

# Stumbling on the rehabilitation gold? Foucault vs. Foucault in San Quentin and beyond

**Bowen Paulle**

University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

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## Abstract

This article examines GRIP, a rehabilitation program currently spreading through California's state prison system. While most 'violent offenders' come to GRIP hoping to increase chances of parole, this yearlong program with four main components – stopping violence, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, understanding victim impact – is meant to create conditions in which inmates can 'do the work' leading to genuine transformation. A central claim is that due in part to the trauma-treatment model GRIP follows, inmates end up 'stumbling on the gold' and going through changes (involving recovery of an 'authentic self' rooted in childhood) that helps enable skillful responses even to 'moments of imminent danger'. Understandably, researchers of such programs may seek theoretical inspiration from the 'dominant' version of Foucault. Yet this paper sets out to change the conversation about prisons and rehabilitation in part by demonstrating the utility of the 'other' Foucault's pragmatic recovery of body-based self-disciplining practices and regimes.

## Keywords

prison, rehabilitation, violence, trauma, transformation, Foucault, care of the self

Most of the men come in looking for a letter [i.e. a certificate] for the [Parole] Board. Others just want the AC. But we're shameless. We take 'em any way we can get 'em. 'Cause we know, they will either run out screaming or they will buy into this like they've never bought into anything before. (Jacques Verduin, founder of GRIP)

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## Corresponding author:

Bowen Paulle, Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Email: b.paulle@uva.nl

After its 'curious eclipse' (Wacquant, 2002), the light of prison ethnography may once again be starting to shine (e.g. Drake et al., 2015; Dubois and Vrancken, 2014). Relatedly, after decades of assuming that 'nothing works,' criminologists and other experts appear once again to be 'taking rehabilitation seriously' (Cullen, 2012: 103, 111). In part, this reappraisal seems to be due to increasing recognition that rehabilitation programs can promote desistance from violent crime by helping ex-convicts construct narratives of return to the goodness of core selves which were lost (when, as innocent children exposed to traumatic events, they were forced to adopt self- and other-destructive coping strategies) (Maruna, 2001: 87; cf. Roach, 2013: 9). As such, at least among those genuinely interested in *How Offenders Transform Their Lives* (Veysey et al., 2013), the value attached to detailed ethnographic accounts scrutinizing the inner workings of seemingly effective rehabilitation programs (that find ways to establish potentially beneficial narratives of essentially good selves) might be expected to grow in the coming years.

Hopeful as these developments may be, the challenges ahead remain daunting. First off, there is every reason to assume that what one finds behind prison walls and catchall phrases like 'rehabilitation' is an enormous heterogeneity – including many programs masquerading as ameliorative that are downright harmful (cf. Ward and Maruna, 2007). Moreover, as one long-term practitioner's adept engagement with the literature demonstrates, there is an abundance of research indicating not only (1) that the vast majority of men serving time for violent crimes in American prisons were (repeatedly) exposed to traumatically violent events as children (usually growing up in high poverty, high crime 'hot spots') but also (2) that they find themselves dealing with *continuous traumatic stress* (CTS) in their gang-infested and hyper-violent 'correctional' facilities (Roach, 2013: 2–3). Within such worlds apart, creating safe classroom settings in which trauma can be treated and violent offenders can meaningfully redefine their own story lines is not easy.

This article based on direct observations, interview data, primary source documents and audio-video material examines a rehabilitation program usually referred to as GRIP – the acronym for Guiding Rage Into Power. The website of Insight-Out, the organization operating this program, describes it as a 'violence prevention and...life skills program' serving multi-ethnic<sup>1</sup> incarcerated populations which follows a 'trauma treatment based model' and helps 'participants learn to: (1) stop their violent behavior, (2) cultivate mindfulness, (3) develop emotional intelligence, and (4) understand victim impact'.<sup>2</sup> In the lexicon of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, GRIP is designated simply as an 'offender accountability' program. Thanks mainly to financial support from philanthropic organizations and individual donors, but also to a grant from the California State legislature's 'innovative programs fund', this yearlong program has recently spread from San Quentin, where it originated in 2011, into three other California state prisons. The program, for which men must voluntarily apply, has sizable waiting lists in some prisons (e.g. over 500 in San Quentin). Currently, GRIP serves a selection of adult men, nearly all labeled 'violent offenders',

who tend to be in their mid-20s to late 50s. Especially if preliminary indications continue suggesting GRIP may be capable of outperforming many other ‘offender accountability’ programs in terms of driving down recidivism rates,<sup>3</sup> GRIP could soon become a large-scale intervention with potential implications far beyond the Golden State. GRIP deserves careful debate based on close-up observation in part because it is presently expanding its operations not only for older adults, but also for ‘youthful offenders’ at far greater risk of committing violent crimes after being released.<sup>4</sup>

One might say that from GRIP’s initial series of welcoming rituals to the graduation ceremony in which the inmates wearing caps and gowns sign pledges of non-violence (in front of family members and civic leaders), the bare bones of this program’s intended message to participants is this: If you are willing to ‘do the work’, this methodology can help you recover your ‘authentic’ self from your trauma-based self and, more specifically, change in ways that consistently enable skillful responses even to highly stressful situations (such as the one in which you committed your crime).

As the opening quote indicates, one of the bedrock claims about this program is that it is self-correcting. As GRIP’s founder Jacques Verduin<sup>5</sup> explains it, no matter what motivates the men to sign up, typically less than 10% ‘drop out’ and nearly all of those who remain end up, at some point, ‘stumbling on the gold’.<sup>6</sup> During a recent conversation in which we discussed the (core of the) approach he spent so much of his life’s energy adapting, Verduin added this:

And I tell them: don’t believe what I teach. Go test it. This method allows you to get in touch; to identify, track and be guided by your own direct experience. You actually don’t need someone else to interpret or analyze you or sell you a belief system. The SETA sequence [i.e. in the curriculum, the acronym for Sensations, Emotions, Thoughts and Actions] teaches that. It’s about being present for breath and sensations and to connect to this embodied experience as the greatest resource for guidance in life.

These memorable phrases and provocative claims might be said to elicit the two questions taken on in the coming pages: First, does GRIP work, as intended, as a self-correcting practice (and if so, in what ways)? Second, how can ethnographers best orient themselves towards such a multi-faceted, potentially self-corrective and ameliorative, yet also potentially harmful methodology operating in intensely challenging institutional domains?

In terms of seeking orientation from extant theory, this second question might be said to lead directly to the scholar who ‘put forth the single most influential analysis of the rise and role of the prison in capitalist modernity’ (Wacquant, 2010: 204): Michel Foucault. Rather than further reinforcing the image of just one all-encompassing ‘Foucauldian approach’ relevant to the study of prisons (cf. Garland, 2014; Wacquant, 2010: 204–6; Useem and Piehl, 2008: 41–4), this paper attempts to show how starkly different systems of Foucauldian ideas – based on his

research of radically different historical epochs and corresponding epistemes – can be used together. At least with regard to a minority of voluntary prison-based rehabilitation programs operated and staffed by NGOs, this paper attempts to demonstrate empirically the utility of a lesser-known Foucault.

In what immediately follows I flesh out what I mean by the ‘dominant’ and the ‘other’ Foucault. Then the paper further contextualizes GRIP and discusses the ethnographic methods I am using to study it. The most substantive portion of the paper sheds light on how insiders experience a selection of GRIP’s core components as they interact on the ground. I attend here to a selection of interactions that reveal what my observations and analyses suggest to be distinctive about the methodology in question. The conclusion argues that ethnographers examining rehabilitation programs as potentially innovative, self-correcting, and beneficial as GRIP should be able to take into the prisons they study both the dominant and the other version of Foucault.

### **Foucault vs. Foucault**

At first blush, GRIP may appear to be yet another intervention such as the ones Fox (1999) and Kramer et al. (2013) associated mainly with the (neoliberal) disciplining and managing of the poor. It might initially seem, that is, that GRIP imposes dubiously normalized subjectivities and leads to the internalization of increasingly pervasive (self-)supervision. From this perspective, one might suggest that linear connections between (elicited and perhaps fabricated) childhood traumas and suitably presented adult acts of violence are, like essentially good selves, little more than ‘truths’ created by matrices of power/knowledge linking practitioners with the utterances of social scientists in swarming disciplining grids. It might seem, in other words, that theoretical inspiration should be sought mainly in the work of what I will call *the dominant (version of) Foucault* – i.e. Foucault the analytical genealogist warning against panopticism and the hidden dangers of biopower.

The dominant Foucault became dominant for a reason. Perhaps more cogently than anyone before or since, in his analyses of seemingly democratic (and mostly 18th and 19th century) institutions he alerted us to the spread of largely taken for granted background practices endangering human freedom. And what makes the dominant Foucault’s analyses so provocative is how he linked, for example, late medieval public executions, the Great Plague, torture dungeons, and confessional boxes with everyday practices found in or on (early) modern clinics, schools, prisons and psychiatric couches. Even in *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Foucault’s main theoretical focus was never on prisons. Rather, it was on the seemingly unstoppable spread of body-based practices stealthily inducing ‘docility’ and crushing spaces for meaningful resistance (to superimposed notions of selfhood).

If you ‘get it’, there’s no turning back. Moreover, once conceptually and emotionally sensitized to the possibility that each of us could come to embody the principle of our own surreptitiously superimposed domination – in part because

of the actions of (social) scientists who get caught up in the continuum of disciplining mechanisms without realizing it – one must take seriously the need to remain vigilant with regard to potentially expansive tentacles of the carceral spider. Clearly, keeping the dominant Foucault in mind can help us remain alert as we engage the possibility that some rehabilitation programs may be far better seen through the lens of the *other Foucault*.

Who was this other Foucault? In using this term I refer to Foucault the pragmatic, openly normative, and at times downright prescriptive methodologist. While found scattered across diverse offerings made just before his untimely death, such as in the interviews and lectures collected in *Foucault Live* (1996) and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005), this other Foucault was perhaps at his best in the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, entitled, *The Care of the Self* (1986).

In the most important parts of *The Care of the Self* (CoS), at least for our purposes, Foucault attempted to recover from Greco-Roman antiquity key aspects of collective learning and self-care regimes that could bring about the *askesis* he understood to be a prerequisite for successfully learning the ‘art of living’.<sup>7</sup> In other words, this decisive Foucault associated forms of *austere self-disciplining* recoverable from another historical epoch and episteme not with the production of ‘docile bodies’ (1979: 135–69) but, rather, with ‘spiritual corporality’ (Carrette, 2002). In short, Foucault focuses here on socio-educational regimes promoting the ethical and aesthetic pursuit of liberating self-cultivation through body-based self-disciplining.<sup>8</sup>

It is vital, within this alternative system of ideas, to understand why the other Foucault considered the regimes described in CoS to be ‘ethical’. What is decisive here is that the durably socialized and often formally institutionalized practices of self-mastery through which Greek and Roman individuals sought to transform themselves were unburdened by the Christian and especially the Cartesian wrong turns characterizing the modern West’s neurotic approach to subjectivity and truth. There was, in Foucault’s depiction of ancient times, neither a demand to submit to self-evident (i.e. God given) truths nor any myth of an autonomous cogito capable of heroically discovering truths. As such, mottos like ‘know thyself’ could represent commitment to genuine, open-ended experimentation with new practices leading to alternative ways of being, in general, and to challenges to taken for granted beliefs (about, for example, sexuality). Foucault’s preferred practices were, in short, self-corrective.

As such, the sources of hope in CoS were not individual philosophers but webs of everyday (carnal) practices that could help one discipline oneself not to go through life as an over-socialized zombie. For Foucault, such self-constituted and re-constituting techniques held out the possibility of jolting oneself out of the habit of blindly doing the done (and potentially harmful) things characterizing the worlds into which one happened to have been thrown. More specifically, Foucault argued that the intensely self-disciplining (somatic) techniques of the ancients could help practitioners not only discern in a timely manner when harmful

emotions and thoughts were creeping in but also to develop the wherewithal to resist them (by not reacting to them at all).

In words that are strikingly similar to those I observed in GRIP's curriculum and classroom discussions, Foucault emphasizes that the 'work . . . should have the form of a steady screening of representations: examining them, monitoring them, and sorting them out. More than an exercise done at regular intervals, it is a constant attitude that one must take towards oneself'. In achieving the end result, and in 'escaping all dependencies and enslavements, one ultimately rejoins oneself, like a harbor sheltered from the tempests'. The holistic 'relation to the self that constitutes the end of the conversion and the final goal of the practice of the self . . . is often conceived in terms of one "belong[ing] to himself", one [being] "his own master" . . . But . . . the relation to self is also defined as a concrete relationship enabling one to delight in oneself' (CoS 65).

With his parting shots, Foucault hoped to contribute to an epistemic rupture based on a 'struggle' through which people might in the future be changed through more 'critical', more 'curative', and more 'therapeutic' (Foucault, 2005: 495) relations to themselves. In sum, the other Foucault clearly hoped that the ancient regimes he described could help promote not just the ability to experience pleasure through skillful self-fashioning, but also through holistic transformations that could help liberate entire cultures. This might be seen less as a break with a monolithic Foucault (focused on the oppressive disciplining of biopower) than an extension of this complex figure's activities as a public intellectual (involved in prison reform) and his commitment to pragmatic policy expertise (as exemplified in his work on the 'specific intellectual'; Rabinow, 1984: 67–75; Floersch, 2002: 5) – i.e. an extension of two dimensions of Foucault's contributions that are underemphasized in typically depoliticized interpretations of his work.

## Context and methods

After receiving information about GRIP through more or less formal channels, and perhaps after hearing about the program's enormous waiting lists, men apply for the program. It stands to reason that most apply understanding that (childhood) trauma will be a major theme. As the inmates and GRIP staff universally confirmed, applicants tend to enter the program seeking above all a certificate for the Board of Parole Hearings (BOPH)<sup>9</sup> rather than any kind of habitus reformation. In the application, the prisoners are asked whether or not they are willing to divulge their (in nearly all cases) violent crimes. If they report that they are, they may be invited into a new group of men representing, roughly, the overall prison population in terms of ethno-racial categories (e.g. 40–50% African American, 25–35% Mexican/Latino, 10–20% white and a few Asian/Native Americans and Others).

In 2011–12, the first GRIP cohort included 30 men. During my observations of the program's inner workings in 2015–16, 125 men were enrolled in five GRIP classes. Three of these were in San Quentin. The other two took place in the

Avenal and Mule Creek California state prisons. The expectation is that in 2016–17 GRIP will reach at the very least 175 men in five of California's 35 state prisons, and perhaps as many as 250 men in seven such facilities. There can be little doubt that GRIP is spreading, at least in part because diverse actors in various overlapping fields consider it to be innovative.

This article is based on direct observations, interview data, various types of primary sources including the entire GRIP curriculum, and video recordings of one cohort's entire year of classes. Actually being in several GRIP classes in different prisons, and talking informally with the participants before and after classes, gave me a lived sense of the intense emotional dynamics and shared focus the program consistently generates. Without the ability to refer back to this visceral sense of what it is like to be there, it would have been impossible to adequately value or interpret the audio-video material. Without access to the video footage and the entire curriculum (including all GRIP assignments and flash cards), I would not have been able to adequately situate my observations during specific parts of the overall process. Without having unrestricted access to the (meetings of) (co-) facilitators with and without the program's founder, I would not have been able to adequately grasp the goals, successes, and challenges.

It might be useful to specify the range of sources and complementary ethnographic vantage points that inform this article. These include: (1) 30 hours of direct observations of two different GRIP classes and related activities (preparations, debriefings) in San Quentin state prison during the summer of 2015, (2) 40 hours of direct observations of four GRIP classes and related activities in San Quentin and in Avenal state prison during the spring of 2016, (3) ongoing analyses of over 100 hours of unedited audio-video footage collected for instructional and training purposes that documents one cohort's entire year (2014–15) of GRIP programming in San Quentin, (4) multiple interviews, informal conversations, and email exchanges with all three of GRIP's lead facilitators, including its founder, (5) repeated interviews or informal conversations with eight of GRIP's 11 (formerly) incarcerated (trainee) co-facilitators as well as with over 25 participants in the program, and (6) primary documents including 225 pages of curricular materials used during GRIP sessions and various other texts written by the founding director and other staff members operating both as implementation designers and as prison reformers.

The direct observations in 2015 and 2016 consisted of (repeated) visits to four different GRIP classes headed by three different lead facilitators and different teams of (formerly) incarcerated co-facilitators. As I was not allowed to take recording devices into San Quentin or Avenal, none of the conversations before, during, or after directly observed GRIP sessions were recorded. As pens and pads were allowed, I did take extensive fieldnotes. Excerpts from the fieldnotes, from transcriptions of the video footage, from interviews and from various primary source documents including the GRIP curriculum were analyzed using Atlas TI, whereby all fragments were coded for key issues related to the main components of

the program (as expressed in the curriculum) and the possibility that GRIP may work as a self-correcting practice.

### **Welcome into the fire**

As is the case in Avenal, to get to GRIP classrooms inside San Quentin one must pass through an exercise yard. In ways that might be said to reinforce stereotypes, 'the [exercise] yard' inside 'SQ' is typically organized along explicitly racialized and often gang-related lines. If not overtly organized through racial segregation and gangs, then there are still the less official 'cars', or groups of prisoners that are more loosely organized as associates. Time and again, what is communicated, one might say, is above all a 'tribal' message: mess with one of us and you mess with all of us. While passing alongside such yards it becomes abundantly clear that GRIP takes place in a world characterized by continual (threats of) further (violent) traumatization.

Such observations might be said to drive home the urgency of getting men entering GRIP cohorts to attune themselves, intensely, to the moods or meanings in diverse GRIP classrooms. To begin seeing how this plays out, it might be useful to return to a few specific moments that emerged during the first three classes of the cohort that was filmed for an entire year.

As the video footage demonstrates, each series of GRIP sessions begins with a number of testimonials from differently racialized men who have already been through the program. In some cases, the men offering testimonials claim to have been highly respected within gang-based prison hierarchies (e.g. to have formerly 'run the yard').

Presumably African American and in his late 30s, in the first testimonial, Sam explained why he felt 'forever indebted to this particular program' and why he 'look[ed] forward to growing along with' the other men 'throughout the next 52 weeks' (MVI\_0027). Sam also revealed that he shot his former girlfriend in an incident that would leave her unable to walk for the rest of her life.

Soon after Sam finished, an inmate named Ephraim said something substantive in the circle of over 30 men for the first time. Probably understood to be Latino, this man I assume to be of roughly the same age as Sam discussed his 'fear' of 'judgment'. As if searching for words that could express what his mirror neurons were eliciting, Ephraim added the following: 'I tried to kill my girlfriend too' and 'when you opened up like that...[pause]...I feel more comfortable now' (MVI\_00030).

Almost immediately thereafter, Roy, a Native American man in his late 50s or early 60s who is clearly one of the most experienced of GRIP inmate co-facilitators, emphasized that 'it's not about judgment'. Emphasizing the centrality of the program's emotional intelligence component, he said one had to 'go back to origins' because 'it all started somewhere'. He implored the men to 'get this stuff out in the open' so that 'we have something to work with' (MVI\_0031). 'This', Roy added, 'is crucial. When you share your truth...that's what this is about, sharing your



truth... sharing our truth together. Without judgment... It's about each of us doing our own work. And if we're spending time judging or tripping out on somebody... what does that say about the work [touches his own chest] that we are here to do?" Seeming to check in on the entire circle of 32 men, Roy then asked, rhetorically, 'is there anybody who has judgment about what Sam or Ephraim just said?' After a brief silence, and in a way that seemed intended to help turn violence and suffering into learning and healing, he went on: 'When you share, you're gonna be able to grow. You're gonna be able to feel that' (MVI\_6956).

Much of this and what follows corresponds to Foucault's (1986: 60–3) careful discussion in *CoS* of how 'subject[ing] oneself to self-examination was a central part of Pythagorean teaching'. The 'purpose of the examination is not', Foucault emphasized, to 'discover one's own guilt'. Quoting the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca, Foucault writes that 'if one "conceals nothing from oneself", if one "omits nothing", it is in order to commit to memory, so as to have them present in one's mind, legitimate ends, but also rules of conduct that enable one to achieve these ends through the choice of appropriate means.' Then, seeming to tap into his inner John Dewey, Foucault went on to argue that the 'fault is not reactivated by the examination in order to determine a culpability or to stimulate a feeling of remorse, but in order to strengthen, on the basis of the recapitulated and reconsidered verification of failure, the rational equipment that ensures wise behavior'.

In a subsequent video-recorded testimonial, a white man matter-of-factly recounted murdering the mother of his daughter. Without having gone through GRIP, he told the newcomers, he did not think he would have been able to process the cocktail of emotions that came with hearing what his young adult daughter had to say during a visit on Thanksgiving Day. Upon uttering these words, his voice started cracking and he felt he had to pause to wipe the tears from his eyes: 'That someone who I harmed the most... could tell me that they forgive me for what I did... ' (MVI\_6957). Given the other comments made by this lanky, soft-spoken man sporting a GRIP baseball cap – for example about being 'beaten like a grown man' by his father after he was 'sent to live with' him at nine years of age, and about his drug use and violence – the message was clear: as a survivor of shattered and abusive familial relationships, without the tools acquired in his earlier GRIP class he might have numbed himself with drugs or distracted himself with violence rather than process bodily sensations and emotions as potentially overwhelming as those generated during his daughter's visit. In closing, he emphasized why he was grateful to be 'training to become a facilitator' because this gave him the chance 'to be in here with you guys and keep doing the work'.

Virgil, an especially charismatic and muscular man with long dreadlocks, offered the final testimonial of the second GRIP gathering. Although this GRIP graduate turned co-facilitator often discusses growing up in poverty and his work through another program (Squires) with 'the youth' from 'the projects' of his native Richmond (California), this man with the name of a prison gang in large letters on his forearm did not need to make explicit where he came from in his opening talk to the newcomers. It seems fair to say that everyone perceived, immediately,

that in terms of durable dispositions Virgil was forced to become as ‘street’ or ‘ghetto’ or ‘hard’ as they come. As such, recognition of the brutal effects of racialized and socio-economic oppression was ‘baked into the cake’ of his testimony and his commanding presence in the room.

Virgil began by stating that ‘what the class taught’ him was ‘that emotional intelligence . . . how to dive in there and sit with them feelings, how to sit in that fire, [and] unturn every little feeling . . . anger, fear, frustration . . . and then to see how all the actions that [these feelings] caused . . . how it made me . . . react’. With a rare, slight, and knowing smile, he added, ‘I got more than what I was looking for. [The class] showed me where [my violence] came from. And to me that’s the most important thing.’

‘Sitting in the fire’, as another co-facilitator would explain to the newcomers later in the same session, is a centrally important GRIP term and frequently used meditative practice around which all four of the program’s stated components revolve (i.e. stopping one’s violence, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and understanding victim impact). The main idea here is that after achieving a sense of stillness and compassion through imagining oneself holding a baby, in the meditation one begins ‘holding’ oneself with the same tenderness one had for the infant while welcoming in the anguish related to one’s own childhood trauma (or the harming of self and others conditioned by it).

The point, of course, is that sincerely feeling the grief (or shame or fear) that can ‘come up’ may indeed feel as impossible as sitting in a fire. Yet while this may ‘feel like it’s going to kill you’, Verduin has written, sitting in there and ‘burning clean’ can actually ‘set you free’. Free, that is, of the experiences, conditions, and reactions turned second nature that contributed to the men ‘forgetting’ who they ‘really are’ (when they committed their crimes). Through techniques powerfully substantiated by the world’s leading trauma-treatment expert in *The Body Keeps the Score* (Van der Kolk, 2014), the specific goal (validated by Maruna, 2001) is to help the inmates find a sense of self-efficacy (if not emancipation) through returning to the goodness of their ‘authentic’ selves rooted in the experience of being an innocent, non-violent, tragically victimized child. Gradually, the meditation transitions into (breathing) exercises emphasizing one’s ability to see clearly and respond skillfully to even seemingly unbearable feelings (activated in challenging social situations). Finally, one is encouraged to confidently accept any and all ‘lessons’ that emerge from this potentially searing meditative experience.

Switching to an example of being able to sit in the fire rather than lash out, Virgil went on to mention that his brother had recently been murdered. He argued that when he was ‘young’ and at once ‘numb’ (to his feelings) and ‘hyper vigilant’ (with regard to threats) due to exposure to violence at home and ‘in the streets’, he would have participated in gang-related retaliation to such an instance. Thanks to GRIP, Virgil proclaimed, he developed the actual techniques and insights that allowed him to monitor his bodily sensations and intelligently process the mix of emotions related to such traumatic events and their reminders. Unable to ‘sit there and deal with that . . . I’m out here . . . striking back, returning violence for

violence . . . You thinking it's just the code of the street, and it's not.' After taking a breath, Virgil continued: 'To me, in my case, it was deeper. It was about being young and being abused, and seeing [his mother] being abused . . . and not able to help them or defend them, or help yourself. So this is where my violence came from. That's why I was able to strike out' (MVI\_6963).

Virgil continued reflecting on his own murdering of a 'friend' in a way that might be considered more probing and revealing than what we find in Anderson's (1999) Ogbu-flavored and culture-bound analysis of (black on black inner city) violence (Paulle, 2013, 2014).

And then in my case . . . You steal some money and I'm thinking ok I got the right to kill you now . . . And in here now, I'm understanding that I didn't have to take this man's life. . . . It had nothing to do with me. It had nothing to do with me being victimized as a kid. [Or] me seeing somebody else being victimized. . . . So I think you have to go down deep and understand . . . that's why I said dig down in there and you understand what you was feeling and how did it change you. To me, I felt defenseless, hopeless. . . . So this is why I did that [i.e. the murder]. (MVI\_6964)

Seeming to tap into GRIP's final core program component (understanding victim impact), Virgil finished his testimony by discussing the emotions that came up for him when he looked into his mother's eyes when she visited soon after his brother's passing. What they showed him, he said, was the 'pain' he caused his victim's mother.

I have observed directly Virgil making such speeches. There is no doubt in my mind that the men he addressed were 'locked in'. The invitation was to attune not just intellectually to GRIP's theoretical vision or clever terms but, on a far more profound level, it was to open up to the undeniably potent emotional dynamics arising out of GRIP's face-to-face encounters. Each man in the large circle felt these skillfully dramatized emotional dynamics resonating and playing out in the 'theater' of his own lived body – and they knew the others around them were feeling roughly the same thing. In other words, as anyone familiar with Durkheim's work on (religious) rituals and bonding might suggest, GRIP's formally secular pedagogy seems to be based on the stirring up of primordial feelings that can bring a new sense of self and a new sense of at least quasi-spiritual solidarity to mind. It is through the recognition of these feelings – at once individual and collective – that the men are invited to 'do' the self-monitoring, self-disciplining, and potentially self-rescuing 'work' of becoming durably non-violent members of a new GRIP 'tribe' (see below). Virgil's utterances as well as simply his way of being-in-the-world might be said to reveal how America's harsh background of grinding poverty and (institutionalized) racism is regularly welcomed into the foreground of the GRIP learning process. Nevertheless, as his laser-like focus demonstrates, GRIP is designed first and foremost to help (formerly) incarcerated men influence what they can influence and, above all, to stop their violence. Pragmatics, not any lack of critical awareness of some kind of hidden right-wing political

agenda, imply that the strong emphasis should be on how these men can – collectively and individually – stabilize and pacify themselves.

### **Naming the tribe, moments of ID, Elvis**

Even with highly effective testimonials, the group formation process cannot succeed unless it is followed up with a series of bonding rituals generating a relatively high degree of, in Collins' (2004) words, mutual focus, shared emotion and rhythmic synchronization. This is exactly what several rituals geared towards group formation are meant to achieve – e.g. synchronized breathing during meditation, holding hands in a circle and thrusting them together while chanting the same words, such as 'for us, by us, about us!', at the end of the class. In perhaps the most powerful of these, the new GRIP 'tribe' is named.

To name the tribe, first off, an inventory is taken of how many years all the men – new participants as well as (former) inmate co-facilitators – have been incarcerated in any type of correctional facility – from juvenile detention to county jails to state prisons. In a given class of around 30 men, the total often climbs higher than 600 years. In the video-recorded class, the total was 662 year. Thus the name of this tribe: '662'. It is almost certainly not lost on many of the men that such a string of numbers sounds like that which is often used to identify gangs: area codes. This an example of how GRIP tribes riff on, and utilize the hunger for belonging that contributes to the formation of gangs. Inside GRIP classes things are, however, supposed to get 'flipped', as Verduin would have it. Tribes are meant to serve constructive rather than destructive purposes. If violence and force contribute to status and senses of *group charisma* (Elias and Scotson, 1994: 104–5) in gangs, authenticity and transparency are supposed to reward and validate participants' progress and indeed the charisma of their tribes.

Another part of this same tribe naming ceremony revolves around impulse control issues generally, and the notion of *imminent danger* specifically. According to the GRIP curriculum, the moment of imminent danger is the 'moment between anger and violence, as well as the moment between craving and using'. Such a moment has three consistent characteristics: 'Everything speeds up, everything intensifies, and there is an experience of regret afterwards'. In the language often used by facilitators, 'ID moments' take place from the second in which one's 'buttons are pressed' and just before one potentially either 'loses it' (and becomes violent) or says 'f...it' (and 'numbs' oneself with drugs or alcohol). With regard to the second pathway, as the curriculum has it, 'You either process these feelings or end up medicating them'. The broader point being that, however trauma-related or otherwise sociologically understandable they may be, unskillful reactions to ID moments often have extremely harmful and prolonged repercussions.

At least in terms of actual behavior in threatening situations, the ultimate goal of the program is to help the men learn to 'ID' such moments – ID being the abbreviation for 'identify' and the acronym for imminent danger – and to respond to them skillfully. The intended message, then, is that concrete steps can be taken to

ensure that ‘Elvis is in the building, when it matters’, as Verduin put it in the third recoding meeting, foreshadowing the part of the GRIP curriculum focusing on meditation and SETA (the monitoring of bodily Sensations, Emotions, Thoughts and Actions). The message is that if one wholeheartedly and regularly engages in practices such as ‘sitting in the fire’ then there is reason for hope that self-work can lead to greater self-efficacy and self-possession – i.e. that one’s sense of ‘authentic self’ rooted in embodied awareness can augment self-regulatory skills and guide one through the heat of even the hottest moments.

As part of the tribe naming ritual, the (co-) facilitator(s) first present the notion of *imminent danger*. Then, going around the circle, each member of the group is asked to divulge how long their moments of ID lasted when they committed the offenses which landed them in prison. Typically in a group of around 30 men, the tally often fails to climb even to 10 minutes – for all involved. Most men report that the ‘moments’ in questions lasted only a few seconds.

Additionally, two more inventories are made: the total number of lives lost due to acts of violence committed by the members (often around 20) and the total number of men who were under the influence of drugs or alcohol when they committed the crimes for which they were convicted. All of the tallies are written on the board towards which the circle is oriented. These sums are also entered into the ‘Tribal Book’, which contains, among other things, information about the members’ loved ones and victims. This large book is often placed on a chair in the middle of the circle as part of a ritualized attempt to bring into the foreground the emotionally charged legacies and ripples of the tribe members’ crimes. Just a few sped-up moments (under the influence) versus hundreds of years of incarceration, many lives lost, expansive circles of suffering, and relentless senses of remorse. These juxtapositions are meant to plant the following question in all the men’s minds: with the help of this fast-emerging group – and for the sake of my beloved as well as for countless potential victims – how can I make sure I never lose a moment like this again?

## Interlocking

During my first series of visits to GRIP classes in San Quentin, in August of 2015, a lead facilitator named Sandy began a class by telling the group of men a few months into the process that, ‘At this point, everything starts to interlock’. This white female GRIP staff member in her 40s, whose facilitation of another program regularly brings her to San Quentin’s infamous ‘death row’, might be said to have foreshadowed what I was about to witness.

A few moments after Sandy made her declaration, she asked if any of the men had experienced a moment of imminent danger since the previous meeting. A dark-skinned man in his 30s who goes by the nickname D4 seemed eager to share. With a do-rag partly covering his long dreadlocks, D4 gave a lively report about such a moment. Someone had stolen some of his food, D4 said, possibly a ‘CO’ (corrections officer). Immediately, he reported, he had wanted to lash out in violence.

The body language and facial expressions from the predominantly black men sitting near D4 made me think things might be getting away from Sandy and the four co-facilitators. With Sandy looking on, two inmate trainee facilitators started asking D4 what he actually felt, in his body, right there, in the heat of that moment. The more precise D4 became, the more the energy seemed to shift.

Then, from across the room, a man who introduced himself to me as Chunky chimed in. This pale-skinned man with a shaved head mentioned that he had stolen lots of things from guys in prison. He had, he added, even 'stolen a life'. In a somewhat meandering way, Chunky went on to share that he was 'the only fuck up in his family' and that he was 'completely stoned' when his father came to tell him about his mother's passing. This middle-aged white man went on to report that his father seemed heartbroken when he told him he hadn't 'seen him sober in 30 years'. Chunky discussed his motivation to get it together – i.e. 'stay clean' – and certainly not to miss his father's funeral.

Supportively, and with greater focus, Chunky brought it back to D4. My field-notes indicate he said something along the lines of this: 'Is lashing out at the person who stole your food really worth getting more time? What will you tell your family when you get sent to the hole?' With everyone apparently engrossed, Chunky looked right at D4 and added, 'You're a better man than that now... it's already started'. Chunky told D4 he did not need to go back to that 'thug' way of being. 'You're better than that. All of us are here to support you', he added.

The applause from the entire group was intense, and it was reinforced by the body language and facial expressions of all present. The tide had been turned, it seemed. Everything, indeed, seemed to start 'interlocking'. Even for me as an observer welcomed in for the first time, the sense of fellowship, and the sense that a genuinely healing process was under way, was undeniable.

A few moments later, an Asian-American man raised his hand and, when called upon, suggested the group check in on one of his fellow trainee facilitators, a black man in his late 40s named Berry, who had tears streaming down his cheeks. Unlike several of the other trainees or co-facilitators present, Berry had been quiet up to that point. Allowing the tears to continue to flow, Berry reported feeling like a proud 'father'. One of 'my guys', he said of Chunky, was not just 'getting it' but also 'opening up' for the 'first time'. Reflecting what seemed to be his newly achieved understanding, Berry said he was crying because 'that's what [real] men do'.

Although seemingly less strident than he had been at the outset, D4 still seemed skeptical. There would be, I thought, no PR version performed for the visitor. D4 reported not being sure he could remain non-violent if he found out who violated him – even if he found out it was a CO.

Immediately, and in a way that seemed to encapsulate everything GRIP is about, Virgil spoke to the group through D4: 'That struggle, that tension, that's where you're supposed to be right now [i.e. during this phase in the program]. This is where the growth takes place. We can help you, but you have to go through this yourself too.'

While discussing care of the body, ‘retreat within oneself’ and the art of ‘not letting oneself become angry at others’, Foucault (1986: 51–3) emphasized: ‘One of the most important aspects of this activity devoted to oneself: it constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice’. Foucault went on to note that while ‘recognized hierarchy gave the most advanced members the task of tutoring the others (individually or in a more collective fashion)’, the perhaps deeper goal is that the ‘interplay of the care of the self and the help of others blends into preexisting relations, giving them a new coloration and a greater warmth’. Here Foucault spoke of the ‘intensification of social relations’.

### **Avenal, Darryl**

A key question for any potentially innovative program is whether or not it can successfully spread out and scale up. With this in mind, it might be useful to examine what is taking place, on the ground, around the outer edges of GRIP’s expanding reach.

In the early spring of 2016, I attended a daylong GRIP class at Avenal state prison, hours away from any major city in California. In GRIP’s circle deep inside one of Avenal’s six main sections, I found myself sitting just one seat away from Darryl. At a certain point – without a hint of bravado, but also without signaling a great deal of shame – Darryl described himself as a ‘domestic terrorist’. He used this term in reference to the violent acts he committed in his former home.

Later in the day, Darryl and I ended up in the same small group in which several men were asked to respond to an example from the GRIP curriculum labeled ‘everyday trauma’. Often in tears, which steadily generated pats on the back from inmates racialized along alternative lines, the men discussed being unable to express, let alone effectively process, the emotions and thoughts that accompanied the traumatic experiences they had as children been forced to endure.

Darryl – whom I presumed to be African American and in his mid-30s – discussed being forced not to express or discuss his feelings after the car his father was operating struck a cyclist and his father sped off. Eyes watering, Darryl read aloud a portion of a written assignment entitled ‘Trama’ [sic], which he had prepared (and which was later copied for me):

This incident is where I think I became emotionally detached from myself not being able to express my true feelings and fed false beliefs of what boys are and aren’t supposed to do built this wall that I’ve been building for over 30 years. I remember at the age of 16 while getting high smoking a joint I asked my father I[f] he remember this incident and his response was damn you got a good as[s] memory. As if everything that happen that day was O.K.

Darryl may not have received even the rudiments of a high school education, but he seemed genuinely proud to be ‘getting it’. Darryl appeared to be coming to grips, that is, with some rather profound insights into the socialization process behind his

own emotional self-estrangement. From a tender age and into adolescence, severing his awareness from the visceral and immediately lived through experience of traumatic events had been effectively drilled into his unconscious mind. Darryl openly discussed the possibility that this contributed, mightily, to the emergence of his alternately violent and self-medicating stress response patterns. Darryl went on to discuss how his own feelings had not been informing even his most fundamental decisions. Like all the others in our smaller group and nearly all the men in the larger group, Darryl seemed to thirst for, and genuinely embrace, the pedagogic resources and overall approach offered by the GRIP curriculum and its facilitators.

To be sure, each inmate offered a different story. I nevertheless recall Darryl's particular case because it was so typical. It was typical, one might say, in the sense that men understood to be black made up roughly half the population of each of the four GRIP classes I have observed in two California state prisons. Tragically, this brings to mind bell hooks' (2002: 21) penetrating argument that, 'When we study the psychohistory of African Americans it becomes apparent that the foundation of the shaky self-esteem that assaults our sensibilities is rooted in the experience of traumatic violence.' Continuing, she posits that, 'it is the normalization of violence in our lives as black people that creates the foundation for ongoing trauma reenactment'. Finally, hooks (2002: 23) adds, the oppressed as well as those who research them should avoid 'collud[ing] with the dominant culture in refusing to document... [the] ongoing psychological impact of traumatic violence'.

Here again, race matters. Yet Darryl's story might be seen as ideal-typical in another, less race-related sense. Often with tears in their eyes or their voices cracking, nearly every one of the men in Darryl's GRIP tribe made what seemed to be compelling connections to the ways in which they were effectively taught not to remain 'in touch with' the overwhelming bodily sensations, toxic emotions, and confusing thoughts related to the traumatic violence they claim to have experienced as children. With striking regularity, the inmates reported that the violence in question had been inflicted upon their mothers, their siblings or themselves by horribly abusive men. Talking about this seemed to unburden the men in part because, in the smaller and larger groups, they often spoke of how they had once been, for example, 'good kids' or 'innocent kids' or 'just plain little boys who didn't want to hurt nobody'. With the plausibility of the links in question seeming to dawn on them, and with what seemed like newfound confidence in their abilities to remain 'authentically' self-possessed even in challenging situations, nearly all of them appeared ready to accept responsibility for their own intensely violent crimes (if not to re-define the adult men who had violated them and their loved ones as both victims and victimizers).

Inside Avenal state prison, as had been the case in San Quentin, I could not help feeling and thinking that GRIP was helping these men find ways to release themselves from the visceral grip not just of childhood trauma but also of the myth of an autonomous (or self-made) individuality. As such, in helping the men 'do the work'



of carefully attending to – if not beginning to heal – the scars inflicted on them as children, new opportunities for returning to meaningfully constructed and essentially good core selves were opening up.

Once again, the series of intellectual and emotional events I witnessed seemed to resonate with what Foucault (1986: 58, 51) discussed in terms of ‘at once personal and social’ practices that ‘often took place within more or less institutionalized structures’ and in which ‘self-knowledge occupies a central place’. In ‘reality’, Foucault argued with regard to his preferred ancient practices, a ‘whole art of self-knowledge developed, with precise recipes, specific norms of examination, and codified exercises’ that promoted ‘establishing a supremacy over oneself’. At the very least, in the words Foucault used while reflecting on the teachings of Seneca, the GRIP experience seemed to help one ‘reunite with oneself’ (1986: 46).

## Conclusion

The final remarks to which we can now turn should not be confused with anything approaching guarantees about GRIP’s future. Should this program expand rapidly – and especially if it is increasingly offered to younger and therefore harder to reach and more recidivism prone populations – the organization managing GRIP may be extremely hard-pressed to train and retain high quality (co-)facilitators (willing to drive for hours to places like Avenal state prison). Even putting such expansion related challenges aside, the area in-between prison systems, broader bureaucratic fields, judicial spheres, philanthropic organizations, and California’s ritual-manipulating union for corrections officers (cf. Page, 2007) is not an easy place to operate. In the past, many rehabilitation programs that may have initially seemed promising have been co-opted and reduced to quackery if not harmful pseudo-interventions (Cullen, 2012). Should this come to pass, for any reasons, the sensitizing concepts and warnings of the dominant Foucault – i.e. the Foucault associated with the carceral continuum, anti-psychology and the dark sides of countless programs that are ‘rehabilitative’ in name only – might well deserve primacy in future analyses of GRIP.

Having said this, with regard to the two inter-related questions posed at the outset, the main finding here must be this: My observations strongly suggest that in its present stage of evolution, GRIP deserves to be considered innovative and successful in the sense that it tends to lead participants to engage in *self-correcting practices* within what the other Foucault might have called *askesis*-generating regimes of self-care. As intended, the participants seem to develop somatically anchored insights into something important. Namely, that continually being distracted by at once socially situated and deeply habituated cycles of tension, craving, self-medicating, and lashing out can at best *temporarily* and *superficially* feel pleasurable. The art of living (aesthetically) more satisfying as well as more ethical lives, in the words of the other Foucault, is far better – and perhaps (as a Heideggerian) one might even say more ‘authentically’ – achieved through the use of austere

self-disciplining techniques enabling clear-sighted and skillful responses to emotionally charged external and internal events.

Sticking with Foucault's words (borrowed from Seneca), GRIP seems to be fostering a 'return to' and a beneficial disciplining of 'oneself'. In the language of the GRIP curriculum, to take responsibility for one's crime and its impact on victims is never separate from a well-founded sense of having discovered body-based techniques (like 'sitting in the fire') and related teachings that can increase one's self-knowledge and one's self-mastery – and therefore one's 'response-ability' even in the face of the most pressing 'moments of imminent danger'. Although GRIP classes often highlight the fact that the inmates' victimizing and victimization is undergirded by (histories of) racialized and political-economic domination, the program's pragmatic achievement is to contribute to public health and the pacification of 'terrorized' homes and neighborhoods by helping participants develop and deploy resources that can help them constructively influence that which they can.

Just before his passing, the author of *Discipline and Punish* did not go through the trouble of unearthing ancient self-care practices because he hoped a few intellectual dandies would use them to their personal benefit. Nor did Foucault naively think his readers would simply attempt to copy the specific practices he detailed. Rather, in his final incarnation as pragmatic and prescriptive methodologist, Foucault wanted to inspire future generations to investigate how they might identify or even create collective learning processes in more or less institutional settings that could serve as background cultural practices engendering greater freedom. Informed by Foucault's final offerings, this article begins the work of demonstrating how ethnographic engagement with the GRIP program – and potentially several others like it – can change discussions about prison reform, violent crime, rehabilitation, and recidivism.

A great deal of this article can be read as a demonstration of how ethnographers might orient themselves to (what members claim to see as) the more beneficial aspects of programs such as GRIP. In closing, I want to discuss how fieldworkers might most usefully orient themselves towards the potentially harmful aspects of such interventions.

As indicated above, my observations do not suggest that the men were merely performing transformed selves in the interest of improving their chances with the Parole Board. However, as an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper suggested, something subtler could be at work. Conceivably, the emotionally charged encounters in GRIP classrooms could predispose the men to romanticize or idealize the program's effectiveness (e.g. to overestimate the degree to which they have attained greater capacities for self-control). This more subtle mechanism might be associated with the risk that all involved, including the researcher, will conflate the temporary effects of powerful interaction rituals (e.g. the participants' tears and testimonials) with durable recalibration and pacification of sets of deep-seated predispositions (i.e. with the emergence of non-violent second natures).

This is certainly something for which researchers should remain on guard. However, my findings do not suggest the men were exaggerating the program's effects while caught up in the powerful chains of GRIP's interaction rituals any more than they remained consciously engaged in Machiavellian enactments of front stage impression management. The program's emotionally charged reminders about – and explorations of – childhood trauma, challenging situational dynamics and harsh structural realities might be expected to dampen, rather than increase, the men's enthusiasm. With regard to the possibility of my own misrepresentation of the program's inner workings and possible effects, I will offer this: after many months far away from the California prison system, I do not believe I was still so swept away by the power of emotional dynamics in GRIP classrooms that I remained incapable of detached analyses.

Having said this, my findings unambiguously point towards another potentially harmful aspect of the program associated with what Durkheim called *collective effervescence*: the loss of bonds with a 'tribe' of 'brothers' upon release. Simply being there – and in my case 'coming all the way from Europe' to study 'what we are doing', as one facilitator put it while introducing me – can in and of itself contribute to the emotional energy and sense of brotherhood in the classroom. Fieldworkers examining programs like GRIP should be careful not to (unnecessarily) contribute to the strengthening of these bonds and emotional dynamics because doing so can, in theory, contribute to setbacks (and perhaps even to a psychological need to return to prison). Whether this is a realistic concern or not, researchers should gather data on how graduates of programs like GRIP cope with the cessation of these emotional energy-generating webs of mutually oriented individuals – perhaps by contributing to the creation of new (psychotherapeutic) groups whose charisma can shield them from feelings of (group) disgrace.

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## Notes

1. Throughout this article I use ‘racialized’ ethnic categories as members’ terms rather than as analytic ones – i.e. as emic rather than etic concepts.
2. See: <http://www.insight-out.org/index.php/programs/grip-program> (accessed 20 May 2016).
3. The statewide recidivism rate is around 64%. As of this writing, by the count of the organization that operates GRIP – which state prison officials can easily verify – 0% of the 53 GRIP graduates who have been released over the course of the past five years have returned to prison. Understandably, as was the case with an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this article, this statement about the program’s possible effects on recidivism might engender concerns about the possibility of ‘cherry picking’. Certainly, given (1) that on average GRIP participants and these specific graduates tend to be older than most inmates and (2) that many of them were convicted of murder, one should not extrapolate from anything approaching this statewide average of 64%. Having said this, even when combined with the reasonable expectation that GRIP’s selection of inmates for the program may further drive down recidivism, these two factors associated with low rates of recidivism cannot be expected to drive the rate all the way down to zero. Furthermore, as of 2013, more than 26,000 prisoners in California – around 20% of the total population – were serving life sentences (with the possibility of parole). As such, one might argue that the men in the GRIP program convicted of violent crimes serving long and/or indeterminate sentences are closer to the proverbial low hanging fruit than they are to cherries.
4. Only with carefully designed randomized control trials can we know whether or not GRIP improves recidivism outcomes among younger men. But aside from being costly, such studies would be extremely difficult to execute (due, for example, to transfers). It would also take upwards of seven to ten years before such studies would begin generating much useful data. As such, policy-makers and researchers might consider looking for other indications of the program’s inner workings and effectiveness.
5. Other than in the case of Verduin, who gave permission to use his actual name, only pseudonyms will be used in this article.
6. This would include, Verduin submits, many of the roughly 10 to 15% who are released during the yearlong program.
7. As Foucault (in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 246), put it: ‘No technique, no . . . skill can be acquired without exercise; neither can one learn the art of living, the *techne tou biou*, without *askesis* which must be taken as a training of oneself by oneself’.
8. Foucault contextualized his arguments in CoS (p. 44) in terms of a ‘slow development of the art of living under the theme of the care of oneself’ during the ‘first two centuries of the imperial epoch’ that ‘can be seen [as] the summit of a curve: a kind of golden age’.
9. See: <http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/BOPH/> (accessed 3 November 2016).

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**Author Biography**

**Bowen Paulle** is an Assistant Professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam. Paulle is the author of *Toxic Schools: High poverty schooling in New York and Amsterdam* (2013, University of Chicago Press). After working on efforts to desegregate schools in various parts of the Netherlands, Paulle is presently working on a grass-roots initiated effort to bring enriching experiences (including high dosage math tutoring) to roughly 1000 primary school students in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Rotterdam.