularly observe the behavior of newer guards who, unaccustomed as Ahn was during training, may err by treating prisoners with some forbearance. But Ahn's imprisonment would only have taken place if he had been caught sympathizing with prisoners; this would constitute *rebellion*. It is significant then, that Ahn talks about reality in terms of what is seen and known by fellow guards.[42] State *control* over

[42] Threat of imprisonment for all North Koreans is based on whether or not a credible source detects incriminating evidence. Prisoners, of course, are not considered credible sources in

Ahn contributed to his *perceiving no choices*, which he indicates played a role in his *rebelling*. He recalls "While I was a soldier in active service I left the prison camp, stealing two AK rifles and six guns from the magazine, and headed across the border. Fellow soldiers chased me to the area of the Tumen River" (2002).[43] At the same time, Ahn's *rebellion* by *escape* (from both the camp and North Korea) increased his *perceiving no choice*. Returning to his guard post or even North Korea is not an option for Ahn because the consequences of his unauthorized absence are severe, including *public execution*.[44]

Authorities responsible for restricting the liberties of others inhibit their own autonomy in the process. This can be understood as the reverse of Foucault's theory of panoptic control; prisoners who monitor guards to survive may do well. But learning the habits, moods, and the intensity of punishments meted out by individual guards is important to the endurance of prisoners. As Foucault points out, new forms of power precipitate new forms of resistance (1997[1975]). Such resistance can manifest in prisoners' surveillance of guards (Buntman 2012). Both prisoners and guards potentially benefit from the power they gain through observing others in the prison camp, but knowledge as power is transposed when knowing is obligatory. Memorization of camp rules, presence (and participation) during executions, and recognition of hardship to which inmates are exposed underscore the subjugation of North Korean prison guards.

Forced Knowledge

The *perpetual vigilance* of fellow authorities shaped Ahn's understanding of what behaviors and norms from him would be socially acceptable. By limiting boundaries on appropriate guard behavior, prison authorities repress guards and increase their likelihood of *perceiving no choices* other than to obey work rules. Yet, such perception allowed Ahn to *realize the truth* about propaganda driving prison policies. For Ahn, that truth was that not

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North Korea and therefore authorities there more easily dismiss accusations from them (Amnesty International 2012).

[43] Part of the border between North Korea and China runs along the Tumen River.

[44] Former prisoner Eun-Cheol Kim (2002) remembered that "When I came out of the prison camp, they made me agree to a written oath with a hand stamp. The pledge read: "I will face execution if I reveal the secrets of Yodok." Like inmates, guards who abscond from prison camps or the DPRK cannot openly return to either, if they wish to avoid harsh penalties.

only were prisoners human and relatable, but guards were expected to severely punish prisoners, at least some of whom guards believed to be innocent. Ahn thus *rebelled* by abandoning his job, demonstrating *explicit resistance* by escaping from the camp and North Korea. To *rebel* after having *perceived no choices* means that Ahn continued to look for options despite their apparent absence.

The state expected Ahn to oppress prisoners and he felt oppressed in the process. He complied for a time, knowing that refusal to do so would result in his own imprisonment – a result worth avoiding. When he ran away - leaving one's post is an act of defiance for which other guards have been imprisoned or shot (Butterworth 2007) - Ahn purposely risked death to recover power lost to dominant groups – in this case, the power of choice lost to prison officials. Thus, he demonstrates that the discretion of guards exists despite policy that attempts to regulate it through propaganda and intimidation.

In some cases, *guards and prisoners* are subject to *similar rules/punishments*; one articulated his dread of a prison lab that purportedly conducted experiments on humans:

> "The Valley of Death"...became the subject of fear at the prison camp for both prisoners and security guards alike...I often heard from my bosses that Department 3 was not just a jail. They were doing experiments on living humans and chemical experiments in a facility built in an underground tunnel. Although they had the title security agent, we found out that they were medical doctors and treated almost the same as a major general of a prison camp...In North Korea, major generals of prison camps have a great deal of power. (Myung-cheol Ahn 2002)

Two aspects of Ahn's memory stand out: that he often heard macabre information from his superiors may mean that spreading rumors is a method that officials use to manipulate camp guards. Secondly, Ahn's mention of the power held by doctors and major generals of prison camps highlights his keen awareness of a social hierarchy in which guards are only above "prison team leaders" (prisoners who are in charge of work groups).

Thus, guards experience substantial coercion not only in their initial assignment to camps but through their continued function as authority figures with minimal privileges. On one hand, the relative distribution of power in prison camps makes guards appear have more control than they do simply because they are juxtaposed with prisoners, who have the least social power in

North Korea. Guards' lack of power within the national-level, administrative hierarchy compounds their desperation as mandatory employees of an insolvent state. But because guards have relatively little power, some may perceive their obedience to authority and exploitation of dominance over prisoners as a means of accumulating power that is limited to and within prison camps.

Kindness and Terror

While most accounts of guards emphasize their cruelty, some testimonies identify the compassion that some guards reportedly showed prisoners. *Guard compassion* indicates that the reproduction of dominance relations through social processes fluctuates; when mutual status recognition of guards with prisoners occurs, the social identity ascribed to guards is fractured. In the prison camp environment, guards who show prisoners mercy are intrepid. As one former prisoner relates:

> ...some teachers were kind. Mr. K.W. Kim...never beat children and [was] particularly kind...He pretended to scold the hildren[*sic*] in a loud voice in the presence of other teachers, but joked with children *when there is no other teacher around* and, often, tried to reduce the work quota for the children. Once...the kind teacher...produced a bag of candy and tenderly told the children, "You never had candy before, did you? All of you, come and take some." Then, he added, "Don't tell anybody that I gave you candy. I didn't like this candy and I am only throwing them away. That's all." Teachers like him never stayed for more than two years and were replaced by more brutal teachers. The security officers also watch and inform about each other and therefore cannot be kind to children even should they want to be. (Hyok Ahn 2002c; emphasis added)

Here, *guard pretense* enabled a teacher to *strategically resist* authority by *disobeying to assist another* (child prisoners). This example shows how the relative distribution of power in prison camps can shift; when guards recognize that their agency to shape social relations can be used for prosocial purposes, they can even perform small acts of heroism (Zimbardo 2007:466). By volunteering to potentially sacrifice personal safety while serving others and without the motive of reward, some guards challenge the "power of institutions to influence individual behavior" (Zimbardo 2007:466). This guard ("teacher") made it clear to the children that they should keep his kindness a secret, reflecting the danger he knew in showing mercy in a highly surveilled social environment where he was expected to be "more brutal."

Therefore, obedience to authority is a question of rational decision-making for North Koreans recruited into camp guard work. Former guards justified their inhumane acts by reasoning that prisoners must deserve debasement and torture. In addition, former guards stressed that by disobeying orders they would become prisoners themselves. Seemingly indiscriminate violence within camps then, is actually organized around carefully weighed objectives at all levels of power and control.

Nonetheless, the testimonies show that the courage required to challenge camp policies is atypical among guards; this is not irrational, given that they know the costs of being caught breaching rules. Most guards respond to their *jobs as work* where violence is intrinsic to the workings of the gulag. A minority of guards is either excessively strict or unusually sympathetic. Some guards are, however, distinguished by their *cruelty/lack of remorse*:

> Song-Kun Choi had a notorious reputation for brutally. He maintained discipline so harshly...Choi was very proud of his reputation and used to boast about it...One day, a primary school boy murmured something to himself while carrying dung in a bucket. The child next to him informed...[Choi, who]...rushed to the malefactor, beat him, and kicked him hard all over when he fell...The teacher kicked the weak child into the dung bucket. The child struggled hard and got out of the bucket. By this time, he was covered with dung and blood all over his body and...could hardly hold himself up but he was given punishment of carrying dung all day long that day. He was whipped hard each time he moved slowly or stopped moving. He was told to use his hands to get dung out of the bucket and spread it in the field. The child had worked hard in the morning and part of afternoon when he finally fell with foam in his mouth. *Children shook with anger at the teacher for the teacher's barbaric behavior but could not help the sufferer for fear of punishment*...The children went home at sunset but the child remained motionless, lying on the ground...the next day...the child's mother[was] holding her dead son and crying. There were a few teachers and the school principal around; *none of them showed the slightest regret or remorse on their faces*...Teachers had various ways of punishing children and were extremely cruel. (Hyok Ahn 2002c; emphasis added)

This example of guard mistreatment echoes former prisoner Shin's account of the small child killed for having wheat in her pocket. In both cases, guards maintained dynamics of power by *beating* and *terrifying* prisoners. Again, prisoners feared openly rebuking the guards and *censored* themselves.

The extent to which guards and prisoners control their own reactions to the camp environment makes refugee testimonies particularly meaningful. Many refugees ended their

interviews with criticism for the North Korean regime, expressions of gratitude for being alive, and a sense of responsibility to *tell/remind the world* about their experiences in the prison system. A female refugee offered her own analysis in an interview:

> North Korean people are no different from any other human beings in this world. They became the world's poorest and most backward people because of human rights violations perpetrated by the two Kims. I believe the North Korean regime must go...I am an ordinary grandmother, but since I have lived 60 years experiencing a rough and tumultuous life in North Korea, I can attest to this with confidence. I implore all...to...make an effort for those who have passed and those still imprisoned...it can be achieved and I believe in that. (Young Soon Kim 2002)

The voices of North Korean prison camp refugees have emerged despite current regime efforts to extinguish and *discredit* them through punitive policies and practices. Yet refugees show that lack of open rebellion is not a reflection of cultural mores or even political beliefs. Rather, the main objectives of prisoners and guards in the sample are to either leave the camps with their lives or die in opposition to the forces oppressing them. They weigh their options moment by moment, and some report having deliberately *returned to the camps to protect family* members from punishment for attempting escape:

> My parents cried and dissuaded me that there might be guards at all stations. They asked me what they should do and talked me into going back to the camp. Running away during the preliminary would bring *us* severe punishment. I should take into account that I might be caught at the Chinese border.
>
> Worries that my parents might go through hardship after I leave halted me somehow. It was right for me to leave North with my parents after I complete my prison term. I went back to the camp with my parents. I tried to make an excuse as saying that it was nothing but hunger that prompted me to escape, which they would not listen at all.
>
> That evening I ran the gauntlet. With my hands and legs shackled and my knees knelt, my groin was trod by six guards. They said a runner should have his leg broken. (Bang Seong-un 2002; emphasis added)

To return to the camps after having escaped contradicts expectations for survival, until it becomes apparent that prisoners protect others by going back. Such *altruism* and *love* indicates that the perseverance of some prisoners can, on occasion, counteract inverse empowerment. This was illustrated by the example of Yong-il Heo, whose sacrifices for his wife defied control. Yong-il's *altruism* was an extension of self-preservation. However, the testimony of Bang Seong-un (2002) demonstrates an unfavorable aspect of *altruism* and *love*.

By returning to the camp to protect his parents, Bang made a decision that decreased his own liberty and power. He achieved but then relinquished agency, inversing his empowerment to defend his family. Thus, *altruistic* responses to prison camp oppression can be either empowering or the inverse of empowerment.

Multiple inconsistencies that appear in the phenomena can be explained by closer examination of the nuanced contexts in which they occur. Former prisoner and guard testimonies provide evidence for what I term *inverse empowerment theory*: contradictory elements of oppression that appear when alienated (that is, hostile, oppressed, brutalized isolated, or marginalized) groups inadvertently or purposely advance their own demise in attempting to recover power lost to dominant groups. When prisoners who *perceive no choices* paradoxically look for options nonetheless, their approach to empowerment has the reverse effect of increasing their vulnerability. Among other examples, this can be seen in the little girl having hidden food, Ahn's vocal protest, and the open riot recalled by several former prisoners.

The burden of trying to organize subversive acts under perilous conditions makes such riots a rarity among North Korean refugee testimonies. The *disappointment* and *sense of doom* described by prisoners is part of the camp process of stripping inmates of a sense of personal agency. In situations where *total institutionalization* removes the "efficacy, choice, and predictability" that constitutes "personal control," *confusion* begins to replace *hope* (Goodstein, MacKenzie and Shotland 1984:344). Without the personal control to plan ahead long-term, prisoners and guards in this study judged their options as very limited or non-existent. Thus, *perceived no choices* encompasses behaviors and decisions made by prisoners and guards in the prison camps. The seemingly paradoxical behaviors of prisoners and guards reflect their views of constrained courses of action. Such perception creates an inverse relationship between power and agency: social actions intended to empower can have the reverse effect of diminishing agency. Prisoners and guards strive for liberation through life as well as death, and in this way, reflect contradictory functions built into the prison camp system.

Implications

Inverse empowerment theory is grounded in the data examined throughout this report. As North Korean refugees reported, oppressive conditions of imprisonment impress upon them that they have few, if any options. Paradoxically, some prisoners and guards adopt silence to survive and thus resist, while others openly defy the prison system and are silenced by the authorities who operate it. The key here is that actions or inactions intended to empower the social being can result in a decrease in power. This means that perception of choice may be as influential on social behaviors as actual choices available. Hence, some prisoners and guards attempted to or successfully escaped, showing that in North Korean prisons, actual choices are obscured by perceived choices.

In sociology, conflict and adversity are often the foci of power dynamics and rightly so; a great deal of information indicates that abuse of power takes place at all levels of social life (Foucault 1997[1975]; Knights and Willmott 1989; Wrong 1968). But power is fundamentally energy, and can be used by social groups as a synergistic source of resilience and strength. I am not the first to assert that power is more than mere action, or an imposition of one's will to gain status or control (Collins 2000; Weber 1991[1948]; Zimbardo 2007). However, instances of *altruism/shared resources* and *love* from North Korean prisoner and guard testimonies advance the notion of power as a potentially benevolent force; one in which influence does not require dominance, and where fortitude can be increased by tolerance. Importantly, the power of assisting others is a response to oppression that invigorated some prisoners and guards, and initiated the giving and receiving of *strong support*. Exercising agency in this way has the potential to counteract inverse empowerment: when prisoners and guards helped others, they cultivated social power and personal efficacy. And whether prisoners and guards ultimately obtained dignity in death or attempted to leave the camps alive, their *perception of no choice* increased the likelihood of their resistance. Altruism was one of the most formidable forms of resistance to emerge from the testimonies. That altruism was sometimes linked to perception of no choice underscores that prisoner and guard responses are part of complex, contradictory social systems and relationships.

Implications about broader social phenomena can be derived from refugee observations. Their accounts facilitate reconceptualizing the meaning of interactions and responses in coercive conditions. In the North Korean prison camps, methods of resistance involving silence or inaction should be understood as strategic but not "passive." The conflation of passivity with submission, and assertion with aggression is problematic (D. Kim 2011). There is little that is passive and much that is persistently assertive about resistance that requires perseverance despite beatings, torture, and ruthlessness by governments whose dominance is threatened by "those whom they oppress" (Douglass 1995[1845]; Ghandi 1996[1869-1948]; King Jr. 1991[1986]; Rohrlich 1998).

According to Seth (2011:5) "much of Korean history has been a story of resistance." Refugee testimonies highlight that what constitutes power and resistance can take many forms; these are shaped by political, economic, historical, and judicial structures, all of which are encapsulated in sociological analysis emphasizing context. Former prisoners and guards in this study who navigated through formidable circumstances provide us with the opportunity to try and understand how DPRK structures are instrumental to the types of individual and group agency with which some prisoners and guards respond.

Chapter 5: Concluding Thoughts

One of the last communist strongholds in the world, North Korea has been described as a "strange" dystopia (Lee 2001). Although little is known about North Korean society in general, stories shared by refugees confront problems, concerns, and achievements that are common to all people: whose will is imposed upon whom, and what does this mean for families, communities, and generations to come? In the context of the prison camps additional barriers such as *starvation* and *family torture/punishment* complicate more common struggles. A North Korean woman who worries about how she will feed her children during a famine faces the additional burden of *anxiety* and *anguish* when she lives in a prison camp. Not only is food scarcer, but she also knows that her children are never safe in the camps, being subject to mistreatment by guards at any time. Guards too, are limited by the dominance hierarchy in which noncompliance imperils their lives, but that they are complicit in maintaining. Therefore, the question of how prisoners and guards respond to camp conditions in the DPRK is a momentous one.

This research also has theoretical implications with the potential to expand the way paradoxical social behaviors are understood. When refugees described how they reacted to their experiences, what becomes clear is that they frequently *perceived no choices*. This view emerged from the meaning refugees imbued in their experiences. It also shaped how former prisoners and guards attempted to influence circumstances in their interests. To attempt to leave the camps alive or die with dignity meant that refugees routinely used action or inaction to manipulate an outcome. But often, instead of the expected result, refugees' behaviors had the reverse effect of increasing their powerlessness. I call this inverse empowerment theory, stressing that inverse empowerment should not be confused with apathy despite sometimes taking the form of action through inaction (such as *complying to minimize risk of death*). Nor can artificial obedience be explained as a cultural norm; resistance is as embedded in Korean cultural traditions as is reverence for duty and fidelity (D. Kim 2011). The micro-social negotiation of power in prisons takes place within macro-social systems of stratification

throughout North Korea. As former North Korean prisoners report, oppressive conditions of imprisonment impress upon them that they have few, if any options.

These findings have academic, economic, political and humanitarian implications. Inverse empowerment theory offers a means for understanding complex and often contradictory ways in which stratification and power shape social life. Former prisoners and guards endure severe hardships and are often reticent to discuss their experiences in the North Korean prison camps. However, it is evident from their testimonies that they articulate themselves to help others recognize what has happened to them, and continues to happen to others. The Kim regime has gone to great lengths to deny, *control* and *discredit* the voices of prison camp witnesses. But the government of the DPRK can be challenged by the "endurance of those whom they oppress" (Douglass 1995[1857]). And so, the last words of this study belong to them:

> The world must know. If the Kim Jong-il dictatorship does not end, there will be no protection of human rights, freedom and human life. (Kwang Il Park 2002)
>
> More must be revealed of the criminal acts there that violated humanity. (Myung-cheol Ahn 2002)
>
> I give you the promise that I will devote my small self to the peaceful reunification of Korea. When that day should come, I will go to Pyongyang to teach my friends and my children the truth about KIM[*sic*] Il-sung and KIM[*sic*] Jong-il. I will serve as a voice crying out for everyone to live in the spirit of democracy. (Yong Kim 2002b)
>
> We would like to show you how much we enjoy our life and would like to repay your kindness in full. We'll try our best to live happy and joy. (Soon-I Seol 2002)

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