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# “Age is Just a Number in Here”: A Qualitative Study of Adulthood in a Women’s Prison

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**ABSTRACT**

Desistance from crime is a significant marker of adulthood, while persistence in criminal behavior is inconsistent with a subjective sense of adulthood (Massoglia & Uggen, 2010). To understand the relationship between crime and adulthood in greater detail, however, it is important to understand how offenders interpret and conceptualize the notion of adulthood in the first place. Based on interviews and mail correspondence with 35 incarcerated women, I explore this question through an examination of how incarcerated women construct definitions of adulthood while in prison. The findings indicate that in a restrictive environment marked by a lack of independence, women in prison rely on intangible markers to define adulthood. Moreover, the inmates believe that these markers are best manifested by those women who have been incarcerated for long periods (5 years or more). I discuss these findings by drawing on older prisonization literature and life-course literature on adulthood.

# Introduction

Life-course researchers (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Laub &Sampson, 1993) have consistently concluded that an important feature of the transition to adulthood is a movement away from delinquency. Age norms shift throughout the life course, and behavior that is acceptable during adolescence is proscribed once individuals attain adulthood (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965). These norms, combined with formal and informal social control mechanisms, structure the transition to adulthood such that most individuals will age out of delinquent behavior once they become adults. Highlighting the close relationship between crime and adulthood, Massoglia and Uggen (2010) concluded that desistance from crime is now seen as one of many markers of adult status in the U.S.

In addition to the research documenting the significance of adulthood in questions of offending patterns, there is also merit in investigating how offenders conceptualize adulthood in the first place. For instance, prior research has shown that offending is linked to a breakdown in individuals' commitment to conventional adult institutions such as work and marriage (Sampson & Laub, 2005). Understanding whether offenders do indeed view engagement in and commitment to these institutions as key markers of adulthood would help explain the process through which offenders lose their "stake in conformity."

In a socio-cultural landscape where crime and adulthood are closely tied, and markers of adulthood are simultaneously becoming more diverse (Arnett, 1997; Aronson, 2008; Massoglia & Uggen, 2010), exploring how offenders interpret and give meaning to the notion of adulthood is important. I explore this question through an examination of how women prisoners construct definitions of adulthood while incarcerated, as well as their views on the impact of incarceration on their subjective sense of

adulthood (how adult they feel). Examining this question is particularly crucial to the extent that the experience of incarceration "interrupts" (Dyer, 2005) the inmates' abilities to conform to conventional expectations of adulthood (such as motherhood and marriage) that are tied to desistance efforts.

## Women and adulthood

Scholars have devoted significant attention to the modern transition to adulthood, arguing that this transition has become longer as young adults pursue a more diverse range of pathways to adulthood (Fursternberg, Kennedy, McCloyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004). While there has been less research focused on women specifically, there is evidence that women's notions of adulthood have shifted somewhat in recent years. It appears that women in contemporary America are living in a post-feminist age where independence—be it financial, emotional, or residential—is strongly valued and even preferred over the experience of marriage and motherhood as markers of adulthood (Aronson, 2008). This is a particularly important finding for the purposes of this study because inmates, by definition, are denied the independence that women in the community consider central to their sense of adulthood. It may also be the case, however, that women in prison do not consider independence to be a key marker of adulthood. Women in prison represent a particularly disadvantaged subgroup (Moloney, Van den bergh, & Moller, 2009); many of them may not have experienced the kind of independence that the more privileged women in Aronson's sample enjoy. Women in prison who have never experienced financial, residential, or even emotional independence because of the social and structural difficulties they have faced may seek alternative markers of adulthood that more closely reflect the realities of their lives.

In fact, there is countering evidence that suggests that motherhood remains a salient priority in the lives of many women, particularly those belonging to low-income groups. Specifically, Edin and Kefalas (2005) argued that while low-income women aspire to be married, motherhood is more than simply an aspiration; it is a necessity that is closely intertwined with the women's sense of identity and meaning. Importantly, the researchers who have argued that contemporary American women value independence more than marriage and motherhood have based their findings on studies conducted with women and young girls in the general population rather than imprisoned women. Although Edin and Kefalas drew their participants from inner cities rather than prisons or jails, their sample may be more similar to the sample in this study on certain metrics, given the less privileged backgrounds of women prisoners. However, there is still merit in investigating conceptions of adulthood among imprisoned women, given the uniquely restrictive and punitive environment in which they live.

The current literature thus suggests that for women, marriage may be less important as a marker of adulthood than motherhood, and that independence may be the most significant indicator of adult status. These findings have interesting implications for a study on women prisoners. Dyer (2005) argued that incarceration serves as an "interruption" to inmates' relationships, and Goffman (1961, p.

12) concluded that institutionalized individuals such as prisoners "cannot possibly maintain a meaningful domestic existence." More recent research has confirmed these preliminary findings, concluding that incarceration is positively linked to a higher likelihood of divorce because of the strain that separation places on partners (Massoglia, Remster, and King, 2011).

Dyer (2005) further theorized that being incarcerated destabilizes the identities of incarcerated fathers by preventing them from enacting the roles that are meaningful to that identity. Under normal circumstances, fathers can simply modify their behavior to bring it in line with the standards they hold for themselves as good fathers. Inmate fathers, however, are limited in their ability to enact such behavior modifications. The result is that inmates are forced to shift the criteria they employ in defining what it means to be a good father. If the same holds true of incarcerated women who value motherhood, being in prison may necessitate the use of strategies that alter how they define motherhood and/or assess their own mothering practices. It merits mention, however, that the structural disadvantages that inmates face before incarceration may make it impossible for them to modify their parenting practices even when they are not in prison. This is a possibility that Dyer does not explicitly address. If this is the case, however, the incarceration event may not serve as an interruption to the mothering identity to extent that Dyer might suggest, specifically because these women have either abandoned attempts to mother in conventional ways already or because they have already altered their definitions of good mothering.

In the same vein, if the inmates consider independence to be a marker of adulthood, the impact of their loss of independence cannot be diminished through behavior modification in any major sense, given the restrictions they face in the prison environment. If they are to reconcile their status as adults with their status as inmates, therefore, they may be compelled to (re) construct their definitions of adulthood through the use of markers other than independence. I explore this possibility by examining the processes through which the inmates construct definitions of adulthood and negotiate their own identities as adults.

## Prisonization

Older criminological research focused extensively on the process of prisonization (Sykes, 1958; Thomas, 1977; Thomas and Foster, 1972), where prisonization is understood as the degree of assimilation into the inmate subculture (Zingraff, 1980). Prisonization can also be understood as the process by which inmates cope with the difficulties posed by the prison environment (Thomas, 1977). Wheeler (1961) argued that prisonization increases over the sentence length but eventually decreases as inmates anticipate their reentry into mainstream society and shed the prison norms they have absorbed. Thomas and Foster (1972) stated that understanding the process of prisonization is important to criminologists for two reasons, (a) it sheds light on the dynamics of the inmate subculture; and (b) prisonization stands to affect both the prison and post-prison lives of inmates.

The concept of prisonization is significant for the purposes of this study in particular because it highlights how the prison environment shapes the attitudes, perceptions, and coping strategies of the people functioning within it. If women become socialized into the prison culture, as Clemmer (1940) claimed every incarcerated person is to some degree, their understandings of normative adult behavior may shift during their period of incarceration. Inferring from Clemmer's prisonization theory, one would expect women with longer sentences to be most deeply absorbed in the anti-social prison culture.

Insofar as women inmates are denied the freedom and independence that Aronson (2008) has argued is crucial to modern women's sense of adulthood, the inmates may conform to unconventional notions of adulthood that are developed in the prison environment. This may especially be the case if women forge bonds with other inmates over time and become less invested in relationships with members of conventional society as a result. Indeed, Zingraff (1980) noted that female inmates place a stronger emphasis than their male counterparts on interpersonal contacts within the prison. However, the greater investment in interpersonal relationships with other inmates surprisingly weakens the impact of confinement on the women. As such, whether or not women who form relationships with other inmates abandon conventional notions of adulthood and adult status markers remains unclear. I thus draw on the prisonization literature to explore whether women inmates absorb prison culture over time in a way that might alter their constructions of adulthood.

While early criminologists focused extensively on the impact of prisonization on inmates' subjective experiences, this research is no longer the primary focus of many researchers. To the extent that the lived experiences of women in prisons have been explored in more recent literature, researchers have highlighted the theme of motherhood. These scholars have examined the coping strategies of women separated from their children (Celinska & Siegel, 2009), and their experiences with being mothers behind bars (Enos, 2001). However, the almost-exclusive focus on mothering has resulted in a dearth of knowledge regarding other facets of women's lived experiences. Indeed, while motherhood is a natural and important issue to focus on, such a focus should not preclude investigations of other parts of women's prison culture. In fact, we must take care not to simply assume that motherhood is the most important role for women in prison by focusing exclusively on this role. Doing so may reinforce the very "mothering discourse" that penologists studying motherhood in prison have critiqued (Enos, 2001). Although motherhood is a salient theme in this study because of its significance for adult women, rather than focusing exclusively on this theme as others have done, I contextualize it within a broader investigation of the impact of incarceration on women's sense of adulthood.

Drawing on the prisonization literature of the '70s, some scholars (Kruttschnitt, Gartner, & Miller, 2000; Kruttschnitt & Gartner, 2005) used in-depth interviews to explore how women's pre-prison experiences influence how they do time. Genders and Player (1990) also examined women serving life

sentences, focusing especially on how these prisoners experience the initial stages of an indeterminate sentence. As such, though some scholars have sustained an interest in prisonization and the lived experience of inmates, there is much room to expand on this research to encapsulate a more diverse range of features of women prisoners' lives. To this end, I invoke the concept of prisonization specifically to examine the extent to which women's narratives suggest that immersion in the prison culture affects their views on and/or sense of adulthood.

## The current study

Although Massoglia and Uggen argued that offenders view desistance from crime as a marker of adult status, there are strong theoretical justifications for an investigation of prisoners' constructions of adulthood, since this population in particular might use markers other than those employed by members in conventional society. Goffman (1961), for example, noted the negative impact of "total" institutions on individuals' identity and self-image, and Sutherland (1939) argued that the prison environment can be problematic because inmates learn deviant behavior through association with other inmates. To the extent that women inmates' beliefs are shaped by their experience in the prison environment instead of conventional society, the women may thus be more likely to learn and adopt deviant definitions of adulthood that in turn increase their likelihood of reoffending.

Alternatively, inmates may see their prison experience as a crucial aspect of their social and emotional maturation; an ex-inmate interviewed in a study on women prisoners' reentry to the community described her time in prison as an experience "growin' up" that helped her in her efforts not to reoffend (O'Brien 2001, p. 293). Both possibilities offer plausible theoretical reasons to believe that women prisoners' notions of adulthood affect their future reoffending. In this study, I thus examine how adulthood is defined in a prison environment that is characterized by a lack of independence and control. To answer this question, I revive prisonization literature that has in recent years been placed on the back-burner of criminological research, and I integrate this body of work with the more recent life-course literature on adulthood.

# Methods

## The site

SCI Muncy is a women's prison located in Muncy, Pennsylvania that also serves as the diagnostic and classification center for the state's female inmates. As of December 31st, 2013, there were 1,432 inmates housed at Muncy, and it was operating at 101.6% of its bed capacity of 1,410 inmates. In 2011, 56.8% of inmates at Muncy were White, 34.8% were African-American, 6.6% were Hispanic, and 1.7% were classified as Other.

## The sample

The final sample in this study consisted of 35 adult women between the age of 18 to 55 who were incarcerated at the facility. I used 18 as the minimum age in the sample because offenders below this age may be housed in the youth offenders' wing at the prison, where their experiences may be sufficiently different from those of other women in the sample; this would render their narratives incomparable. I also limited the sample to adult women because perceptions of adulthood might not be firm in the minds of younger women. More importantly, given the pervasiveness of age-related norms (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965) adult women are more likely than adolescent women to have attained or to have contemplated attaining the traditional markers of adulthood described in the literature (marriage, motherhood, employment, etc.). I retained 18 as the minimum age (instead of a higher threshold) to compare notions of adulthood among those in the "emerging adulthood" phase with those who are past this stage and into a more established period of adulthood (Arnett, 1997). As I describe in the findings section, constructions of adulthood among this group were in fact shaped by their emerging adulthood experiences, so their inclusion in the sample was important. Morse (2008) argued that samples in qualitative research are not reflective of a goal to generalize findings across whole populations. Instead, qualitative researchers seek to understand a specific phenomenon in depth by designing samples that consist of participants who are similar to one another based on the specific experience or phenomenon being studied. For this reason, I also excluded women who were above 55 years of age because their experiences were likely to be sufficiently different from other inmates, which would render their narratives difficult to compare to those of other inmates.

I recruited participants[1] through purposive sampling using a list (provided by the state Department of Corrections) of all the inmates housed at Muncy. In particular, I selected participants to obtain diversity in age, race, and sentence length. After constructing a list of inmates who responded to an invitation letter, I categorized participants based on their sentence length (Kruttschnitt & Gartner, 2005). Specifically, I placed inmates into three categories:[2] Long-term inmates (those who had been at the prison 5 years or longer); short-term inmates (those who had been at the prison for 7 months-2 years); and recently admitted inmates (those who had been at the prison for 6 months or fewer). Although some women in the recently-admitted category may have spent a good portion of their time in Muncy in the Classification wing, I include them to introduce a diversity of perspectives on the prison environment. As I will point out later, sentence length emerged as a particularly important theme in the inmates' narratives and including inmates who had limited exposure to the prison environment was therefore important. The final sample generally reflected the broader prison population, insofar as it was predominantly White, with the majority of inmates between 25-39 years of age. Table 1 provides some key demographic information regarding the sample.

## The interviews

Although 35 was the target number of interviews, I was prepared to conduct more interviews if necessary, based on whether theoretical saturation had been reached. Determining theoretical saturation is ultimately a subjective decision made by the researcher, but when this stage is reached, no new properties or dimensions should emerge from continued coding or comparison (Holton 2007; Morse 2007). Although clear patterns had emerged in the data when 20-25 interviews had been completed, I collected 35 interviews to meet the target sample size. I also chose to continue collecting interviews to attain consistency in the number of participants in each category of inmates. Similar to other qualitative research (Carbone-Lopez and Miller, 2011), while the sample size precludes wide generalizability of the findings, the goal of this study is not generalizability. Rather, it seeks to understand the phenomenon of adulthood in depth, a goal that rich data obtained from qualitative interviews is best-suited to attain.

The interviews with inmates were conducted between September and December, 2012 in private rooms in the Superintendent's office building.[3]

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics (n=35)

| Sentence length | Race | | | Age | | Marital status | | | | Parental status | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | W | B | H | Younger (< 35) | Older (35-55) | Married | Divorced | Widowed | Never Married | Children | No Children |
| Recently admitted (6 months or fewer) (n=11) | 8 (72.7) | 2 (18.2) | 1 (9.1) | 6 (54.5) | 5 (45.5) | 2 (18.2) | 5 (45.5) | 0 (0) | 4 (36.4) | 7 (63.7) | 4 (36.4) |

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Short-term (7 months -2 years) (n=13) | 3 (23.1) | 6 (46.2) | 4 (30.8) | 6 (46.2) | 7 (53.8) | 2 (15.4) | 5 (38.5) | 1 (7.6) | 5 (38.5) | 10 (76.9) | 3 (23.1) |
| Long-term (5 years or more*) (n=11) | 4 (36.3) | 3 (27.3) | 4 (36.4) | 6 (54.5) | 5 (45.5) | 0 (0) | 5 (45.5) | 0 (0) | 6 (54.5) | 7 (63.7) | 4 (36.4) |
| Total (n=35) | 15 (42.9) | 11 (31.4) | 9 (25.7) | 18 (51.4) | 17 (48.6) | 4 (11.4) | 15 (42.9) | 1 (2.86) | 15 (42.9) | 24 (68.6) | 11 (31.4) |

Note: Percentages in parentheses Abbreviations: W=White; B=Black; H=Hispanic. * Includes Hannah, a 20-year-old inmate who volunteered to participate because of her interest in Sociology even though I had not sent her a letter. Since she had served 3 years in Muncy (and 4 in total), and because her narrative reflected her self-identification as a long-termer, I placed her in the long-term category. She identified as a long-termer because she interacted primarily with other long-termers and lifers, she was serving a 6-12 year sentence length, and she had been facing a life-without-parole sentence.

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The interviews lasted between 32 minutes and 1 hour and 10 minutes. The interviews began with close-ended questions aimed at obtaining basic demographic information (relationship history, parental status, incarceration history, etc.). Following this, I asked the inmates a series of open-ended questions aimed at understanding how they conceptualize adulthood (for example, "What do you think makes a woman feel like an adult? or "What do you think it means to be a good wife or partner?"). I also asked a series of questions about the women's experiences related to adulthood (for example, I asked inmates when they got married (if they were/had been married) and about their employment histories). Finally, I asked inmates about their views on how the prison environment affected their views on, and sense of, adulthood. Here, I asked the inmates whether they viewed the other inmates as adults, what kind of behavior they associated with inmates they viewed as adults in Muncy, etc. I obtained information on the crime the inmates were convicted of through the list provided by the state Department of Corrections. This list also contained each inmate's full name, race, age, and sentence length.

I recorded the interviews and thereafter transcribed them, choosing pseudonyms to maintain participant confidentiality. In addition to the audio recordings of the interviews, I also took detailed field notes while at the correctional facility.

# Analysis of the Interviews

## *Analytic method*

To analyze the interview data, I used the grounded theory approach of qualitative data analysis. There have been several interpretations of this approach, but in this study, I employed Charmaz's application of grounded theory. All variations of the grounded theory approach have certain common elements, including simultaneous data collection and analysis, the search for emerging themes during early data analysis, and the inductive construction of abstract categories based on emerging patterns in the data. Charmaz describes her approach as one that "builds upon a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective with constructivist methods" (Charmaz 2003, p. 314). In her version of grounded theory, Charmaz makes several assumptions: That multiple realities exist; that the data reflect both the researcher's and the participants' mutual constructions; and that the researcher is affected, however incompletely, by his/her engagement with the participants' worlds.

## *Coding*

Charmaz describes coding as the "first analytic step that moves the researcher from description to conceptualization of that description" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 319). Initial coding was conducted using sensitizing concepts (such as identity, self-image, negotiation etc.) drawn from the symbolic interactionist tradition generally (Charmaz, 2003), Massoglia and Uggen's interactionist theory of desistance (2010), and the literature on prisons and prisonization. During this phase, I conducted line-by-line coding using Atlas.ti (a qualitative data analysis program), searching for patterns of similarities and differences in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Following the emergence of core themes, I conducted focused coding to construct abstract concepts and theoretical generalizations that unified the data in a meaningful way. Specifically, I drew on reappearing initial codes to sort through and synthesize large amounts of data by integrating these codes into more abstract categories. Throughout the coding process, I also kept detailed memos that ranged from loose free-writes to tightly written analytic notes.

## *The letters*

Following the collection and initial analysis of the interviews, I continued communicating by mail with a sub-sample of the women I had already interviewed.[4] I undertook this second stage in the research process because preliminary analysis of the interview data revealed the significance of the prisoners' early childhood and adolescent experiences in their narratives on adulthood. In a total of 38 letters with 10 women who were interviewed, I asked the inmates a series of open-ended questions about

their lives, beginning with their childhood and ending with the period just prior to their current incarceration. Although these letters focused on themes that are not central to the topic of this article, I also used the letters to solicit feedback and clarification from the participants about my interpretation of their interviews. Finally, many of the inmates expanded on issues raised in the interview that they believed required further detail based on my questions to them in the letters. For these reasons, I present data from the letters in this article where relevant.

## "Age is just a number in here:" The conceptual (in)significance of age in Muncy

Like modern American women in the community (Aronson, 2008), the vast majority (almost 70%) of the inmates considered independence to be the most significant marker of adult status. The participants understood independence primarily to mean one's ability to rely on oneself. Although this encapsulated the women's emotional independence, most women used the word *independence* to mean financial independence specifically. Like women in the community, independence and self-reliance among this sample of women was also closely tied to their desire and ability to make decisions and live their lives autonomously. Unlike their counterparts in the community, however, by virtue of their status as prisoners, the women in this sample are deprived of this independence that they consider essential for their subjective sense of adulthood.

Considering how pervasive age-related norms that dictate adult behavior are in the community, as an alternative marker of adulthood in the absence of independence, I investigated the women's views on age and its relation to adult status. The majority of the inmates (29 of the 35 women in the sample) were emphatic in their belief that other inmates' age did not shape whether or not they perceived these inmates as adults. Many women, however, drew a distinction between their beliefs regarding the significance of age in the context of adult status before they entered prison and their beliefs following their incarceration. Keysha, 23 years old, was serving 1-2 years for endangering the welfare of a child. She stated:

> I feel like we're in this like … this um, this camp. And like everybody's young, because I would think an adult, you know … When I was home, being home, an adult is an adult. And in here it's like, they feed into you know, the negativity … they're actually worse than the young ones!

The experience of incarceration, therefore, appeared to alter their conceptualization of adulthood. Coming to prison injected a level of uncertainty and doubt into the women's heretofore firmly-held views on the relationship between age and adulthood. As inmates began to question the certainty of the normative belief that people of a certain age should behave a certain way (Neugarten et al, 1956), their emotional and social stability became increasingly tenuous. This was particularly true of women who had been recently incarcerated, perhaps because many of these women had been confined in the

Classification wing of the prison and were only now beginning the period of adjustment to the general prison culture.

It is important to note, however, that most of the women who believed that age did not matter in Muncy did not reject age as a significant factor that shapes adult status generally. Indeed, the inmates were very much aware of age-prescribed norms that guide transitions into adult roles, and they considered these norms significant, but only in the outside world. Within the prison walls, however, Christine summarized the opinion of a large majority of the sample when she said, "Age is just a number in here."

Inmates who had served time in prison before or who had been incarcerated for longer periods did not have as much difficulty confronting this element of the prison environment. Reflective of their integration into a prison subculture where age was irrelevant, these inmates remarked on insignificance of age with wry humor rather than the confusion and frustration that characterized Keysha's interview.

Saila was 29 years old and was serving 2.25-6 years for a drug offense. She shared:

> 'Cause it's females in here that are fifty and swear they're twenty! You know, it's … it's … it's just … I dunno, it's a lot in here. I done seen it all. Like if they was [sic] to put this place in a movie, they would get an Oscar for it. They definitely will. It's too much.

Serving 10-20 years for burglary, Jordan was 33 years old. She said,

> I used to think, you know what? [laughs] I used to think … and it's taught me a lesson here … I used to think that at a certain age … I don't know where this stereotypical idea came from. I used to think that at a certain age, people … not just women, but people should stop doing certain things. You know? That is so not true. Like even some of the officers, some of the staff, like … I'm like ugh. You know, like you're too … the common saying, you're too old to act like that. It's … it just doesn't apply.

Although the women were emphatic in their opinion that age did not matter in determining other inmates' status as adults, their narratives reflected a keen awareness of age-based norms when evaluating their own lives. In appraising herself, Samantha, for example, expressed disappointment in herself for being incarcerated at her age:

> S: I am too old to be in jail. That's what I think. [laughs)] I guess there's no age limit to be in jail, but I be thinking like … like I'll be 40 next month. What am I doing in jail?!
>
> I: Why do you think age is important in that kind of assessment of yourself?

> S: I'm not saying anyone should come to jail. I don't wish that on nobody, but at least if you came to jail at a younger age, I guess … I don't know. I don't know why I think that. Maybe because you have … like a lot of places hire younger people.

Samantha was 40 years old; she was serving 7.5-15 years for aggravated assault and had some difficulty articulating why it disturbed her that she was incarcerated at 40 years of age, ultimately concluding that an incarceration record at her age might damage her chances of gaining employment upon release. However, her rhetorical question—"What am I doing in jail?!"—suggests a more deep-seated awareness of age norms that stigmatize incarceration and offending, especially beyond a certain age (Massoglia & Uggen, 2010; Neugarten et al.,1965).

Katie, 30 years old, was serving 3-6 years for robbery. Her narrative demonstrated a similar awareness of age-prescribed norms and a great deal of critical reflection on what it meant to be incarcerated at her age, which she considered fairly young.

> I had an older lady make a comment to me … I was like "you're too old to be in jail." She said … she said, well how did she say it to me? [Laughs a bit] "Well you're too … you're too … you're missing all your adulthood being in jail." And I sat and I thought about it. You know, she got to live all that. And she only came to jail at her age and here I am missing out on all the good years. Do you see? So I was like … I kinda thought about it one day. Like, oh, man.

As such, despite their commitment to the idea that age is "just a number" in Muncy, the inmates' narratives demonstrated an introspective reflection on the meaning of age in the context of their own incarceration. When probed on the reasons behind the lack of significance of age in determining the adult status of other inmates in prison, the women provided two principal explanations for why age did not matter—drug use and incarceration at a young age.

Over 20% of the women in the sample argued that inmates' sense and enactment of adulthood were often affected by whether or not they were addicted to drugs. The inmates expressed the belief that women addicted to drugs got "stuck" at the age at which they began their drug use, and their sense of adulthood was severely undermined by their desire for what the inmates described as their "next high." Regardless of age, then, the inmates believed that some women who were trapped in a drug addiction were either unable or unwilling to adapt to adult roles because of their addiction. Whether their development was stunted due to extreme drug use or they were simply ill fitted for adult responsibilities, age was largely irrelevant as a factor affecting adulthood for drug addicts.

Zelda was serving 20-60 years for kidnapping. At age 34, she stated, "Well I'm not a drug addict. And you know, when people do drugs, their mind gets like stagnated in whatever stage they started doing drugs, so their comprehension levels or their naiveness is way beyond … they're child-like ways."

Barbara was 40 years old and was serving 10-20 years for kidnapping to inflict injury. Her view on drugs was, "I think when I started using drugs, time had somehow stopped and I was stuck within myself and some of the things that had happened to me throughout my life."

In addition to drug use, some women argued that women got stuck at the age they were when they were first incarcerated. Incarceration is a life-course event that has reverberating consequences for individuals long after they are released (Pettit & Western, 2004), and the stagnation of the inmates' sense of adulthood upon incarceration is one way in which inmates might feel the effects of their incarceration even after their sentence concludes. This representation of the far-reaching consequences of incarceration is one that research has thus far not touched upon. Khloe, a 20-year-old inmate who had been incarcerated for several years already on a robbery conviction, said, "Being as though that I had to grow up here, I'm still stuck at that age when I first came in." Women who continue to age in prison, but who do not feel that their subjective sense of adulthood develops simultaneously, may face difficulties in readjusting to conventional society where timely transitions to adult roles are valued (Furstenberg et al., 2004; Neugarten et al., 1965). Since offenders' beliefs regarding how adult they feel are important in shaping their motivation to desist from crime (Massoglia & Uggen, 2010), women inmates who feel that they are stuck at the age at which they first entered prison may be more likely to return to a lifestyle of crime upon their release. There are many lasting negative effects of incarceration, including difficulties finding employment (Western, Kling, & Weiman, 2001) sustaining relationships (Massoglia, Remster, & King, 2011) and maintaining residential stability (Gowan, 2002). A more subtle, yet perhaps equally damaging impact of early incarceration is the inmates' inability to develop a subjective sense of adulthood that is appropriate for their age and that will assist them in sustaining a crime-free lifestyle.

The inmates' belief that age is not a defining feature of adulthood is especially important because offenders coming into contact with the criminal justice system are already *off-time* in making key transition to adult roles (Pettit & Western, 2004). For those inmates who begin to doubt previously held beliefs regarding the strength of the tie between age and adulthood, a timely transition to adulthood may be further disrupted. The combination of not feeling adult and questioning the importance of age-structured transitions could thus negatively impact the inmates' reentry into society and the conventional adult roles that come with this transition.

If age is not considered an important marker of adulthood, and independence is not a feasible marker in the restrictive prison environment, how do the inmates then define adulthood? In the following section, I explore whether, as Dyer (2004) might suggest, inmates who cannot simply modify their behavior in prison develop alternative ways to define their identities.

## Adulthood in the "Muncy World"

The inmates at Muncy repeatedly referred to inmates whom they did not view as adult as *messy*. When asked to clarify their use of this term, the inmates described a messy inmate in Muncy as one who gossips, spreads rumors, and initiates conflicts and disagreements. To use Owen's (1998) term, a messy inmate at Muncy is one who is involved "in the mix." Keysha was 23 years old and was serving 1-2 years for endangering the welfare of a child. She described this phenomenon succinctly. "Like they're the ones that get it started, they try to, you know … we call up here 'messy' where they tell one thing and it goes to another." For the women in this sample, adulthood was defined relative to the standard set by messy inmates. A true adult in Muncy was everything a messy one was not—she stayed out of the politics of the inmate population, refrained from engaging in confrontations, and carried herself with class and dignity.

The phenomenon of being messy goes hand-in-hand with being involved in what Hannah referred to as the *Muncy world*. This expression refers to the way in which Muncy is a self-contained environment, one that both resembles and is segregated from the real world. Hannah was serving 6-12 years for robbery and was 20 years old. In describing why she felt that some inmates did not behave like adults, she described the Muncy world as a central feature in the process of institutionalization.

> H: I think being in jail, because you have no responsibilities other than yourself, your priorities get so messed up. You lose focus of what you're supposed to be doing for the outside. You know, prepare yourself for the outside. A lot of people lose focus of that, and they get stuck in this … we call this the "Muncy world." This little area.
>
> I: It just kinda becomes their world?
>
> H: Yeah, it becomes … it is their world. Like this is all they see.

Interestingly, Hannah's comments imply that those women who have grown accustomed to prison life were also the women least likely to behave like adults. This belief is consistent with Clemmer's (1940) argument that inmates who have longer sentence lengths are more likely to experience higher degrees of prisonization and become assimilated into the antisocial prison culture (a key feature of the Muncy world). Hannah herself, however, directly contradicted this idea when she described those inmates whom she viewed as the most adult-like in prison—the lifers and other inmates who had been incarcerated for a very long time.

## "They finally got it": The adult status of lifers and long-termers

A particularly interesting finding pertains to the inmates' views on the long-term impact of incarceration on women's sense of adulthood. Despite the women's belief that early incarceration experiences stunted inmates' transition to adulthood, and contrary to Clemmer's prisonization theory,

the inmates noted that prolonged periods of incarceration appeared to bolster their subjective sense of adulthood. Specifically, 10 women in the sample expressed the strong belief that, of all the inmates incarcerated at Muncy, those who had been in prison the longest[5] were the ones most likely to behave like adults. Four of the women noted the positive impact that long-termers and lifers had on younger inmates undergoing the transition to adulthood. Finally, all but one of the long-termers noted that their sense of adulthood had strengthened over the duration of their sentence.

The finding that lifers and long-termers generally attempt to stay out of trouble in prison is one that prior research has uncovered (Johnson, 2002). The findings of this study, however, reveal that this behavior is closely tied to how inmates construct adulthood in the prison setting, and that inmates see this behavior as reflective of a process of socialization. When asked about what kind of behavior the lifers and long-termers exhibited that resulted in the perception that they were the adults in prison, inmates pointed to the lifers' day-to-day behavior. To be an adult in Muncy was to refrain from being messy. Lifers and long-termers embodied this lifestyle best because they pointedly refused to engage in the he-said/she-said of prison life, as well as the fighting and the politics of same-sex relationships that prevailed in Muncy. Instead, these inmates carried themselves with class and dignity, and others described them as humble.

Additionally, the significance of sentence length was evident in the narratives of inmates who described how those who had been incarcerated for longer periods had passed through the different responses to incarceration. A 20 year old, Hannah was serving 6-12 years for robbery.

> The ones that have been here for awhile, like they have been where we were at one point when we came in—loud, hyper, mixed up in all this. They did that already. And a lot of them have gotten the … got that they weren't gonna get nowhere. They got it. They finally got it. After awhile, but they got it.

Implicit in Hannah's statement is the notion that shorter-term inmates were less frequently perceived as adults. Indeed, inmates who had recently arrived at Muncy or who expected to be released after a short sentence were more often perceived as immersed in the street-life behavior that characterized messy inmates' prison lives. Serving 20-60 years for kidnapping, Zelda was 34 years old.

> So the short-timers, they really don't care what's important and what's not, 'cause this is just temporary and they're going home. You know what I mean? They don't even care about cleaning their room or their hygiene—they're going home … Now the long-timers and the lifers, we're more on the know about our medical, you know, what laws pass, who got granted what, why we don't have our rights, why our rights getting stripped from us, you know, like certain things that happen in here and what not. We're more on that.

Jordan, 33, had been incarcerated for 7 years at the time of the interview. She explained that her first 3 years at Muncy were the hardest. She described herself as being in denial during these years, providing further support for the finding that the period directly following the incarceration event is the most chaotic. After the first few years, however, Jordan became involved in religious activities in the prison, and she concluded that she now felt like much more of an adult:

> I: Okay, so based on your opinion now, do you feel like an adult now?
>
> J: Yes. I think more. I think more.
>
> I: About what kinds of things?
>
> J: Just life in general. As far as choices, and career moves, and certain opportunities when I get out of here. I never thought about retirement, saving for retirement. You know, I think about those types of things now. Like life insurance.

Jordan's narrative reflects her commitment to traditional markers of adulthood, such as employment. Importantly, she emphasized that her interest in these conventional adult concerns developed only after several years in prison. Contrary to Clemmer's theory of prisonization, therefore, inmates who were in prison the longest appeared to develop more conventional rather than anti-social attitudes. Further, unlike Wheeler's theory of prisonization, these inmates conformed to conventional norms even if their release dates were uncertain and far away. Their conformity to these norms thus did not appear to be tied to a shedding of the prison culture as their release dates approached. Instead, it reflected the inmates' gradual socialization into the positive elements of the prison culture and their growing distance from the toxic "mix" in the prison, regardless of their release date.

In addition to the long-termers' views on their own status of adulthood, inmates in both the short-term category and recently-admitted category also agreed on the adult status of long-termers and lifers because they viewed these inmates as role models and mother figures. Joanna, 25, was serving 3 years, 1 month, 29 days for theft. When asked what kind of inmate she saw as an adult, she said, "It's generally your lifers and women that have been here for quite some time, you know? They've established within themselves the acceptance of reality. And I see them as like mother figures here."

That younger inmates such as Joanna, Hannah and Khloe saw older long-termers and lifers as mother figures is particularly significant because it reflects commitment to a very traditional—and very gendered—adult role for women. Prior literature (Celinska and Siegel, 2009; Enos, 2001) has extensively documented women prisoners' commitment to mothering and the motherhood role. The findings in this study suggest that this importance may be partially rooted in the fact that women consider motherhood to be a key part of their definition of adulthood. In the absence of the opportunity to mother conventionally, the inmates sought out ways to enact the mothering role even

after years of being incarcerated. In fact, the inmates relied on this form of mothering as a unique way in which inmates could enact adulthood in the restrictive prison setting. Although the women in this sample resembled middle-class women in the community in their focus on independence (Aronson, 2008), unlike these women, the inmates did not downplay the significance of motherhood. Despite evidence of changing markers of adulthood among modern American women (Aronson, 2008), therefore, women prisoners in Muncy reflected conformity to motherhood as an age-old marker of adulthood that reflects gendered socialization.

Marie, for instance, is a 33-year-old lifer who said she did not think she would ever have children of her own. Instead, she was heavily involved in the puppy training program at Muncy. In fact, she shared, "I treat my dog like my child. [laughs] Like I act like she's my child." Marie also noted the importance in her life of an older inmate to whom Marie looked up as a role model. In response to a question about how she saw her life in 10 years, Marie said "Um, I wanna say outta here. [laughs] Yeah. If I was here, I'd probably be doing what my friend does. She's been here 42 years and basically she just raises us young ones that come, that come in. Like me." In this way, the lifers and long-termers were viewed as adults not only because they manifested the intangible markers of adulthood that the inmates relied upon, but also because they very actively enacted a role that is conventionally tied to adulthood among American women.

## Discussion

Like other modern American women, the inmates in this sample repeatedly noted that a sense of independence was crucial to their subjective sense of adulthood. Yet unlike most women, the inmates in this study live in an environment characterized by a lack of independence and control. Given this context, this study aimed to investigate how women inmates construct adulthood in the prison setting.

The findings of the study indicate that in spite of the lack of independence in prison, the women believe that it is possible to be an adult in prison. Instead of independence as a key indicator of adulthood, the inmates relied on intangible markers of adulthood such as carrying oneself with class and dignity. The inmates most likely to manifest these traits were those who had been incarcerated the longest. For analytic purposes, it can be concluded that lifers and long-term prisoners in Muncy were perceived as the adults for three reasons:

1. Despite the inmates' rejection of the idea that age serves as a marker of adulthood in prison, many conflated lifers' and long-termers' age with their sentence length. As such, while many of the women expressed the belief that age is just a number in Muncy, they also recognized that the older long-termers and lifers were the inmates that they considered adults. Although this appears to be a contradiction in the inmates' views, it can also be seen as reflective of the mixture of prison-specific and mainstream norms to which the inmates conform. The inmates were taken aback by the

absence of age-appropriate behavior in prison, but their conflation of age and sentence length reflects their firm belief that age is an important determinant of adulthood generally. This finding is significant also because it suggests that the maturational process of aging out of antisocial behavior that researchers (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Laub & Sampson, 1993) have repeatedly documented persists even in the prison environment—an issue that prior research has not explored.

2. Although the inmates sometimes conflated the impact of sentence length with the natural process of aging out of antisocial behavior in the prison, it is crucial to remember that these inmates underwent the aging process during a long prison sentence. Sentence length was thus more important than just age, and older inmates who had spent much of their adulthood in and out of prison (rather than in prison for a long, continuous stretch) were not viewed as adults. Although I do not causally test the relationship between sentence length and adulthood, the inmates' narratives suggest that the aging process over several years in the prison environment is the most important factor in shaping inmates' status as adults in Muncy. Indeed, there was strong evidence that long-termers and lifers were perceived as adults because they had undergone a long process of socialization in the prison setting. Specifically, long-termers and lifers had already cycled through the range of responses to their incarceration, and many inmates reported that their first few years in Muncy were the hardest. Having already passed through the chaotic phase of their incarceration that was marked by antisocial behavior, the long-termers and lifers were now at a stage of acceptance, a stage in which they also strove to help other (often younger) inmates. For this reason, they were considered role models and mother figures.
3. Finally, the women in this sample considered lifers and long-termers to be adults because, consistent with Arnett's (1997) discussion of markers of adulthood, they adhere to intangible markers of adulthood in prison such as carrying oneself with class and dignity and responding maturely to stressful or confrontational situations. These women's lack of involvement in the Muncy world, along with their seemingly-genuine efforts to give back convinced other inmates that they were the true adults in Muncy. It merits mention, however, that the young adults in Arnett's (1997) research who relied on these intangible markers of adulthood were not members of an ostracized population living in an extremely restricted environment. While the inmates' similar adherence to such markers of adulthood may be taken as further evidence of a shift in young Americans' conceptualization of adulthood, it is important to note that they relied on these markers specifically, and perhaps only, because of their restricted environment. Indeed, as mentioned, there was ample evidence of conformity to motherhood as a conventional marker of adulthood.

Contrary to older prisonization literature (Clemmer, 1940), there was little evidence in this study of an increase in anti-social behavior over a long period of incarceration. Instead, there was evidence of a decrease in such behavior. Moreover, there was no evidence that inmates underwent a recovery period during which they shed of the prison culture as they drew closer to their release date (Wheeler, 1961).

Consistent with the concept of prisonization, however, the long-term inmates and the lifers have, over time, become deeply ingrained in the prison culture, and their roles within this culture are significant. Despite this, limitations of the initial definition of prisonization as the "taking on in greater or less degree of the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary" (Clemmer, 1940, p. 299) are evident insofar as the culture the long-termers and lifers belong to is very different from that of the newer inmates. Indeed, it is difficult to pinpoint what the general culture of Muncy is, since the prison world of the newly-admitted inmates hardly resembles that of the long-termers and the lifers.

It is important to note that the distance that lifers and long-termers maintain from the politics of same-sex relationships and conflict in Muncy does not mean that they are distanced from the prison culture generally. Instead, there was evidence of a process of "positive prisonization," whereby over time, the aging process in prison combined with the socialization of other prisoners who had been incarcerated for longer periods resulted in the inmates' adoption of adult-like behavior. Through positive prisonization, inmates do absorb the prison culture, but also over time, learn to select those elements of the prison culture that most align with their own sense of adulthood. For instance, these inmates are closely involved in prison programs, and they are eager to support newer inmates as they transition into their time at Muncy. These long-term inmates eventually join networks of other inmates serving long sentences, eventually forming a closely-knit subculture that is generally prosocial and, according to many inmates in this study, the best manifestation of adulthood in prison.

Bosworth and Carrabine (2001, p. 501) have argued that penologists must be wary of assuming that "those who do not challenge authority accept the legitimacy of the institution." The lifers and long-termers who were considered the true adults in Muncy were considered as such partly because of the distance they maintained from the Muncy world with its fighting and gossip. Yet this finding should not be taken to imply that these inmates accepted the legitimacy of the prison or those who controlled the inmates' independence. Rather, those who had been incarcerated for a long time had already cycled through the more tumultuous responses to their incarceration; instead of accepting the authority of the prison environment, their attitudes now reflected an identity-protecting and coping strategy intended to ease their remaining time at Muncy and avoid granting the institution further control over their lives. Long-termers and lifers, having experienced the rebellious phases of their response to incarceration, also crystallized their identities as the adults of Muncy by acting as role models and mother figures to younger and newer inmates as a way of giving back.

With regard to markers of adulthood, the women noted that before they arrived in prison, they strongly believed that age was an important determinant of adult status. After spending time in the prison environment and being exposed to other inmates' behaviors, however, they no longer posit that age and adulthood are closely tied, even though they recognize the importance of in their own self-appraisals. In spite of this latter belief (or perhaps because of the negative implications of this belief

for their own identities), the inmates adopt intangible markers of adulthood instead of using age to define adulthood. By defining adulthood through intangible markers instead of age or independence, the inmates in this study were able to reconcile their lack of independence with their notions of adulthood.

Contrary to literature positing the development of anti-social norms in the prison environment, the women in this study did not describe alternative, antisocial markers of adulthood. It is important to note, however, that the inmates' questioning of their prior-held belief in the close tie between age and adulthood appears to be closely tied to their contact with the antisocial prison subculture (or the Muncy world) where age-prescribed norms do not hold weight as they do in the mainstream community. This finding is significant because the belief that age and adulthood are not closely related to one another may be especially problematic in the case of inmates in the emerging adulthood phase who are already off-time in making key transitions to adult roles.

Finally, given literature that suggests that offenders are more likely to desist if they feel like adults (Massoglia & Uggen, 2010), the inmates' belief that some women get stuck at a certain point in their life course because of their incarceration is practically and theoretically significant. The transition to adulthood appears to be a crucial period during which incarceration can result in positive changes that stem from prolonged self-reflection. It can also, however, result in a delayed (or non-existent) transition to adulthood if women believe that their social and emotional growth is stunted at the age at which they were incarcerated. More attention should thus be paid to the impact of incarceration on young women undergoing the transition to adulthood, specifically in the context of the women's subjective sense of adulthood.

## Conclusion

The findings in this study indicate that the women in this sample actively construct definitions of adulthood that are consistent with their status as prisoners. Contrary to prior literature on the negative impact of the prison environment, however, these definitions of adulthood are neither antisocial nor unconventional. Instead, the women define adulthood by drawing on markers of adulthood similar to those employed by college-aged students in Arnett's (1997) research. Although women prisoners resemble women in the community in this way, we must be careful to note that prisoners do not have the luxury of choice that many women in Arnett's sample may enjoy. In fact, the inmates' reliance on intangible markers may be solely because they are compelled to seek out alternative markers of adulthood while incarcerated. Nevertheless, Massoglia et al. (2011) have argued that criminologists should shift their focus away from the ways in which incarceration represents a unique life-course stage, and instead consider the ways in which it is similar to other transitions that individuals undergo in the life course. The results of this research suggest that criminology might

benefit from a similar shift away from examinations of how prisoners are different from individuals in the community toward an investigation of how and why inmates resemble individuals outside prison.

The findings also suggest that lifers and long-term inmates represent a unique category of prisoners as the true adults in Muncy, and they are thus a group deserving of more scholarly attention. The inmates in the long-term category noted that their behavior was in turn shaped by the fact that they had already cycled through the more volatile phases of their incarceration. The implications of the positive impact of longer prison sentences outlined here must be addressed. Though the data in this study indicate that inmates' sense of adulthood is strengthened over longer prison sentences, much more comprehensive statistical analyses are needed to confirm whether there is a causal link between sentence length and a subjective sense of adulthood. The qualitative data used in this study are geared toward shedding light on how women inmates interpret and give meaning to their prison lives and identities. The finding that those who have been incarcerated the longest behave in the most conventionally adult manner should not be taken to mean that longer prison sentences result in the development of prosocial identities. Such a conclusion is beyond the reach of the data and methods employed here, and is one that future research can and should seek to evaluate.

Further, it is important to note that inmates who had been incarcerated the longest are seen as the true adults in Muncy. The finding that the long-term inmates and the lifers are seen as the adults in the prison environment should not be taken to mean that they would be able and willing to adopt conventional adult roles outside prison. In fact, their status as adults may be limited to the prison environment alone because they stand in stark contrast to inmates involved in the chaotic prison subculture known as the Muncy world. Whether or not these inmates would continue to feel adult, be perceived as adults, or be able to enact adulthood successfully once released is thus far from obvious. In the absence of more comprehensive data, we must thus be careful not to conclude that incarcerating offenders for longer periods would have the beneficial impact of making offenders feel or behave more adult once they are released. Rather, the findings of this study reveal the limits of prior conceptions of the prisonization process, and they point to the important and valuable role that lifers and long-termers play in the prison environment.

Finally, although the inmates in this study did not describe antisocial markers of adulthood when they were asked about their definitions of adulthood, it is important to note that some women who are heavily involved in the Muncy world may have chosen not to participate in this study and may in fact define adulthood using antisocial markers. Future researchers may focus exclusively on the women's prison culture as past researchers have (Heffernan, 1972; Owen, 1998), specifically to assess the salience of these antisocial norms and the extent to which they shape definitions of adulthood among the inmates.

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## Footnotes

1. Readers interested in issues of reflexivity and access in this study may review Janani Umamaheswar. 2014. "Gate-keeping and the Politics of Access to Prisons: Implications for Qualitative Prison Research." *Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice and Criminology 2*(2): 238-267. ↩
2. The sentence length refers to the inmates' current sentence. While prisonization could have occurred over multiple sentences, like Wheeler (1961), I chose the current sentence length in order to assess how different periods of continuous incarceration appear to affect inmates' attitudes toward adulthood. ↩

3. It is possible that some inmates were uncomfortable with being interviewed in an office in the Superintendent's building. While I had little choice in determining the precise location of the interviews, the inmates seemed comfortable in the setting. There were other inmates who were working or otherwise occupied in the same building, and many of the women I interviewed chatted informally with other inmates and correctional officers before and after the interview. The interviews were also conducted quite informally. The inmates were not constrained in any way, they sat next to me at a table (instead of across from me), and the door was always closed to ensure privacy. ↩

4. Muncy's policy is to monitor inmates' mail randomly, and I was therefore unable to guarantee that facility officials would not read the inmates' letters. I made this fact clear to the inmates in the letter inviting them to participate in the second stage of the study. While some inmates may have chosen not to participate in the study because of concerns related to the confidentiality of their letters, many inmates seemed to appreciate the opportunity to correspond by mail. These inmates sent me letters that were often several pages long and that contained very sensitive, personal narratives that they had not shared in the interviews. ↩

5. It is important to point out that the women referred to those inmates who had been incarcerated a long time as long-termers and lifers even though one could conceive of long-termers as those inmates who have long sentences, regardless of the amount of time they have already served. The definition of long-term inmates used by inmates was the same definition I chose to use in this study because of its intuitive appeal. Elicia, for example, was serving a life sentence, but had been incarcerated for under one year at the time of the interview. Despite being a lifer in one sense, the inmates that the women in this sample thought of when they described lifers were those who had been incarcerated for many years. ↩