

SPINNING THE YARD: RISKY THERAPY

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“Spinning the yard” means walking around the yard (clockwise or counter-clockwise). Inmates spin the yard every day during each recreational period. Typically the yard is a square, but within that square is a circle. For many, it is an addiction. Continually observed by correctional officers, the yard (260 ft. x 260 ft.) can often feel like a zoo. The circle within the yard is imaginary, yet everyone follows the same path.

This aspect of prison culture has both positive and negative implications. We spend so much of our time spinning the yard that I wanted to figure out why. Is spinning the yard contagious and habitual? Who created a circle within this square? And why do inmates spin the yard? To find out, I spoke with several inmates in the yard over the course of two weeks. I learned that spinning helps inmates to reclaim social status, process thoughts, socialize, and display strength, yet sometimes at the expense of their own wellbeing.

Prison is a very stressful environment and the yard is a place where frustrations are released. There are several accounts regarding the origins of the term “spinning,” but what I found interesting was its relation to a preexisting phrase: “taking a lap.”¹ Although similar to spinning the yard, the original meaning of *taking a lap* implies that the rotations were less frequent than what it eventually became. My friend Quadre mentioned the term when he exclaimed, “Even when I was in D.F.Y.² [Division for Youth], we was spinning the yard but we called it ‘taking a lap.’” Yet when I asked Quadre where the term comes from, he pointed to life before prison. “In the streets we used to say ‘come with me, let’s spin real quick.’” He also added that “the term is a new twist on taking a lap or walking the yard. In Five Points³ the term refers to walking. Even when I was in Sing-Sing⁴ we never used that term, but I think the term comes from the actual act of walking around the yard.” Quadre continued, “Old timers⁵ back in the days, mid 60s-70s took a spin with a young brother and schooled him about prison culture. The O.G.’s⁶ probably said, ‘let’s walk around the yard and give people knowledge of the prison.’ But our generation put a spin on it and said, ‘let’s spin the yard.’” This account has positive implications, for the initial purpose dealt with familiarizing one with prison, yet there are also some negative aspects of spinning the yard.

The yard is crowded. At first it appears a normal day; several inmates are scattered in the yard in tribal groups of fives. Each group is distinguished by a specific skin shade and gang affiliation: Bloods, Crips, Muslims, Latin Kings, MS-

¹ Taking a lap is walking around the yard either clockwise or counter clockwise.

² Division for Youth is a juvenile jail (i.e., Spofford).

³ Five Points is a maximum A. prison located in Romulus, New York.

⁴ Sing-Sing is a maximum B. prison located in Ossining New York.

⁵ “Old Timer” is an old person who has been in prison since the 60-80s.

⁶ O.G.” is reference to original gangster.

13s, Trinitarios, God Bodies, West Indians and Aryan Nation. Each group spins the yard.

A young, brown-skinned male was walking with a couple of familiar faces from his neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. The vibe in the yard feels unusual — I didn't quite know what it was exactly. At the time, I was several feet away speaking with a couple of friends about Trump's biases towards immigrants despite the fact that his wife is an immigrant. As the men were spinning the yard, another group of men were spinning counter clockwise. A few minutes later the young brown-skinned male was running across the yard. His face had been slashed and blood covered his jaw and neck. His eyes were wide and he seemed intoxicated. The yard became dream-like and everything moved in slow motion. Tribal groups clung to their people like infants cling to their mothers. I stood still, alert, and I had a strong feeling the slashing was over something small and unimportant.

On a typical day, the yard would be filled with inmates using the telephone, exercising, playing sports, socializing, and systematically spinning the yard. Usually, the prison yard is filled with approximately one hundred inmates, scattered throughout like pedestrians at a shopping mall. Many take part in conversation or smoke cigarettes while some sit at benches playing chess, cards, and dominoes. Others simply sit at their territorial bench areas.

The telephones are always crowded, for the telephones are commodities in the yards. Each prison yard has approximately twenty to forty phones for inmates to contact their families. Phone companies such as Global-tel-link and Securus, connect families across the country. Each telephone call is thirty minutes so some inmates would spin the yard for half an hour, then seize their turn on the telephone. As several inmates talk with enthusiasm on the twenty telephones stationed against the wall in the yard, others stand nearby waiting for their turn. This is common practice but not all inmates spin the yard to kill time.

While spinning the yard, inmates kill time, age, and vent their frustrations. For example, an inmate would spin the yard with a companion to express the good and bad in his life. Vulnerability is allowed and it is never exploited. In fact, my friend "Quadre," elaborated on the significance of spinning the yard after having a bad family visit. Quadre lamented, "I would spin the yard usually when I had something going on internally. For instance, I had a fucked up visit today and instead of sitting in my cell dwelling on it, I came to the yard to spin. I had to talk to one of my comrades, and I know that he don't want to hear me vent all the time but he listens to me and my problems." Clearly, spinning was helpful for Quadre's mental stability; and the Labyrinth, which is the maze/yard he is confined is where he leaves his problems. When an inmate returns to his cell after spinning the yard he feels drained, hungry and tired. Yard recreation in the evening begins at 6:30pm and ends at 9:45pm, so, many inmates spin for a substantial amount of time within those time periods. One can kill a lot of time spinning prison yards — time you can never get back. This killing of time is a good thing and bad thing. On one end, your days are going by fast and on the other you're wasting precious time. Gray hairs become visible and one can't help to think about the progress he would have made if he was home. The yard evokes a sense of nostalgia.

To me, spinning the yard feels like walking through an inner city neighborhood. As I turned each corner of the yard it reminded me of corners in New York City. Although there were no bodegas or Chinese restaurants, the crowds of inmates that were posted on the corners made me feel as if I was in the ghetto. I find this alarming because it made prison feel like it is a natural setting and made me feel as if I belong here, or like *we* belong here. There were a few people that I recognized who greeted me with a ‘what’s up?’ or a handshake, but the majority of the people were occupied through conversation. After thirty minutes of spinning I realized that I had been power walking, for I felt tired and naturally slowed my pace. I had been thinking about so many things at once, where unconsciously I sped up my pace. Naturally and instinctively I was hyper-aware of my surroundings because I could feel tension in certain areas of the yard and I recognized this while I was spinning. I’ve been incarcerated for nineteen years, so tension is easily identifiable. For instance, body language, sudden unusual movement, shouting, grouping, silence, all are telltale signs of something brewing in this melting pot of a prison. Ironically, there was a sense of *déjà vu* each time I passed my initial starting point of spinning, for I had been going nowhere fast. Though I was conducting my research as a participant, individually spinning the yard, there were several instances where I felt compelled and obligated to stop and converse with inmates I knew or allow them to accompany me. Either way, we all come to the yard to travel. In the yard you’re going nowhere fast and you can lose your sense of time and space.

For many prisoners, spinning the yard is an activity where they can signal social status or strengthen affiliations. When a prisoner enters the yard, he is automatically schooled—directly or indirectly. I asked my friend Big Boy a question the other day. I asked; “if he thought there was a difference between the black, white, and Hispanic inmates who spin the yard?” His response spoke to perception rather than clear distinctions. Big Boy explained, “Yeah...different ethnic circles take this prison life more serious than others, they groom their young and their newcomers to prison life for their ideology of prison life.” I find that many older prisoners show the newer prisoners who enter the prison system the ropes, so to speak. The newer prisoners are informed of who’s who, what lines not to cross and their new roles in the prison environment. Some are turned into beasts.

Many prisoners identify themselves and others as animals, from Lions, big Dogs, Wolves, Silverback Gorillas, to Cats, Snakes, Rats and Birds with positive and negative social implications. These characteristics are empowering for some, while labels such as rat or snake may be detrimental for others. I find that these animal characteristics give some a false sense of empowerment. One individual I observed in the yard had an intense walk that carried a hint of aggression. The overexaggerated strut of the individual looked identical to a gorilla walking in the jungle. He had the power. Looking at him implied you were looking for trouble. In fact, spinning the yard is dangerous, because you can walk right into a situation. Like being at the wrong place at the wrong time and something could happen to you. Some individuals might think you’re scheming, especially if you’re staring or you walk up upon someone unexpectedly who’s paranoid. Also, if you’re spinning

the yard by yourself you could become a victim; people could look at you as weak because you're by yourself. Loners are perceived as weak and it is likely the reason unaffiliated inmates are preyed upon in this environment. If an inmate lacks status in the yard, he could be ostracized or compelled to affiliate himself with one of the prison social groups. Gangs are always looking for new recruits and many young prisoners get tangled in the gang web. Many of them have little to no family and feel lost. The gang culture acts as a parental substitute, so it is ideal for the youth. The new prisoners may spin the yard with members of the Bloods, Latin Kings, etc. discussing the possibilities of becoming a member and the requirements. Sponsors or recruiters usually use the yard to spin with prospects. However, you have the drifters spinning aimlessly while this recruiting is taking place.

There are mental health inmates who spin the yard under unique circumstances. The mental health inmates walk aimlessly, often times for the whole recreational period — even in bad weather. Most of the mental health inmates are either heavily medicated, have serious psychological problems, or are violence prone. One mental health inmate by the name of “Tubar,”⁷ a fifty-four year-old African American male who had been incarcerated since the seventies, told me that he and other mental health inmates developed this learned behavior from watching other inmates. Other than (according to Tubar) coming to the yard to “bum cigarettes” their ontology is habitual.

While spinning the yard, one can display their status. Spinning the yard as a pair included intimate conversation, for the men walked at a steady pace, listening to one another intensely. Meanwhile both are blocking out the noise in the yard. Identifying with individuals in the yard has race implications, for common language unifies groups of people. Thus, the pair communicates in a language they both understand whether it is English, Spanish, Creole, Korean, Chinese, West Indian Patois, Albanian, Russian, and in some cases Ebonics/street slang. The pairs I observed spinning often emphasized certain words and displayed a degree of excitement within their observance of the atmosphere while rotating. Their mere presence and status dictates whether or not other inmates will spin the yard, post up against a wall or sit at a bench. One particular pair of men was dark skinned, built like football players, except they had long keloid scars on their faces. These two, wore their scars like badges of honor. They were intimidating to say the least. When they spin the yard, all the other groups would watch. While certain inmates with high social standing spin the yard, others with less social standing will opt not to. The high-status pair sped up their pace during each lap, yet the frequent laps eventually become tiresome at one point or another. So whether you're spinning the yard or taking a lap individually, as a pair or a group, the occupants of the yard are watching you, observing your body language and determining your affiliation — which ultimately determines how you will be treated while you spin. Inmates will move out of your way while you're spinning and some will acknowledge you, while others will ignore you and expect you to move out of their way. Although some prisoners spin the yard directly or indirectly displaying their status, others

⁷ Rest in Peace Tubar. He obtained his freedom when he died in prison from a heart attack.

spin for therapy.

People don't just spin the yard, they really spin the yard — it's their therapy. Giovanni, a 30-year-old White American fellow prisoner I play basketball with, who has been incarcerated for ten years stated that he spins the yard as a "defense mechanism." He would spin the yard to avoid "social activities," because he didn't know who was who. Yet Giovanni acknowledged the benefits when he stated, "you never stop spinning the yard because it's a therapeutic program that you develop for yourself, because no one tells you to spin the yard." Therapy is achieved through spinning the yard for many inmates and particularly the ones I observed who developed this *spinning* habit in order to combat the problems in their lives. Giovanni laments, "I was thinking and moving, just burning deep. I was leaving whatever weighed on me in that *circle*." Although spinning the yard is a physical act, Quadre affirmed that it's habitual and also for mental clarity. Thus Quadre declared, "When I came to the state penitentiary I fell right in line because that's what they were doing here and they called it spinning the yard. Then you used it how you used it, whether it was clearing your mind or continual exercise." The inmates at this facility (Green Haven⁸) reify spinning the yard by their active and consistent participation in the act itself. Although spinning the yard is part of prison culture, the origin of spinning the yard lies in the streets. People spin around the blocks within their neighborhoods, cutting up the street corners.

Speaking of cutting, the day that young kid was cut still troubles me. One by one, Correction Officers flooded the yard ordering everyone against the wall. Palms caressed the red bricks that formed a three story wall. Two of the four walls are connected to housing blocks while two connect to corridors. Guards in towers overseeing the yard armed with rifles stood silent. Their menacing appearance made the yard look like a concentration camp opposed to an American prison. With tear gas and live ammunition at their disposal, they observed all movement in the yard while Correction Officers searched for the inmate who cut the young, brown-skinned kid. While on the wall I could hear gossip as the news traveled from lips to ears. It was a case of mistaken identity. Word is, the transgressor thought the young kid was someone he was with in Comstock⁹ who had stole his radio; however, this young kid never been in prison before, yet alone Comstock, and he had recently come up north. We call prisons "up north" because they are all mostly upstate. Another story depicted the young kid as a snitch who turned on his codefendants. Word traveled to the prison from the streets and he was subsequently dealt with. There are little to no facts to substantiate either story. We will never know which story is true because tomorrow there will be another incident that will overlap the ones we are hearing today. The footsteps from all that spinning is synonymous with steps we take in our neighborhoods; however, many of these men in this yard will never return home. Prison is the home of these men. A melting pot of cultures walking aimlessly in the yard all subscribe to one culture now: prison culture. Soon they will be replaced by others who will take these same wrong paths. Like the laps we take around the yard, each foot step gets covered by

⁸ Green Haven is a maximum A. prison located in Stormville, New York.

⁹ Comstock aka Great Meadow is a Max A prison located in Comstock, New York.

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