Medium Security Prisons and Inmate Subcultures:  
The ‘Normal Prison’

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ABSTRACT
Time spent in prison does not occur in a vacuum. Inmates’ views of self, the situation, and others around them are likely to have a major impact on their imprisonment. The goal of the current research was to investigate assimilation into the inmate culture, and norms of the current inmate culture. Qualitative investigations were employed to examine and gain a better understanding of these views. Data collection procedures consisted of open-ended, unstructured interviews with twenty male inmates at a medium security prison in Ohio. Analyses of interview transcriptions suggest that the inmate culture of this institution is built around trust and respect. Hierarchies, norms, and tips for serving a sentence revolved around the presence or absence of respect accorded by other inmates.

INTRODUCTION

The current population of individuals incarcerated in the United States exceeds two million. These individuals have been deemed so deviant that society wants them at least temporarily incapacitated. Amidst this, there are periods, though infrequent, when prisons are overrun by the deviants within. Thus, the goal of the current research was to investigate and describe processes of assimilation into the inmate culture. A plethora of research was conducted on similar topics throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (for example Clemmer, 1958; Sykes, 1958; Sykes & Messinger, 1960; Goffman, 1961; Wheeler, 1961; Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Irwin, 1980; and Thomas, 1977). Also, there has recently been a movement towards conducting research on the “prison community” or “pains of imprisonment” in relation to female inmates (e.g., Alarid 1997); however, little research has been conducted to update knowledge of the male inmate subculture.

Time spent in prison does not occur in a vacuum. Inmates’ views of the self, the situation, and of others about them are likely to have a major impact on their imprisonment experience. Qualitative investigations were employed to examine and gain a better understanding of these views.
Several themes associated with inmates’ experiences while incarcerated were explored through this study:

- Relationship processes
- Descriptions of inmate culture
- Processes of assimilation into the inmate culture

This study did not test statistically the presence of a particular set of norms nor propose to test theoretical explanations for the existence of a prison culture. Theories of prison culture will be discussed when applicable.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

A prison, as Clemmer (1958) argued, is simply another community. This community can be viewed as a self-contained world with its own morals, social relations, patterns of behavior, rules, and laws. Because prison is a self-contained community, acts that are viewed as deviant might be defined differently than how they would be defined in the open society. Inmates must learn what is viewed as deviant in the community in which they will live (Castle, Hensley, & Tewksbury, 2002).

Throughout literature on the topic of violations of norms in institutions, the central focus revolves around the rules established by the inmate code. The code represents an organization of criminal values in clearcut opposition to the values of conventional society, and to prison officials as representatives of that society. The main tenet of this code forbids any type of supportive or nonexploitative liaison with prison officials. It seeks to confer high status and prestige on those inmates who stand most clearly in opposition to the administration (Ohlin, 1956, p. 28). An argument exists about the actual number of rules that comprise the inmate code; ranging from a high of seventeen rules (Sykes & Messinger, 1960) to a low of three rules (Pollock, 1997). The inmate code is not a published piece of legislation, however; a basic assumption is that the prescriptions for behavior in the inmate code are different from “official” values of the institution.

More recent literature has deemphasized the effects of the inmate code (Irwin, 1980), or suggested that the code is constantly changing to suit the needs of the inmates who have been incarcerated for longer periods (Kaminski, 2003). Furthermore, the inmate code seems to have been replaced by a “Code of the Streets” as a result of the growing importance of gangs in prisons (Hunt, Riegel, Morales, & Waldorf, 1993). Lerner (2002) suggests that inmate statuses exist, however the power one possesses in prison is based on affiliation with a gang.
The purpose of the current research was to investigate descriptions of current inmate culture at a medium security prison. Much of the current literature on inmate culture centers on maximum security prisons rather than the most common, medium security institution (for example: Austin and Irwin’s 2001 chapter on Super-Max). Early (1992) and Santos (2004) examine life in United States penitentiaries Leavenworth and Atlanta, respectively. Both of these institutions are infamous for their violent populations. Finally the first hand experiences of the inmates in Ross and Richards (2003) seem to glamorize or sensationalize the importance of violence within an institution.

METHODS

To understand the current dynamics that exist within the prison community it was necessary to conduct a two-part investigation. The first stage of the research was composed of a qualitative pilot examination of inmates’ accounts and narratives. According to Orbuch (1997, p. 455) accounts, stories, and narratives “represent ways in which people organize views of themselves, of others, and of their social world.” Since research on prison argot is somewhat outdated, it was necessary to gain an updated understanding. Examination of inmate accounts, stories, and narratives allowed for a better understanding of the current inmate argot and facilitated the construction of a proper interview schedule. The aim was to better understand the impact of prison life on individuals by exploring the personal meanings inmates portray through their stories. Inmate accounts, stories, and narratives can serve both as ways of interpreting their experience and as a means of communicating to others (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). The accounts and stories may not be totally veridical in that people often selectively construct, retrieve, and distort narratives to fit their self-concepts, and to represent what they believe is important” (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994, p.665).

This research, in essence, will focus on the prison inmates’ perception of the cause of relationship formation, code violation, status violation, as well as the factors influencing these attributions, and the actor’s perceived reactions to the friendships, code violations, and status violations.

THE PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted at a medium security prison so the researcher could construct a proper survey instrument. Interviews were conducted until the data became repetitive and no new information was gained. As a result, the target sample size of ten was achieved. The data collection procedures consisted of several open-ended, unstructured interviews. With the subjects’ permission, interviews were audiotaped. The researcher transcribed these taped interviews. The format of the interviews included substantive areas such as perceptions of prison prior to incarceration, perceptions of prison experiences, perceptions of friendships, and perceptions of others’ prison experiences. Probes were utilized as needed to keep subjects on task and to facilitate brevity. Subjects were interviewed in private rooms with only the
interviewer present. No prison staff or other inmates could overhear the interview. Interviews lasted between 53 minutes and two and one-half hours. At the conclusion of the interview, subjects were debriefed and given contact information.

THE CURRENT INVESTIGATION

Interviews were conducted at a medium security prison. The target sample size was approximately fifteen to twenty-five subjects. Interviews were conducted until themes became repetitive and no new information was gained. The interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed. The transcriptions were employed to analyze the interviews and discover themes.

The second data-gathering component of the study consisted of a more in-depth qualitative investigation of the inmates’ relationships and perceptions of the inmate culture. From the interviews emerging patterns relating to the formation, maintenance, and functions of inmate friendships, as well as some of the codes, statuses, and language of the inmate subculture are described. Several of the respondents provided mini-themes related to a presence of an inmate code as well as making several slang references about particular types of inmates that could be construed as current inmate statuses and the corresponding inmate argot. For example, respondents indicated differentiations between inmates based on sentence type (determinant versus indeterminant).

Early sociological influence on accounts can be seen in Goffman’s (1959; 1971) work regarding presentation of the self after a transgression has occurred. Accounts were used to correct behavior or to counteract the negative implications of wrongdoing. Sykes and Matza (1957) used accounts as a tool to counteract negative consequences or implication of behavior. They describe the process by which individuals rationalize deviant acts and behaviors when reproached. Accounts and narratives may be used to provide justifications or excuses for deviant forms of behavior. The techniques of neutralization developed by Sykes and Matza include denial of injury, denial of victim, denial of responsibility, and condemnation of the condemners.

Accounts, however, are not limited to negative situations. Scott and Lyman (1968) utilize a more concise conception of accounts: individuals use accounts whenever their actions are subject to “valuative inquiry” (p.46). Individuals use excuses to deny personal responsibility for their actions, choosing instead to attribute behavior to external factors. Conversely, justifications are used to accept responsibility while downplaying any relationship between behavior and personal disposition (Crittenden, 1983). Garfinkel (1967) examined accounts in the context of more mundane experiences and argued that in everyday life, individuals continuously use accounts to describe, criticize, and idealize specific situations. Moreover, actors are apt to use entitlements to claim credit for desired outcomes and enhancements to increase the value of their behavior (Forsyth, 1980).
Baumeister and Newman (1994) view narratives as a tool or a means to achieve a particular goal. They argued that many interpersonal motives for and patterns of storytelling depend on the particular social context or audience. First, stories can be told by actors in an attempt to obtain a particular goal. Baumeister and Newman (1994) state, “stories can manipulate other people’s perceptions, emotions and inferences, and so describing events in particular ways can increase an individual’s chances of obtaining desired rewards” (p. 680). The way in which an actor is able to present information will alter the perception of the audience. For example, a story may be used to elicit respect, fear, and/or sympathy from the audience. Second, stories can be a tool for the transmission of culture. As a medium for socialization, narratives are often employed to teach others. Polkinghorne (1988) argued that narratives transmit norms, moral beliefs, and cultural values. Finally, stories can be used in an attempt to validate identity claims. “Our self-evaluations are affected by the evaluations others have of us, and more importantly, by how we perceive those evaluations” (Gecas & Schwalbe 1983, p. 77). Social interactions are therefore vital to construction of identity.

Sampling

For the purpose of this study the subjects were adult males incarcerated at a medium security institution in Ohio. The target sample size was approximately fifteen to twenty-five subjects.

Subjects were randomly selected by institutional staff through the use of their Department of Rehabilitation and Correction number. The institutional staff members selected thirty institutional numbers at random from a list of all inmates incarcerated for the given interview schedule. Inmates that were selected were then asked to volunteer for the interview.

The data collection procedures consisted of open-ended, unstructured interviews. With the subject’s consent, the interviews were audiotaped. The researcher transcribed these tapes and then the tapes were destroyed for confidentiality. These issues were addressed in the consent form. All subjects were guaranteed confidentiality. No names were associated with the resulting transcription of the audiotaped interviews. The subjects were advised prior to the interview to avoid the use of real names throughout the interview. If an actual name was inadvertently used, it was replaced with a pseudonym in the transcription. Actual subjects and the institution are referred to by pseudonyms at all times in the transcripts. Only the researcher had full access to the raw data.

The risks to the subjects were minimal. The topics covered included general questions pertaining to the inmates’ background, friendships with other inmates and those outside the walls, perceptions of inmate hierarchies, unwritten rules, and expectations for release. Any information that could jeopardize the subjects’ legal status was not collected. The questions were not intended to be threatening or anxiety-producing. The interview, however, could have posed a slight emotional risk.
RESULTS

Several themes associated with inmates’ experiences while incarcerated were explored through this study. Specifically, the following broad themes were the foci of this study: friendship processes, processes of assimilation into the inmate culture, and descriptions of current inmate culture. After the transcriptions of the interviews, several themes emerged. This section will discuss the themes that were under investigation as well as unexpected themes that developed.

Analyses of the data consisted of transcript organization so that meaningful conclusion could be drawn. The data analyses for the study involved organizing segments of transcripts into the three broad categories presented throughout this chapter. Excerpts from interview transcriptions are included to illustrate the themes that emerged in each of the three broad categories. The excerpts are referenced to each appropriate respondent by pseudonym. A brief vignette of each respondent and their appropriate pseudonym appear in Appendix A.

How to Do Time

Analyses of discussions revealed several themes related to suggestions about how to serve time. These include impression management, standing up for oneself, doing your own time, and getting to know other inmates. Respondents where asked to report rules to live by and how to serve time. Many of the respondents’ suggestions appear to resemble “lifestyle tips” rather than norms.

Impression Management

Many of the respondents emphasized the importance of new inmates’ impression management. Many respondents suggested that how individuals “carry themselves” determines how they will spend their time while incarcerated. It was believed that individuals who are able to display convincing performances adjusted better than individuals who were not as convincing.

Brad: It depends on who you are really, I mean your stature. If you’re small, white guy, specifically, you get preyed upon in here, mostly by the black inmates. Not because of their stature or nothing, but because they know they’re scared. They prey on that weakness. And might have parents looking out for him where this guy here he might have been locked down already for ten years. Most of his funds have been depleted, and most of his contacts to the outside world has left him on his own. So now he preys off the weaker young guys and for whatever, monetary value, his own reputation, owes everybody. My advice to a kid like that is, you know, “Hey little man do what you gotta do. Gotta be a man. Get your own reputation going. You ain’t gotta be a prison punk, tossin salads, or you ain’t gotta give this guy twenty dollars of your fifty every week. You don’t have to do that. Fight for what you believe in. But everyone needs to [look like they are ready to use violence]. It’s how you carry yourself.”
Turner: Well the first thing you got to do, you got to carry yourself like a man. You can’t behave like a kid. You can’t act like a kid. And you can’t let them treat you like a kid. That’s number one. That goes for staff and other inmates or whoever. Be respectful to yourself and naturally you gonna be respectful to everybody else. And everybody else will respect that.

Mark: You be like, “Well, I don’t really know a good dude, and I can’t say nothing bad about him, but by how he carry his self and his conduct.”

Steve: Because you know, guys look, like I said, they look for weaknesses. They prey on weaknesses, so best thing to do is, watch how you carry yourself….

I: What do you mean by, “Watch how you carry yourself?”

R: Look like you ready to fight or can fight. Ya know?

I: Be ready to fight?

R: Yeah, if you look like you can protect yourself, you will be alright. But you need to be able to keep that up at all times.

Many respondents emphasized the importance of inmates’ ability to provide a convincing performance. Respondents posited that how individuals carry themselves determines the conditions of their confinement. It was asserted that individuals should appear that they are willing to use violence if prompted. Inmates that were able to display more convincing performances adjusted better than inmates who were not as convincing.

Stand Up for Yourself

When faced with adversity, many respondents advised that inmates stand up for themselves. It was revealed that inmates who fight send a message to others that they were prepared to use violence and, therefore would be difficult to exploit.

Don: The number one thing with a young guy like that is to not make themselves a sexual target. If somebody comes on to you, you fight. Yeah, you’re going to go to the hole and everything but usually if you fight once or twice, the word gets out that there’s easier pickin’s around you know (laughs).
I: Even if you lose?

R: Right. ‘Cause the guys trying to do something. They want to try to taunt somebody into something. They don’t really want to fight with somebody, and there’s always the possibility that they might lose.

It was reported that inmates who fight send a message to others that they are prepared to use violence and, therefore, are difficult to exploit. Inmates who are considered predators look for targets that will not fight, whom they can exploit without drawing attention to themselves.

Do Your Own Time

Some of the respondents recommended that inmates should do their own time. Respondents reported that inmates that do their own time stay out of trouble, receive more respect, and are viewed as wanting to improve their situation. This suggested normative theme could be a holdover from the inmate code.


David: Stick with your own, at least until you establish yourself. At least ‘til you can pick through the bullshit to see who’s decent and who’s not. You know, stick with your own and go from there.

Ralph: Stick to yourself as much as you can and gather your thoughts. And try to educate yourself. Whatever area you’re lacking in, try to strengthen that. If you have a problem and you haven’t got your GED, work on that. And hit college and hit some vocational training. Cuz, all you have is time in here. And if you use it to your advantage, that’s going to help you. If you sit and just dream about the past or hope for the future, that doesn’t help you, and you can gossip and talk about people all day, but that’s not going to keep you out of the joint.

One of the maxims of the inmate code is to do your own time (Sykes, 1958). Some of the respondents asserted that inmates should do their own time. Inmates who do their own time stay out of trouble, receive more respect, and are viewed as wanting to improve their situation. Although several respondents discussed that importance of doing your own time, many contradicted themselves both in behavior and further suggested normative behavior.
Get to Know Other Inmates

In stark contrast to the theme “do your own time,” many respondents contradicted themselves and emphasized the importance of newer inmates getting to know other inmates. Respondents recommended that new inmates should get to know others and form a small, close-knit group to help ease the pain of their incarceration.

Keith: Now, I’m goin’ tell you by really stayin’ to yourself, or what you should do really is by finding two or three people to kick it with and base your time around that. Cause y’all could use each other to bid off each other, to make your time pass.

Brad: I would tell ‘em, “Say, make sure you really get to know people. Know ‘em for yourself. Don’t listen to a lot of these guys. These guys will say this and say that. Don’t listen to em. Just get to know people for yourself. You’ll know who they are; you’ll know who’s good guy, who’s bad guy, who to be with and not to be with. You know, and you’re going to do what you want to do anyway, so, be choosy.

Mike: Get to know your cubies. Respect em. Know who they are. Find a good group to do your time with.

Kurt: You’re gonna want to find a small group. Choose your friends, honestly. They’ll make your bit a lot easier. Part of it is choosing your own friends. I don’t even know of any gangs that are here, but if you know, one approached you and that’s what you want, boom. If you don’t, hey you just tell em, no.

Max: First off you need to know who your affiliating yourself with. If you start messing around with guys that’s, that’s all the time in the shit, being loud, you want to back away from them. Try to keep a low profile. Don’t let yourself in the limelight, but have you some friends. But not too many. Keeps a lot of the staff and stuff up off from you too, cuz they recognize just as well as anybody else.

Carl: Having people makes the time go by faster. Share it with some good friends that will really help you out there. Make the time smoother. But won’t be getting into any trouble. That makes your time go faster. Help you out in the long run. That’s about the main thing I guess.

In stark contrast to “do your own time,” many respondents revealed that new inmates should get to know other inmates. There were two reasons provided for getting to know other inmates. First, having a primary group of friends would ease inmates’ sentences. Second, it is important to find high quality friends. As previously mentioned, respondents reported that they had
primary groups of friends while incarcerated and suggested that having these groups assisted in coping with their sentence.

**Existence of Hierarchies**

Discussions about hierarchies were also contradictory. Many respondents suggested that hierarchies did not exist, however, analyses of transcripts revealed several themes related to a hierarchical standing of inmates that included occupations, organizations, athletics, religion, education, patients, convictions, and individuals or groups to avoid. The hierarchies that emerged from the analyses seem to be based on very conventional criteria.

**Occupations**

Some of the respondents suggested that different occupations were more desirable than others. In addition, some occupations provided inmates with more power than other inmates, thus establishing a hierarchy. For example, a respondent reported value in occupations that would allow inmates to be versatile. It is important to note that educational programs are considered an occupation throughout the Ohio Department of Corrections.

**Mike:** GED first. That’s top of the list. Get that; then you can go anywhere in this kingdom. You can go OPI, you can go to vocational school, you can go a lot of other places, college, whatever, but if you ain’t got your GED, they ain’t going to let you OPI. You won’t be able to go to vocational school.

Another respondent suggested that occupational hierarchy is based on the monetary reward, physical fitness, and demands of the occupation.

**Jason:** What are you going to do with your day? Which job are you gonna select. What do you wanna do? Do you want to work at recreation? Which is you know, a good job. OPI, where I work, is a good job. I prefer working there cuz it pays the most. Um…

**I:** What’s a bad job?

**R:** Kitchen. Cutting the grass.

**I:** Why are those bad?

**R:** Well, Kitchen is bad because you have to get up at four o’clock in the morning. And, they don’t really treat them as well over there. The hours are bad, it’s too early. You gotta
work a split shift, you leave, you know, you got a little bit of time. You gotta come back and work, you know, like you do now. Cutting the grass is just doing the yard maintenance is just too boring. For my opinion, boring. It’s menial. Its not doing you any good.

**I:** Why are those other jobs good jobs?

**R:** Well, from my point of view, OPI is a good job because a lot of guys learned the sewing skill, and they left here and usually found jobs. You know, we pick em out of the paper all of the time and put them on the boards over there. So there’s a demand for it. Since we have an apprenticeship program through US Labor Department, some of them have become quality control inspectors, have left a couple of them have and have gone down and gotten in, and, I forget which. Oh, Delphi Automotive in Dayton has a QA, a quality control inspector based on their apprenticeship program. Plus, you earn more money. So if you, you don’t want to burden your people, you can get by much easier making a hundred dollars a month than you can making eighteen or twenty dollars. So that would be OPI. Education pretty self-explanatory. If you can’t read or write, you can go all the way through college. Especially if you’re just barely short of a GED. I would rate those three as probably the, OPI, recreation, and education. Now then you pick your order. That’s the three best things you can do here.

**I:** Why is recreation so desirable?

**R:** I always thought because you can stay physically fit. You can get out. You have an excellent weight room, basketball, golf, track in the back. You can occupy your time and stay in shape and whatever. ‘Cause a lot of guys have finished high school or two years of college here and they’re in a net that they do have to go find something else. OPI has a hiring limit. So you can’t everybody can’t go there. We’re limited to 125. So the next, the third alternative is recreation.

**Organizations**

Throughout the institution several volunteer organizations exist such as the Vietnam Veterans of America and the Good Hope Jaycees. These organizations hold fundraisers for outside benefactors. The fundraisers generally involve food sales from outside vendors (e.g., Pizza Hut, McDonalds). Respondents reported that being in these organizations or knowing the heads of the organizations provides opportunities for privileges.

**Kevin:** I know the president of the Jaycees, and I know the president of the VVA, and they’re both nice people. Um I don’t know ‘em well enough to consider them as quote-unquote “friend,” but I mean they are if you have a question about what the organization’s about they’ll let you know. They have about as much power as a guy can. You can make your own prediction from there.
**Brad:** Different leaders in organizations, Jaycees something like that. You know what I’m sayin’? You always want to rub elbows with the big honchos of the Jaycees and see if you can move me up in line at the Pizza sale or something.

**Athletes**

Some of the respondents believed that inmates that perform well during the institutional recreational activities are well respected throughout the institution.

**Mike:** Well, the ball players especially. They gets lots of respect. I don’t care if you’re white, black, even if you’re white. You’re goin’ to play shortstop and you’re good you gets lots of respect, from all players. They, basketball the same way. You can go up there, and you can dunk or you can shoot or you can run that floor. Pssh, you get the utmost respect. I mean from each pod. You ain’t even got to be in the pod you in. “Aw man, there goes so-and-so. Man, he can play.”

**Mark:** And even kitchen workers. You can work in the kitchen, but you the dunkin’est basketball player. Man they’re, “Oh man, there goes Breakmen.”

**Education**

Many respondents thought that participation in the education programs available in the institution is well respected. In addition, having knowledge of legal matters can also provide inmates with higher-level status.

**Don:** Somebody who’s got some intelligence gets respect because right away you’re looked at as somebody. Somebody’s got some legal work or something that they don’t understand. That’s a source that they can go to for help, you know. And I think maybe from what I’ve seen, it’s the really intelligent guys that get the respect across the board.

**Jerome:** For anybody in GED program. Trying to get an education. College program one of these guys that is trying to get himself together spiritually. Any guys trying to get their behavior together. That’s the kind of guy you’re supposed to admire. Now come in here and you’re trying to be one of those guys that is gangbanging, you’re going backwards. You won’t be one of the guys trying to go forward. Vocational programs, even some of the guys working in the kitchen. They work hard over there. Some guys just trying to do their time, trying to stay out of the way. That’s the kind of guys you want to be with.
Max: There’s some guys in here that don’t deserve to be here, and there’s some guys that do. And then there’s guys that deserves a chance because, you meet guys, and, there’s some good dudes here. For real, and intelligent guys here, that has, they could go through college if they wanted to, probably no problem. That has certain expertise in certain areas. You know, there’s some intelligent guys here. I mean there’s some guys here that can work with the law and the law books over there.

Patients

Allen Correctional Institution is unique because the institution has a unit for inmates with mental disabilities. The inmate population call these “patients.” In addition, these inmates wear separate uniforms from the rest of the inmate population. Because the patients are easily identified, some respondents saw them as targets for…?

David: In this place there’s a lot of crazy guys. RTU, SCDU inmates.

I: Who is that? What do you mean?

R: Mentally retarded or, it’s guys that you could look at and you can tell there’s something wrong with them. Whether they’re mentally retarded or deformed in a facial feature or something. They kind of gravitate together and if there would be a bottom, I guess you would say it would be them. Cuz everybody heaps shit on them. And they talk shit to them and play jokes on ‘em or what not. But they I guess would be at the bottom.

Carl: Patients for the reason, uh, medicine or whatever, people find out about em and talk about them and stuff. Really don’t respect them.

Convictions

Some of the respondents thought that a negative hierarchy based on convictions exists. Inmates’ type of conviction, particularly child molestation, lowered their statuses. However, some respondents revealed type of conviction rarely raised inmates’ statuses.

Patrick: That you should respect? Yeah there’s a few guys that, I mean you gotta understand, just cuz this is medium security prison; you got guys in here that are killers. You’ve got guys that were on death row, that were, whose sentences were commuted
under the old law when they trans, when they stopped the death penalty. They’re in here now, and they, but they’re doing life. They’re never getting out of here. So this is home. I wouldn’t, if your gonna pick a fight with somebody, pick it with the right person.

Keith: People really don’t even look at what you done did no more unless it’s like rape messing with little kids anything pertaining to that, you’re liable to get hurt in here.

David: Child molesters are normally at the very bottom. I think, at every institution, child molesters kinda catch a lot of shit. That’s something that if you’re in for child molesting, you try to not let anybody know cuz you’re going to get some shit out of it.

Kurt: Child molesters, you got problems until you establish yourself. And if you a child molester most guys ain’t goin’ to give you no respect anyway. Cuz, I mean everybody’s got kids, or their friends or family have kids. That’s something that just hard to accept. You mess with kids. Rapists any more, it’s no big deal. Murders, they, I think the administration thinks that murders carry more weight, but they don’t. It’s an individual thing. You got guys in here for petty larceny, grand theft auto that carry more respect than guys that got double murders. It’s all the individual.

Jake: People who’ve been down longer get more respect. That I’ve noticed. People who are not here on sex crimes, pedophile. You know, there’s certain…certain crimes that obviously take back even inmates.

Even those offenders convicted of sexual offenses ranked sexual offenders lower in the hierarchy. For example, an offender who was convicted of a sexual offense provided the following quote.

Jason: Sex crimes rate the lowest, but there’s still differentiation between those because, you know, some people on sex crimes, some people have read their cases, and the transcripts saying, “I can’t believe you got convicted of this,” you know, etc. Which is totally different than say, those, the pedophile thing with the priest now, with the young kids? I mean there’s different levels of that.

**Individuals or Groups to Avoid**

Many respondents revealed that there are several types of individuals or groups to avoid while incarcerated. These included individuals viewed as troublemakers, those who attract the attention of the staff, and gang members.
Mike: The guys to avoid are the jumpsuits. The guys in the jumpsuits and the guys that see that the CO harass a lot. You can just sit back, and you can see the CO, “You come here, come here. Pull your shirt off. Do this,” and you see he’s got tattoos or something like that. Harass ’em all on a daily basis because they been with that type of people. So them’s the ones you avoid. ‘Cause if you with ’em, naturally you’re going to shake them down; they’re going to shake you down. So, simple as that, that’s what you avoid.

Jake: The ones that I would stay away from are the ones that are loud and into trouble. They’re into drugs, they’re into tattoos and they’re pretty outward about it. It’s not like they you know, stuff that usually is concealed. They may think that they’re trying to conceal it, but you can see what they’re doing. What ends up happening is once you get involved in that and those are your friends, you’re gonna get caught at some point. And you’re gonna end up having that on your record, but not only that now the staff sees you with those people and you’re associated with that group. Guilt by association. That goes on a lot, both by inmates and by staff. And here you are known by who you hang around with.

Steve: ‘Bout every group, you know, that’s got a loud mouth. Someone that’s always looking to draw attention to themselves. Maybe they feel, more accepted that way, or they just want to be the center of attention. Those type of guys you want to avoid altogether because they’re always drawing attention to themselves. You know if the staff looking at them, they seein’ you too.

Keith: Yeah. The ones who, I mean the certain signs to look for. You got people who walk around with lighting bolts on them. That’s a group to avoid ‘cause that would mean they are the Aryan Brothers. People who hang around in a large amount of people, definitely aren’t the crowd to be in, ‘cause if they doin’ it, and then you become cool with them, then you will get dragged onto that activity.

Max: Well you got your Crips, you got your Bloods, you got your AB. Yeah. You avoid them. I mean, if you, the first thing you want to do is keep a low profile if you can. But, you don’t want to throw yourself in to the limelight. You want to avoid these groups because they prey on each other, prey on the weak individuals. Some groups protect their own race. If they feel that certain, certain, should be taken care of then you got other groups that all they want to do is fuck someone. So you have the differences in you groups. Between the AB, Bloods, Crips, Black Coalition, and you got your Spanish groups. So, you want to avoid em.

Jerome: Yeah, your basic, like on the street you’ve got gangs. Aryan brothers, Crips, Bloods, whatever you want to call ‘em. Guys in the Klan. All you do, you ignore ‘em.
Cuz you’re one of the subjects. You know they ain’t wrapped too tight anybody want to sit around in that trash all day long, you ain’t wrapped too tight.

The Changing Nature of Institutions

The changing nature of institutions was a theme that emerged across all other themes in the discussions. This theme was discussed by respondents specifically in regards to gang activity, type of conviction offenses being respected, differences in sentences, and the inmate code. Many of the respondents who commented on the changing nature of institutions have been incarcerated previously, for longer periods, and/or were older; thus, they had an opportunity to compare past and present prison cultures.

Ohio, like other states, has made a concerned effort over the past several years to reduce the presence and power of gangs in prisons. During the interview process respondents were asked about groups to avoid. Many of the respondents suggested avoiding the gangs in general, and specific gangs, identified by name, in particular. Respondents asserted, however, that administrative changes in handling gang activity have reduced the power of gangs. Don said, “It’s kind of hard to tell because that’s one of the things about this camp. They’re real strong on gang activity. So, I don’t think you see near the kind of gang activity going on here that you would see in some of the other prisons or in older prisons.”

Respondents observed that the institution has been changed by the state’s procedures for handling gang activity. According to Max, who consistently called himself a “convict” throughout the interview, the “gangs used to control when a hit was gonna take place. Now, you never know. Not that they happen that often, but there was an understanding.” Gangs may have been functional for the institution because they lowered the rate of random violence. Inmates who were immersed in the inmate culture valued the reduction of random violence even more than an overall reduction in violence.

As previously mentioned, certain types of conviction offenses can lower inmates’ statuses; however, many of the respondents asserted that rarely would a type of offense raise an inmate’s status. Keith suggested that “people really don’t even look at what you done did no more unless its messing with little kids.” Another example from Jason, explains that the inmate population is more concerned with their future than establishing a hierarchy based on type of conviction. “And that’s how it used to be, but the prison system has changed a whole lot. Nobody’s held in that much esteem. Everybody is just trying to leave here. Who cares what you did?” It is possible that the security level (i.e. medium) of the prison housing the respondents in this study reduced the importance of type of offense.

Many of the respondents sentenced under the state law effective prior to July 1, 1996, discussed the changes in the inmate culture based on the type of sentence inmates received. The passing of Senate Bill 2, effective July 1, 1996, changed the structure of felony sentences in
Ohio. Prior to Senate Bill 2 indeterminate sentences (e.g., 2 to 5 years) were imposed. Under Senate Bill 2 offenders are given determinate sentences (e.g., 4 years), or what the inmates have termed “flat time.” Many of the respondents asserted that differences exist in the behaviors based on the type of sentence. For example, David stated:

I’m under the old law, so I still have to deal with the parole board. There’s a great number of people here now that are new law, flat timers, and their mindset is a lot different than mine. They don’t care. They know when they’re going to go home. They don’t have to worry about getting in trouble or doing whatever. I can’t think like that. I have to always think the parole board in the back of my mind. I can’t get in no shit, ‘cause I’ll have to answer to that when I get to the parole board.

Some of respondents reported that the difference in release criteria changes the way the inmates serve their sentences. Martin suggested that flat timers have a flippant attitude towards older inmates that try to enforce inmate-created rules. “They’re like, ‘Man fuck you. I’m doing a year. You can’t tell me shit. And I’ll go spend all year in the hole. It doesn’t matter where I do my time at. When that year’s up, I’m goin’ home. I mean it’s changed a lot.” Individuals serving determinate sentences may disregard cultural norms important only to those serving indeterminate sentences.

For many respondents the changing nature of institutions meant the abandonment of an inmate code. Some studies have noted the diminished effects of the inmate code (Irwin, 1980). These studies argue mandatory, fixed-length sentences reduce the threat of inmates “snitching” on deviants. The results of the present study also suggest the declining importance of an inmate code. Very few of the original maxims of the inmate code or argot roles as described by Sykes (1958) were present in the discussions with the respondents. When these rules or roles were discussed, the information provided often related to examples of how the institution has changed. For example, Jason stated, “Those John Wayne movies are a dud. That stuff isn’t real prison. It’s no longer us versus staff. Everybody is a snitch.”

The changes in the inmate culture and the institutions seemed to produce anxiety among some of the respondents. For example, Max sought medical attention because of the anomic feeling he was experiencing.

I’ve done this off and on over twenty something years, and I’ve seen the gradual change in prison from the first time I arrived in Mansfield until now. Prison nowadays isn’t as physical as it used to be, although you’ve still got to be strong. It’s more of a mental thing now. And you have a different class of individuals coming in, what we call Generation X. They have no respect or morals, or no principles or values any more. They’re off the hook. And that makes it harder for a guy such as myself. I consider myself a convict. I been down some twenty some years. I’ve been tested. I’ve been through the mill. I’m well respected. The younger guys now is making prison life much, much harder.
Because they’re constantly cursing you or putting you on their nuts or something like that. Back in the day you didn’t do that. If you did that you had a fight right there at the drop of a hat. Nowadays it ain’t like that. I got out in ’91 and came back in ’95 and just the difference in just that four or five years things changed so much that I actually thought I was having mental problems. I even went to the psychologist and got on Prozac. Things had changed so much, so drastically that I thought I was going soft.

Other respondents that had served longer or previous sentences articulated similar sentiments. Stu became noticeably upset when he asserted that “seeing these changes, inmates are going soft. We used to have a code to live by. At times I thought I was going a little nuts. I mean everybody is telling on people. (pounding fist on desk) What is that about?” The anomic feeling that these respondents experienced could support the notion that differences in sentencing established two cultures throughout the institution. The culture of flat timers seems to have superseded the previously established culture. The increasing number of newer inmates has enabled their culture to become dominant.

The emergence of the theme relating to the changing nature of the institutions may be a consequence of the security level of the prison. Many of the respondents who discussed the changing nature of the institutions were older. In addition, many of the respondents that have served longer determinant sentences did not report changes in the nature of the institution.

One of the goals of this study was to attempt to update the literature relating to the inmate code. The early descriptions of the inmate code and prison argot roles were based, for the most part, on the work of Sykes (1958) and his study of maximum security institutions. Little support was found to support the traditional inmate code as described by Sykes. However, the results suggest that Kaminski’s (2003) argument that the inmate code is a rather fluid construct of the inmate society seems to be supported. The themes in this study suggest that the code is based on conventional criteria.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study**

The current study endeavored to investigate relationships between inmates. While the perceptions of the respondents in this sample may not represent those in other prisons, the information presented may instruct future efforts.

A basic limitation of this study is related to sample size. The pilot study was limited to ten subjects selected because the staff viewed them as “talkative.” The current study was limited to twenty subjects for both temporal and practical reasons who were selected randomly from a list of all inmates. Two of the subjects were eliminated from the sample of the follow-up study for lack of ability to expand on their answers. Participation in both studies was strictly voluntary. The experiences of the respondents that chose to participate in the interviews may be different from respondents who did not participate.
The data are comprised of the respondents’ own words and expressions as told to the interviewer. Attempts to validate claims made by the respondents were limited to information similar to the vignettes provided in Appendix A. The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction maintains an offender database website. This public access website contains information such as conviction offense(s), length of sentence, time served, and date of birth. The information found at this site was used in an attempt to verify the information provided by the respondents. In a few instances, respondents provided false information about their conviction. For example, Jason stated during the interview that he had been convicted of a violent offense; however, the database stated that Jason had been convicted of a sexual offense (Ohio separates these offenses on their offender database). The norms that exist in the inmate culture might have influenced respondents’ willingness to disclose specific types of information. Although respondents were assured confidentiality, some may have withheld information they considered incriminating or embarrassing.

Differences exist between inmate cultures based on institutional custody levels. Previous studies on inmate culture generally focus on maximum security institutions. The current study was conducted at two medium security level institutions. The inmate population at medium security institutions consists of inmates that are serving shorter sentences, approaching release, or serving longer sentences, yet, because of proper behavior have been classified as medium security. It is important to note that maximum security institutions comprise less than ten percent of all institutions, while medium security institutions comprise more than half of all institutions. Future research on prison culture should further investigate medium security institutions as well as update the literature on maximum security institutions.
REFERENCES


### APPENDIX

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Eric Franklyn Bronson is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice at Quinnipiac University. His research interests focus on inmate subcultures and violence on college campuses. Teaching areas include corrections, criminology, sociology of sport and racial and ethnic groups.

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