

**Institutional Survivors Describe the Time-Out Room:**

**Narratives of Discipline and Punish**

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This paper examines the narratives of 12 women and 9 men who are survivors of the Michener Center, a total institution for 'mental defectives' that has operated in the province of Alberta, Canada from 1923 to the present. I wish to make clear that the term 'mental defectives' is not my own, but reflects official language concerning the mandate of the Michener Center at the time of its opening in 1923, and for several decades thereafter. Although the survivors' narratives reported here are specific to one institution, Michener Center's practices of institutionalization and segregation reflected broader discourses and practices relating to science, eugenics and fitness in the West during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this paper, survivor narratives are examined with a focus on Time-Out Rooms, which were used to discipline misbehaving and runaway inmates.

Most histories of the institutionalization of individuals who are developmentally disabled have excluded accounts from those who lived in and suffered most from those institutions, yet institutional survivors have important insights into the intimate mechanisms of disability oppression at its most profound level. They have much to tell us about the actual workings of power and difference, and it is important to know the history of the institutionalization of marginalized individuals from the perspectives of those who actually lived in such places. Survivors' stories also provide us with rich materials with which to examine theoretical understandings of difference and social control. In this paper, the work of Michel Foucault is played against survivor narratives, which complicate Foucault's claims about social control, embodied power, disciplinary versus punishment societies, and power that is exercised through vision, visibility and the gaze. Before engaging in an analysis of the interplay between these ideas and survivor narratives, however, it is important for the reader to understand what Time-Out Rooms were, and where and how they operated in the Michener Center.

### **Time-Out Rooms**

Time-Out Rooms were an omnipresent means of exercising both reactive and precautionary control within the institution. From survivor narratives<sup>1</sup>, it seems that each unit in

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<sup>1</sup> On May 17, 2001, along with my colleague Dr. Anne Hughson and Mr. Bruce Uditsky of the Alberta Association of Community Living, I approached the Michener Board to request an opportunity to visit the Michener grounds to "gain a more detailed understanding of some of the site buildings and layout" (Michener Center Board of Directors, 2001: 7). Our request was declined, perhaps reflecting "fear that the

the Michener Center had at least one of these rooms; rather than being hidden away, the rooms were a part of the ward itself, within the sightlines of warders and other residents in each residential unit. The Time-Out Rooms were uniformly outfitted: each room had a heavy, locked door with a small aperture through which instructions or food could be passed, and the inside of the room was outfitted with a drain in the middle of the floor and little else. A mattress would be dragged in at night for inmates to sleep on, to be removed in the morning to facilitate cleaning the cell. Inmates who were housed in the Time-Out Rooms were typically naked, because staff feared that inmates might harm themselves by chewing at torn clothing or perhaps by trying to hang themselves (Anonymous 2004). As well, these rooms had a one-way mirror through which warders (and other inmates) could observe the individual being given a 'Time-Out' in the Time-Out Room, and in which the individuals inside could, no doubt, see themselves reflected.

All of the individuals interviewed for this project knew about the Time-Out Rooms, and spoke consistently about their uses and practices. According to participants, inmates were housed in Time-Out Rooms as a result of resistance to daily practices of the institution; a resident could be sent to the Time-Out Room for refusing to eat the food they were given, for refusing to go to bed or wake up at the times they were told to, for aggressive behaviour towards staff or towards other residents, or for refusing to perform work duties as instructed. Above all, however, survivors noted that people were sent to the Time-Out Rooms because of attempts to escape the institution. The detection of escape was a public event; a discovered escape would be heralded at any time of the day or night by wailing sirens and the hustle and bustle of ward searches and intra-institutional communications relating to the attempt. The combination of the sirens, the hubbub, and the knowledge that those who attempted escape would inevitably end up in the Time-Out Rooms comprised a powerful presence in survivor narratives about institutional life. Hence, Time-Out Rooms were a central form of physical and psychological, reactive and preventative social control.

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project would not contribute to the accurate representation of the high quality of current supports and operations (ibid:7). Michener is now under new governance, and another request has been initiated.

### **Institutionalization, Eugenics, Reintegration and Participants' Durations of Residency**

It is useful to understand the context in which these survivors' experiences occurred, and to understand the relationships between the larger social context and some of the personal qualities of the survivors. The Provincial Training School (PTS) for Mental Defectives opened in 1923 in an imposing 3-storey brick building located in parkland outside the small town of Red Deer, Alberta. Originally constructed as a religious college for young women, then purchased by the Alberta government as a mental hospital for 'shell-shocked' WWI soldiers, its designation as Alberta's first full-time, long-term care facility for individuals with intellectual disabilities was one of many changes in the administration of mental and psychological health services in Alberta. Prior to the PTS opening, children with intellectual disabilities either remained in their communities or they were housed alongside of individuals designated as mentally ill in places like the Mental Hospital in Brandon, Manitoba, situated two provinces away. Thus, the opening of PTS was seen at the time as a very progressive move because it segregated the "mentally retarded from the mentally ill", moved children closer to their families, and purportedly shifted the focus of services from incarceration to education (Alberta Government Publications 1985: 2). In 1973, in the midst of the shift away from institutionalization and the development of a community-living movement, a new swimming-pool complex was built on the premises, and the institution was renamed the Michener Center in acknowledgment of Red Deer's most famous citizen, Roland Michener, a former athlete who ultimately became the Governor-General of Canada. Thus, in this paper, I will refer to PTS when discussing the early days of the institution, and Michener Center when describing more recent events. Most of the participants in this study were admitted to the institution during the PTS years, and left the institution between the mid-70s and mid-80s as part of that deinstitutionalization movement.

The stated PTS mandate was to engage in the work of "academic, vocational and personal development of retarded children and young adults" (Alberta Government Publications 1985: 3), indicating that 'trainees' would receive an education with the ultimate goal of a productive reintegration to society. Institutional rhetoric concerning the training mandate of the institution and community reintegration persisted throughout Michener's history: in the 1950s, the involvement of parent advisory groups resulted in "emphasis on increasing the trainee's

independence” (ibid: 13), and in the 1960s “program development produced a growing emphasis on resident training” (ibid: 14). Institutional rhetoric about training for ‘real’ life aside, however, population figures for the institution indicate that residents did not spend relatively short periods in in Michener Center to develop skills for community living, but that they remained in the institution for long periods, and their numbers grew steadily over the years. The institutional population topped out in 1969 with almost 2400 residents. In the 1970s and 1980s, through community and parent-driven advocacy efforts, deinstitutionalization began in earnest: by 1983, there were approximately 1600 residents, and in the year 2001, approximately 400 individuals remained (Alberta Government Publications 1985; Michener Center Communications Officer 1999). In 1973, in the midst of the shift away from institutionalization and the development of a community-living movement, a new swimming-pool complex was built on the premises, and the institution was renamed the Michener Center in acknowledgment of Red Deer’s most famous citizen, Roland Michener, a former athlete who ultimately became the Governor-General of Canada. Thus, in this paper, I refer to PTS when discussing the early days of the institution, and Michener Center when describing more recent events. Most of the participants in this study were admitted to the institution during the PTS years, and left the institution between the mid-70s and mid-80s as part of that deinstitutionalization movement.

The participants who contributed to this study offer details about their ages at admission and at discharge that stand in contrast to the institutional promise of education for the community. Of the 21 individuals interviewed, the average age for admission was at slightly over 12 years of age, with a range of admission ages between 7 and 25. The youngest age at discharge was indeed at 18 for one of the participants, which would coincide with the completion of one’s ‘school’ years. However, for most people, the age at discharge was much later, and the average age for leaving was a little older than 27 years. In other words, the average child or young person in this study spent *15 years* in the institution, and one person interviewed spent over 30 years inside Michener Center. These lengthy stays do not support the institutional claim of education and reintegration as the central goal of the institute, but reflect practices that are more akin to lifelong internment, particularly when one considers that most of the individuals interviewed left

the institution during a time of major shifts in rhetoric and practice relating to communitization. Without this shift toward community living for individuals with developmental disabilities, we can safely assume that many of these individuals would have remained inside the Michener Center even longer, and in some instances, for their entire lives.

### **Eugenics and the Michener Center**

While training and education were the given reasons given for the institution's existence and for individual admissions, eugenics concerns played an important role in establishing and sustaining the institution. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a belief that "feeble-mindedness" could be attributed to poor genetic material prevailed in the minds of social reformers, government officials and medical and scientific practitioners (McLaren 1986; McLaren 1990; Smith 1985). At the Michener Center, institutionalization, segregation and eugenics were intimately linked. The housing of 'mental defectives' in a virtual fortress set at distance from a small rural town, and the reportedly almost obsessive arrangements for sexual segregation within the Michener Center institution functioned as a covert form of eugenics; 'defective' individuals segregated in these ways posed little risk of 'polluting' the social body with their genetic material. More overt eugenics programs also operated within the Michener Center; in 1928, just five years after the opening of the PTS, the Province of Alberta implemented the Sexual Sterilization Act and established the Alberta Eugenics Board. The Board regularly convened meetings at the Michener Center, and although things started slowly with 'only' sixteen sterilizations performed in 1930, by the time of the Board's closing in 1973, it was approving between 30 and 40 involuntary sterilizations per year, most of them on Michener Residents (Alberta Government Publications 1985; Park and Radford 1998).

In addition to being deemed 'mentally unfit', other categories of 'impurity' are reflected in the demographic qualities of the participants in this study: of 21 participants, 11 were of Ukrainian heritage and three were Métis; in Alberta, Ukrainians were commonly derided as social misfits and second-class citizens, and aboriginal persons (including Métis) continue to be treated with considerable prejudice. Beyond Alberta's borders, concerns about the troubling nature of both Eastern Europeans and First Nations People were clearly expressed in eugenics discourse in

North America during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Dowbiggin 1995; McLaren 1986; McLaren 1990). Thus, although this sample of participants is not representative of the general population at Michener, the participants' ethnic backgrounds do reflect circulating concerns about pollution and fitness that were embedded in eugenics discourse. Indeed, of the 21 institutional survivors who participated in this research, five of the twelve women and four of the nine men stated that they had been involuntarily sterilized while residing in Michener Center.

In addition to containing and segregating the participants in this research because of 'categories of personhood' such as race and ethnicity, it is possible that eugenics concerns motivated the admissions of these survivors in more subtle ways. As noted earlier, these individuals were often excluded from regular classrooms and were left to their own devices in communities that marginalized them; indeed, concerns about truancy and delinquency were cited by three survivors as the imputed reasons for being admitted to Michener Center. Thus, moral panics about keeping 'problem' children off the streets and out of potential trouble may have led professionals to segregate such potentially 'dangerous' young people from the rest of the community. As well, the cordoning off of young people in this way also operated to preclude the possibility of their adult sexuality and reproduction in the community, again operating as a covert form of eugenics. It must be noted, however, that institutionalization did not necessarily preclude sexual activity or reproduction for Michener inmates. In the interviews, three female survivors described witnessing incidents of sexual assault by staff, and two described roommates who were aborted when they became pregnant, all incidents occurring while these individuals were under segregated 'care'.

### **The Time-Out Room – View from Outside, View from Within**

As noted earlier, every survivor in this study knew of and spoke about the Time-Out Rooms, and their role as an ever-present means of exercising control within the institution. Stan and Roy provide us with descriptions of the procedures for 'admitting' a misbehaving resident into the Time-Out Rooms that introduce us to contradictions between discipline-based modes of engendering social control, and punishment-based methods in the practices of the Michener Center. Stan told me, "They would put you down on the floor in a 'sleeper'. It's like a headlock,

and they put you to sleep and throw you in the Time-Out Room...It was scary, not nice. Had a window and glass, and a mat on the floor, and a drain in the middle.” Roy concurred, saying, “They would put you in there in this room. You had no bed. You slept on the floor. They had windows...people could see you walking back and forth. Some of them, they would put straitjackets on.”

Stan and Roy’s descriptions remind us of Foucault’s Panopticon, with its deployment of the gaze as a disciplining arm of those in power. The Panopticon was a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham, an enlightenment philosopher, and its design reflected enlightenment principles of social control. Rather than the brutality of early prisons, the Panopticon used vision rather than violence to control inmates; its central tower housed the prison guards, while the prisoners’ cells ringed the tower in such a way that guards could see inmates’ every act without being detected. Like the Panopticon, the one-way mirror of the Time-Out Room acted as a window to those who observed from outside, and operated as the means through which warders could exercise constant and easy surveillance upon miscreants. Similarly, because Time-Out Room inmates could not tell when they were being observed nor see who was outside, the one-way mirror acted as a visual reminder to inmates of the constant possibility of being observed. Thus, the Time-Out Room operated in some ways to create compliance and control through what Foucault would term ‘disciplinary’ means – through observations of the self by others and through pre-emptive self-observations. However, Stan and Roy’s comments allow us to see that in the Michener Center, there was more to social control than the disciplinary gaze. Instead, these comments convey that brute power, in the form of the straitjacket and the stranglehold, was a common, and publicly-displayed accompaniment to the disciplinary control of the Time-Out Room. Thus, rather than the smooth, rational and impersonal surveillance-based power that Foucault imagined would take place in modern institutional orders, the stories these survivors tell us about the public violence and brute force of routine discipline at Michener Center show us a more terrifying and chaotic picture of social control in action. Indeed, we can hear that both discipline-based or ‘modern’ practices and punishment-based or ‘pre-modern’ practices operated in concert within the institution.

### **The Time-Out room – Spectacle, Prevention and Division**

When discussing the Time-Out rooms, survivors noted that there was little secrecy or mystery surrounding the use of the space or the ways that individuals came to be incarcerated in them. The highly visible positioning of the rooms themselves, with one on each ward, typically part of the 'regular' hallway of resident rooms and within the sightlines of both the nursing stations and the public day-rooms of each ward, meant that residents of the institution could not avoid knowing about and seeing the Time-Out Rooms. Further, the sirens and flashlight searches that accompanied the internment of runaway residents into Time-Out Rooms, and the struggles and straitjacketing that accompanied the internment of inmates with bad behaviours means that other residents could hardly ignore the violence attached to these spaces.

The public aspect of the Time-Out rooms' spatial designs is reminiscent of Foucault's punishment-type means of social control. Foucault tells us that, in pre-modern societies, punishments unfolded in highly visible public spectacles, which were acted out to warn the general public about what would happen to transgressors. While the Time-Out rooms, with their locked doors and windowed walls at first glance seem to reflect a more private, disciplinary means of social control, the public positioning of the space, and the often violent and noisy means by which inmates were admitted to the space in fact offered a spectacle of punishment to other inmates that let them know who was a 'bad' inmate, and that displayed publicly the institutional response to inmates who resist. The spectacle of admission and the public positioning of the space offered all residents a visual performance of institutional might, as evidenced by swift, brutal and unforgiving punishment for those who failed to comply with institutional regimes.

Survivors themselves acknowledged the cautionary or preventative qualities of Time-Out Room practices. John, for example, noted that, "Some of the kids got put away on the side in this little place. In this dark room with a big window on the door. Sometimes they were there for 2 – 3 days." When I asked him whether that had ever happened to him, he emphatically noted, "No, I made sure I stayed out of trouble." For John, as for others, the architectural, spatial, and physical aspects of the Time-Out rooms engendered preventative self-discipline and self-technologies, exercised in efforts to avoid trouble.

Recall Foucault's argument that technologies of the self are engaged in by individuals not only so that they can avoid social sanctions, but also so that they can come to think of themselves as good, deserving and worthy citizens (Foucault 1988). Drawing on Foucault, it is possible to understand that in John's description of himself as a person who "made sure [he] stayed out of trouble", there was more at stake than simply avoiding punishment. In addition, we can understand that compliance and avoiding punishment are ways that John can see himself as good, smart and unlike those who failed to avoid the stigma and brutality of the Time-Out rooms.

Like John, most participants in this study were loath to admit to actually doing time in a Time-Out Room, and they were remarkably unsympathetic towards those who did end up in them. Donna, for example, noted:

I never went to the Time-Out Rooms, no. I would make sure I wouldn't get in trouble. So I could get, you know? I thought that with my behaviour that sooner or later, I'd get out of Michener. I thought that I was the kind of person that knew what to do.

Donna's comments permit us again to understand the cautionary value of the Time-Out Rooms, and they also show how she was able to distance herself from her surroundings in several ways. First, she was able to provide herself with assurances that abuse and violation can actually be avoided in the institution. In the institution's chaotic and unpredictable environment, in which inmates had virtually no power over their days, their lives, or their futures, the only power Donna was able to grasp was the power she was able to wield over her self. By telling herself that she was the kind of person who exercised positive behaviours, and by believing that these qualities would not only keep her out of Time-Out Rooms, but that they may even provide her with the ability to escape the institution itself, she was able to provide herself with assurances that institutional abuses could, and would, be avoided. Beyond Foucault's notion of technologies of the self that are aimed toward constructing a positive social self-concept, Donna's comments allow us to understand that such technologies offer the individual some real power – the power to avoid punishment, the power to imagine oneself as 'in control', and the power to dream of another, better life.

Ironically, the power Donna deployed was not directed towards the institution or its workers, but instead maintained the status quo by engendering her own compliance, and also by

reinforcing divisions amongst the inmates themselves. Donna's comments show us how institutional orders and self-technologies keep people from forming alliances amongst the oppressed. For her, the unruly co-resident is not seen as someone with a sense of justice or an enduring spirit, but she instead frames Time-Out Room inmates as deserving punishment or as individuals who simply do not know how to avoid it, unlike Donna herself. This framing surely provided residents like Donna with assurances of personal power and safety in a place where both were in short shrift, but it also precluded solidarity amongst inmates. Time-Out Rooms seem to have functioned not only to divide and conquer, but they did so through the construction of hierarchies amongst inmates themselves.

### **Humiliation and the Gaze**

Hierarchies within the institution were maintained through 'grades' that separated wards according to the inmates' personal qualities. As well, hierarchies were sustained through the use of the Time-Out Rooms throughout the institution. This is reflected in comments like Donna's about those who were careless enough or foolish enough to 'deserve' incarceration in the Time-Out Rooms. Finally, the few descriptions provided by survivors who admitted to having spent time in Time-Out Rooms provide us with some insight into how the rooms acted not only to 'demote' inmates in the eyes of others, but in their own eyes as well. Glen, for example, described his perspective on the inside of a Time-Out Room as follows:

The staff could look in from a window in the door, but I couldn't see out of it. There was only a mirror. There was no toilet, and when I had to go, I had to bang on the door with my feet, but most of the time no one would come, so I urinated myself. I had to sit like that sometimes for hours until the staff would come.  
(Pause) That hurt my feelings.

Glen's description moves our understanding of the Time-Out Room functions beyond simple discipline or punishment, or the creation of divisions amongst inmates. Instead, Glen allows us to understand that the Time-Out Rooms had another, central function, which was to humiliate and dehumanize its inmates.

While Glen's description recalls Roy and Stan's comments about visibility as a tool of power in the institution, it also helps us to move beyond Foucault's idea of the panopticon and the disciplining gaze. Rather than a simple description of how the gaze 'works', Glen's description

allows us to understand how such a gaze 'feels' to the individual who is its object. His narrative tells us that being the object of such practices is not only humiliating, but that the individual understands only too well that the purpose of these rooms was to make the inmate feel both violated and degraded. Indeed, we can understand that, besides fear, a central emotion connected to the Time-Out Rooms was shame. This perhaps explains why few survivors were willing to admit that they had ever been in such a room, and why they spoke so harshly about individuals who had been in them.

Finally, Glen's description reminds us that the added visual plane of the one-way mirror operated not only to provide outsiders with a view on the inmate and her/his disgrace, but that they offered a view of the individual her/himself that was both somber and humiliating. Perhaps this self-view was a painful to inmates as was the knowledge that others could see them in their abject state. Glen's comments permit us to understand that the individuals who are the objects of their own gaze come to be seen not only to others but to themselves as dehumanized.

### **Discussion**

Survivors' descriptions of Quiet Rooms provide us with both confirmations of and contradictions to Foucauldian concepts. Foucauldian ideas about punishment and discipline-based societies offer fruitful constructs for analyzing the Quiet Room practices. Nonetheless, these ideas fall short of explaining the unruly, non-routinized brutality of the Michener Center when juxtaposed against the actual experiences described by those who lived in the institution. In addition to the use of science, routinization and the gaze in engendering institutional control, survivors describe both quotidian and extraordinary violence occurring in Time-Out Room practices, and such brutality is more reminiscent of Foucault's pre-enlightenment punishment model of social control than the disciplinary practices he theorized as the hallmarks of modernity. Foucault's concept of an historical transition from punishment-based social practices to discipline-based control is complicated in the survivor narratives, where both types of control are exercised simultaneously.

As well, while Foucauldian notions of technologies of the self can help us to understand why individuals might want to comply with the institutional order, they cannot explain why

individuals in the institution distanced themselves from those who were most degraded, and how hierarchies and divisions are created amongst inmates within the institution. Drawing on survivor narratives permits us insight into the personal power that can be gained when such hierarchies are made to exist, and what gains can be had by individuals who seek to distance themselves from those who are suffering most from the order of things. Survivor narratives enable us to understand the terror and lack of control that prevailed in such places as the Michener Center, in turn making it possible to see how a sense of personal power could be obtained by individuals who told themselves that, given the right behaviours, they could remain safe and exercise some control over their lives.

Finally, Foucault's ideas provide tools for understanding the power of the spatial designs of the Rooms, their locations within the institution, and the ways that vision and visibility were organized to sustain power relations within the institution. Thus, the mirrored door, the viewing window and the hallway vista with the Time-Out Room at its center can be understood as means of exercising discipline through bio-power. These spectacles and views provided staff, fellow patients, and inmates themselves with specific and strategic perspectives, wherein the incarcerated individual could be seen, and become objectified and degraded. However, survivors' narratives move us beyond understanding the simple mechanics of space, vistas and the gaze. These survivor accounts provide us an added layer that permits an understanding of how such technologies of power can feel when one is at the receiving end of such visions, and they allow us to see that humiliation and dehumanization lie at the core of Time-Out Room practices.

Foucault's insights offer us the ability to understand the embodied aspects of social control and the ways that discipline relies on the penetrative gaze of experts. However, Foucault has been criticized for the distanced and impersonal account he provides of what are not simply processes of social control, but are instead horrific human experiences. Feminist critics note, for example that "Foucault's is a world in which things move, rather than people, a world in which subjects become obliterated...(Hartsock 1990). By asking institutional survivors to report on the practices within the institution, it is possible to move away from the distanced and objectifying standpoint of theorists or 'normals'. As Susan Wendell (1996) has argued, in order to develop an

emancipatory knowledge of disability and its history, it is critical to examine disability oppression from the positions or standpoints of those who are disabled. When we listen to the narratives of disabled individuals themselves about their experiences of stigma, brutality, marginalization and social control, we are offered far richer insights into the workings of power and the construction of difference than Foucault's theories can provide. Instead, survivor narratives offer us a profoundly convincing personal and political argument against the institution's routine and systemic violence, and ultimately, against institutionalization itself.

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