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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

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 35 women prisoners incarcerated in SCI Muncy, a women’s prison in Pennsylvania, supplemented by mail correspondence with a sub-sample of these women, I examine how the inmates construct definitions of adulthood while incarcerated. I also investigate the inmates’ conformity to conventional markers of adulthood, as well as their views on how their incarceration has affected their sense of adulthood. The findings suggest that incarcerated women—like women outside prison—adhere to some conventional markers of adulthood (motherhood in particular), while expressing ambivalence about others (marriage in particular). Further, the findings indicate that inmates who have been incarcerated for longer periods (over 5 years) are more often perceived as adults by other inmates; that longer periods of incarceration make women “feel” more adult; and that women’s opinions regarding the impact of confinement on their sense of adulthood are mixed.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The punitive turn of the penal system has arguably been one of the most significant institutional transformations in the United States over the last few decades. While women continue to constitute a minority group in the incarcerated population, the number of women in prisons has increased tremendously. Despite this, and despite some scholars’ call for greater attention to be paid to the lives of female offenders (Tonry and Petersilia 1999), male offenders continue to be the focus of most criminological work. The lack of research on women in prisons is especially surprising because women have been disproportionately affected by the U.S.’s increased emphasis on punishment and crime control: Between 1980 and 2008, for instance, the imprisonment rate for women increased more than six-fold (Kruttschnitt, 2010; MacKenzie, 2006). Kruttschnitt and Gartner (2003: 63) have argued that there is virtue in reinvigorating the classic qualitative prison sociology that focused on women prisoners’ lived experiences, specifically by “broadening the range of questions that can be asked about the experiences, consequences, and justifications of imprisonment as punishment.” To this end, the most general purpose of this study is to answer scholars’ calls for qualitative prison studies on how women respond to, cope with, and even demonstrate resistance to the prison environment.

The specific goal of this study is to investigate how women prisoners construct definitions of adulthood while incarcerated, and whether they adhere to conventional markers of adulthood. Related to this question, I also explore the inmates’ beliefs regarding the impact of their confinement on their subjective sense of adulthood (whether
or not they feel like adults). Finally, I explore how women reconcile their status as adults with their status as inmates in a depersonalizing prison environment. Researchers (Sampson and Laub, 1993) have posited that individuals engage in criminal behavior when their ties to conventional society, primarily in the form of marriage and employment (both of which are key adulthood markers) are loosened/broken down. Research has further shown that the number of children women offenders have is an important predictor of their risk of recidivating, as is their engagement in conventional activities (Alarid, Burton, and Cullen 2000; Benda 2005). Although we thus know of specific factors that impact criminal trajectories, less is known about the processes through which these trajectories are affected. Studying inmates’ constructions of adulthood is particularly important because how inmates define adulthood could affect their interest in conventional roles and activities that have implications for their future offending patterns. If the inmates in this study believe that criminal behavior and incarceration is at odds with a conventional sense of adulthood (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010), they may be less likely to reoffend upon release from prison. However, if the inmates do not adhere to conventional markers of adulthood in the first place, they may be more likely to reoffend upon release. For instance, if the inmates do not believe that independence is a marker of adult status, they may be less inclined to find employment upon their release, thereby increasing the likelihood of reoffending.

By integrating life-course literature on adult status markers in contemporary American society with classic prisonization literature, I therefore aim to shed light on a novel, and as yet unexplored, aspect of women’s prison experiences that could affect
their desistance efforts upon release. Drawing on 35 in-depth interviews with adult women incarcerated at SCI Muncy—a women’s prison in Muncy, Pennsylvania—supplemented by mail correspondence with a sub-sample of these women, the specific questions I seek to address in this study are:

1) To what extent do women inmates believe that the experience of incarceration and the prison environment affects their sense of adulthood?

2) How far do women in prison adhere to conventional understandings of adult status markers? In particular, research (described next) has noted that women consider independence to be the most significant marker of adulthood. To what extent do imprisoned women share this belief, and to what extent do the inmates believe that motherhood, employment, and marriage, all considered conventional markers of adult status, also define adulthood?

3) Insofar as women inmates—like women in conventional society—believe that independence is crucial in “feeling” like an adult, how do they reconcile their lack of independence as prisoners with their adult status?

**Literature Review**

In this section, I describe trends in women’s imprisonment in the U.S. over the last few decades, as well as how these trends have been accompanied by corresponding changes in criminological and sociological research on women’s prisons. Additionally, I summarize the literature on definitions of adulthood and adult status markers in contemporary America. In doing so, I highlight how the meaning of adulthood has changed along with the social and political landscape of the U.S. in the last few decades. Finally, I describe the theoretical frameworks—derived from a) the prisonization
literature and b) the symbolic interactionist tradition—that I draw on in my analysis and presentation of the study findings.

**Women’s Incarceration in the U.S.**

Like men’s incarceration, women’s punishment has historically reflected strong race- and class-based inequalities (Petit and Western, 2004; Western and Wildeman, 2009; Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2003) in the penal system. The incarceration rate for African-American women, for example, almost doubled in the 1990s (Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2003). Though there are encouraging signs that the trend towards increasing incarceration rates for African-American women is waning, as of 2007, the incarceration rate for this demographic group in the U.S. exceeded the total imprisonment rate for both men and women of all European countries except Spain (Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2003). Though the increase in the incarceration rate among Hispanic women was more modest, it was still well above the increase experienced by White women in the 90s.

The reasons for the spike in women’s incarceration overlap significantly with those behind the rise in men’s incarceration. These reasons include federal and state sentencing reforms, such as mandatory minimums and changes in sentencing guidelines (Kruttschnitt, 2010). Such changes emerged at a time when the criminal justice system generally underwent a shift away from focusing on crime causation and rehabilitation and towards an emphasis on deterrence and just deserts (Petersilia, 1994). The sentencing reforms were part of a broader movement from indeterminate to determinate sentencing, which was designed to eliminate unwarranted disparity in sentencing and to focus on offenders’ criminal history when determining their sentences. Some scholars (Kramer, Lubitz, and Kempinen, 1989; Steffensmeier, Ulmer, and Kramer, 1998) have noted that
Pennsylvania permitted a greater level of judicial discretion than other states that implemented sentencing guidelines, in part because its guidelines system is “less constrained by correctional capacity and more accepting of rehabilitative sentencing aims” (Koons-Witt, 2002: 301). In Pennsylvania, policymakers thus attempted to integrate just deserts, deterrence, rehabilitation, and incapacitation into the guidelines model (Koons-Witt, 2002).

To eliminate unwanted gender disparities in sentencing, Daly (1994) argued that judges had three options: They could treat men more like women; treat women more like men; or “split the difference.” In earlier decades, women offenders had benefited from judicial discretion. Following the sentencing changes, however, most policymakers relied on the latter two options of eliminated the gender-based sentencing disparities (Koons-Witt, 2002). Specifically, judges no longer took gender alone into serious consideration when weighing the benefits and drawbacks of custodial and noncustodial punishment options (Kruttschnitt, 2010). To the extent that judges considered the unique social position of women offenders, such consideration was driven by a concern about practicality rather than gender (Steffensmeier, Kramer, and Streifel, 1993). Evidence from Minnesota has suggested that gender was not a predictor of sentencing outcomes before or after the sentencing reforms. Motherhood, however, was an important factor in determining the sentencing of women offenders following the reforms. Specifically, only women with dependent children benefited from the leniency and chivalry of the courts; offenders with no children were significantly more likely than those who had dependent children to be incarcerated. However, even offenders with dependent children faced a higher likelihood of incarceration following emergence of the new sentencing guidelines
compared to the era preceding the sentencing guidelines. Although there is thus mixed support for the conclusion that women offenders were disproportionately affected by changes in sentencing guidelines, the emergence of these guidelines played a major role in bringing about the record numbers of both men and women being incarcerated in the U.S. (Blumstein and Beck, 1999).

In addition to sentencing reforms, the increase in the women’s prison population was driven in part by the war on drugs. While the increase in the women’s prison population occurred across all offenses, it was the greatest for those incarcerated for drug offenses (Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2003). Between 1990 and 1996, for example, the increase in drug offenders in the female inmate population was 100 percent, much higher than the 55 percent increase in drug offenders among male inmates (Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2003). The drastic changes that resulted from shifts in sentencing policies along with the war on drugs are also reflected in the fact that, by the end of the 20th century, there were more drug offenders than there were violent offenders in women’s prisons (Kruttschnitt, 2010).

The tremendous increase in the women’s prison population is an important development in the U.S. social and political landscape because of the role these women play in their communities. Some scholars have noted, for example, that women are the “glue” that hold low-income, disorganized neighborhoods together (Kruttschnitt, 2010). Additionally, since women are often the primary caregivers for their children (Mumola, 2000), incarcerating mothers leads to family disruptions that are difficult to mend. The distance between inmate mothers and children exacerbate these disruptions, since there
are fewer women’s prisons than there are men’s, and women’s facilities are typically located farther away from the women’s families (Kruttschnitt, 2010).

Once again, moreover, the changes in family structure that have resulted from the prison boom have been more acutely felt by lower-class African-American families: While the risk of maternal imprisonment for White children is small, a full 5 percent of African-American children born in 1990 to mothers who had not completed high school had their mother imprisoned (Wildeman and Western, 2010). Overall, the prison boom thus affected lower-income women of color most strongly, highlighting the racial and class inequalities that the penal system sustained and reproduced over the last few decades.

**Research on women prisoners**

As the women’s prison population underwent drastic changes, there were simultaneous shifts in the research conducted on this population. Historically, even in the “golden age of prison sociology,” research on women’s prisons reflected assumptions about gender and femininity. Scholars studying prisons at this time either ignored women’s incarceration entirely (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958) or focused almost exclusively on women’s sexuality and kinship networks in prison (Ward and Kassebaum, 1965). These researchers instead often discussed gender only to the extent that it explained the prevalence and structure of prison homosexuality and pseudo-families (Heffernan, 1972; Ward and Kassebaum, 1965) or the ways in which women’s pre-prison identities shaped how they adapted to prison life (Heffernan, 1972). For example, Heffernan (1972) noted that women were not socialized to “take it like a man” or “be
tough,” which could explain why women’s prison culture was less violent and volatile than that of men’s prisons (Sykes, 1958).

An exception to this literature was Rose Giallambardo’s (1965) seminal work on how women’s adaptations to incarceration reflect their agency. Giallombardo focused on women’s efforts to resist the prison environment through the development of an alternative universe consisting of homosexual relationships and inmate family structures. Even in Giallambardo’s work, however, gender was invoked primarily in discussions of how women “imported” (Clemmer, 1950) gender norms from outside prison, and how these norms structured prison culture in women’s facilities. At this time, however, scholars studying women’s prison culture did not examine gender in the context of studying how women coped with and resisted the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 1958).

Instead, with waning interest in women prisoners’ sexuality following the consistent conclusions of the early studies on this population (Giallombardo, 1965; Heffernan, 1972; Ward and Kassebaum, 1965), women’s prisons fell to the backburner of criminological and sociological interest for several years. In some ways, then, the agenda set by early prison sociologists studying women’s prisons was less diverse than that set by scholars studying men’s prisons. The latter developed theories of social “types” in men’s prisons, and they studied the strong “inmate code” that structured inmate life, as well as the tense and volatile nature of men’s prisons (Clemmer 1950; Sykes, 1958). Indeed, some early prison scholars documented historic shifts in incarceration in the U.S. that did not apply to women’s prisons. Irwin (1980), for example, noted that the fall of the rehabilitative ideal in the 70s led to subsequent rises in prison violence, racial tensions, and the development of gangs in men’s prisons. None of these have been
documented as major features of women’s prisons (Bowker, 1981; Kruttschnitt, Gartner, and Miller, 2000). For many years, therefore, interest in women’s prisons diminished as the more rife, conflict-ridden men’s prisons gained attention from both the general public and prison scholars (Irwin, 1980; Jacobs, 1977).

As mentioned, male offenders—and male prisoners—continue to be the focus of much criminological work. The focus on male offenders and men’s prisons is unsurprising to the extent that there continue to be far more incarcerated men than incarcerated women in the U.S. (Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2003). As Garland (2001) has noted, the incarceration boom primarily affected young, African-American men from inner-city neighborhoods. Criminological research (both quantitative and qualitative) has thus reasonably focused extensively on the causes and consequences of rising incarceration rates for this population (Edin, Nelson, and Paranal, 2004; Wacquant, 2000; Western and Wildeman, 2009). Following the research in the 70s, however, some scholars have explored women’s imprisonment in the context of the prison boom. Owen’s (1998) study on women’s prison culture, for example, represents a welcome return to examinations of women’s prison lives that disappeared in the 70s following the works of early prison sociologists.

Perhaps most importantly, scholars—especially beginning in the 90s—recognized that women prisoners’ identities could not be captured fully by understanding their gendered socialization and their prison relationships. This development of earlier studies of women inmates that invoked gender as a basic explanatory variable has been sustained and advanced by feminist penologists worldwide (Bosworth and Carrabine 2001; Carlen, 2004; Chesney-Lind, 1991; Haney 2010; Hannah-Moffat and Shaw, 2000). Penologists in
the U.K. and the U.S., for example, have problematized the notion of women prisoners as passive victims of oppression, highlighting instead the ways in which women resist state governance (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001; Haney, 2010). By applying a more critical lens to analyze women’s resistance to carceral regimes, these studies reflect a departure from earlier depictions of women prisoners that focused primarily on how women responded to the prison environment (Ward and Kassebaum, 1965). Consistent with recent developments in criminology more broadly (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001), therefore, penologists now recognize that offenders, and women prisoners in particular, exercise their agency to resist oppressive institutional rule in ways that were not previously recognized by prison scholars.

It is important to note, however, that the literature on the extent to which women prisoners are able to exert their agency is conflicted. For example, Hannah-Moffat (1999) has argued that in Canada, even prison programs designed to offer women prisoners options (such as leisure training) regulate the prisoners morally. Resistance to such programs, moreover, often results in higher risk classifications. Whether or not women prisoners can be considered truly “free” to pursue these options is thus debatable. The fact that women’s decision to participate in programs designed to better themselves go hand-in-hand with their risk classification highlights the limitations on how far we can consider women prisoners as agentic while they are incarcerated. Although women prisoners do actively seek out ways to resist institutional control (Haney, 2010), therefore, there are inevitably very stringent constraints on their ability to act independently while they are incarcerated. For this reason, care must be taken not to overstate the agentic nature of women’s prison lives.
To conclude, although there have been significant strides in the development of a well-rounded body of literature regarding women prisoners and women’s incarceration, there continue to be gaps in the literature. For example, Kruttschnitt (2010) has pointed to the need to focus more on the collateral consequences of women’s incarceration. This is a topic that has yet to receive a significant amount of attention, despite the emphasis on the collateral consequences of men’s incarceration (Foster and Hagan 2007; Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Lopoo and Western 2005). Moreover, despite the large body of literature on women prisoners’ identities as mothers (Celinska and Siegel, 2009; Enos, 2001; Ferraro and Moe, 2003), the role of motherhood in inmate mothers’ lives continues to remain a complex issue. For example, while some researchers (Enos, 2001; Ferraro and Moe, 2003) concluded that their children are sources of hope and strength for inmate mothers, others (Giordano, 2010) have noted that previously-incarcerated women do not reflect on parenting with a sense of optimism and satisfaction. As such, there remain several unanswered questions about women prisoners, and there is much room for in-depth qualitative studies on women’s prison lives and conditions in particular. Finally, while there are pending questions about how inmate mothers approach parenting, the literature would benefit from a movement away from a singular focus on motherhood (Enos, 2001; Celinska and Siegel, 2009; Ferraro and Moe, 2003).

The transition to adulthood and adult status markers

The literature on adulthood markers and the transition to adulthood provide significant clues regarding the potential problems that women in prison may face, specifically in the context of their identities as adults. Perhaps the most consistent finding in the literature on the modern transition to adulthood is that it is longer than it was half a
century ago (Berlin, Furstenberg, and Waters, 2010; Furstenberg et al., 2004; Furstenberg, 2010; Settersten and Ray, 2010). Simultaneously, young adults are relying on their families for a much longer period than they did in the post-war years (Furstenberg, 2010). This extended transition to adulthood can be a fulfilling period of self-exploration for young adults with adequate financial resources. However, youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds face a challenging transition to adulthood marked by the stressful juggling of educational, professional, and familial commitments. Individuals who come into contact with the criminal justice system in particular face unique issues that result in delays and deviations from normative timetables for attaining adulthood (Foster et al., 2005; Raphael, 2007).

Regarding markers of adulthood, Arnett (1997, 1998) has proposed that young adults are foregoing the use of traditional transitions as markers of adulthood, and adopting instead individualistic, psychological criteria to define adulthood. Instead of marriage, full-time employment, parenthood, and residential independence, therefore, youth are now employing criteria such as taking responsibility for themselves as indicators of adult status. An investigation of women’s notions of adulthood suggests that women in contemporary America are living in a “post-feminist” age where independence—be it financial, emotional, and residential—is strongly valued and 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 a sense of adulthood. It is for this reason that whether and
how inmates reconcile their status as adults with their status as inmates are key research questions in this study.

It must be noted, however, that 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) have 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. 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) has argued that incarceration serves as an “interruption” to inmates’ relationships, and Goffman (1961:12) concluded that institutionalized individuals such as prisoners “cannot possibly maintain a meaningful domestic existence.” 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. Fathers outside prison 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 identity negotiation strategies that alter how they define motherhood and/or assess
their own mothering practices.

Similarly, 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. In the ensuing chapters, I explore this possibility by examining the
processes through which the inmates construct definitions of adulthood and negotiate
their own identities as adults.

Finally, in their examination of the desistance process using a symbolic
interactionist perspective, Massoglia and Uggen (2010) combine literature on age norms
with life-course criminological literature to conclude that desistance from crime is one of
many markers of adult status in contemporary U.S. culture. They emphasize in particular
the effect of internalizing the appraisals of others, and the extent to which this influences
motivations to desist from crime. While not the focus of their article, in noting that their
results are not only applicable to the men they interviewed, the authors include brief
excerpts from female prisoners who allude to the importance of adult status in their own
lives. One such prisoner, for example, described her fellow inmates as “little kids walking
around in women’s bodies.” Another described herself as “so much more than a felon,”
since she was educated, hard working, a good mother, and dependable (Massoglia and Uggen 2010: 570).

Notions of adulthood thus appear to be inconsistent with engagement in criminal activity among both women and men. Although Massoglia and Uggen argue that inmates view desistance from crime as a marker of adult status, there are theoretical grounds for the argument that prisoners in particular might use markers other than those employed by members in conventional society. Goffman (1961) has noted the negative impact of “total” institutions on individuals’ identity and self-image, and Sutherland (1939) has argued that prison can be problematic because it leads to the learning of deviant behavior through association with criminals. To the extent that women’s beliefs are shaped by their experience in the prison environment instead of conventional society, the women may be more likely to learn and adopt deviant conceptions of adulthood that in turn increase their likelihood of reoffending.

On the other hand, inmates may see their prison experience as a crucial aspect of their social and emotional maturation. For example, an ex-inmate interviewed in a study on women inmates’ 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: 293). There are thus theoretically plausible reasons to believe that women’s notions of adulthood affect their future reoffending and may be shaped by the prison environment rather than by conventional society.
Theoretical Framework

I use two primary theoretical frameworks to contextualize and analyze the findings in this study. The first theoretical concept—prisonization—is derived from studies conducted by penologists during the “golden era” of prison sociology in the 70s. I also draw on the symbolic interactionist tradition to emphasize the processes through which inmates negotiate their identities and define their subjective sense of adulthood. In this section, I describe each of these theoretical frameworks in detail.

Prisonization

Older criminological research focused extensively on the process of “prisonization” (Sykes, 1958; Thomas, 1977; Thomas and Foster, 1972), where “prisonization” was 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. Thomas and Foster (1972) have argued that understanding the process of prisonization is important to criminologists for two reasons: It sheds light on the dynamics of the inmate subculture; and 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) claims every incarcerated person is to some degree, their understandings of normative adult behavior may shift while incarcerated. Insofar as women inmates are denied the freedom and independence that
Aronson (2008) argues is crucial to contemporary women’s understanding of adulthood, the inmates may conform to non-conventional notions of adulthood that are developed in the prison environment. This may especially be the case if women forge bonds with other inmates and become less invested in relationships with members of conventional society as a result. Indeed, Zingraff (1980) noted that female inmates placed a stronger emphasis than their male counterparts on interpersonal contacts within the prison. However, the greater investment in interpersonal relationships with other inmates surprisingly weakened the impact of confinement on the women. As such, whether or not women who form relationships with other inmates would abandon conventional notions of adulthood and adult status markers remains unclear.

Scholars studying prisonization noted that there were three general types of variables that shaped adaptations to imprisonment: pre-prison socialization and experience; characteristics of the prison organization and problems it creates for the inmates; and extra-prison influences in terms of the contacts prisoners maintain with the outside world and the expectations they have of their post-release lives (Thomas 1977). Based on these variables, two general models were proposed to explain the process of prisonization: The deprivation model, which emphasizes the problems that the prison environment itself poses to inmates; and the importation model, which focuses on the pre-prison experiences of the inmates (Zingraff 1980). Although the importation and deprivation models are key elements of the prisonization literature, I do not focus on testing these models, since I am less concerned with the competing hypotheses that these two models pose. Instead, because this study is centered primarily on an exploration of the impact of confinement on how adult women feel, I 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. Similarly, though the “pains of imprisonment” are relevant to any study of inmates’ prison lives, they are not the focus of this study. Given the central focus on the inmates’ identities in this study, I draw instead on those elements of the theoretical literature on prisonization that emphasize how the inmates’ absorption of prison culture over time affects their identities. Though I note the ways in which certain pains of imprisonment such as the loss of independence impact inmates’ identities, these deprivations are not the focus of my study, as they have already been documented in earlier studies (Heffernan, 1972; Ward and Kassebaum, 1965).

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 experience of motherhood. These scholars have examined the coping strategies of women separated from their children (Celinska and Siegel 2009), and their experiences with being mothers behind bars (Enos 2001). Drawing on the prisonization literature of the 70s, other scholars (Kruttschnitt, Gartner, and Miller, 2000; Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2005) have 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 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.

**Symbolic interactionism**

Although I draw on the symbolic interactionist perspective most heavily in Chapter 7 when I describe the women prisoners’ self- and reflected appraisals, this perspective is central to the overall study. Its importance lies in this study’s recurring emphasis on the inmates’ identities as adults and on the ways in which they reconcile their definitions of adulthood with their status as inmates. Symbolic interactionism is a wide-ranging theory that can be applied to numerous social relationships and contexts, but it has proven especially useful to criminologists whose goal is to bring into focus the importance of offenders’ identities. Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002), for example, have proposed a “theory of cognitive transformation” to explain offenders’ desistance efforts. Specifically, they argue that, in studying the process of desistance, it is important to take into consideration “cognitive and identity transformations and the actor’s own role in the transformation process” (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002: 992).

In this study, I employ Massoglia and Uggen’s interactionist perspective on delinquency, applying it to the experience of incarcerated women. Where Massoglia and Uggen’s emphasis is on crime and arrest, the immediate emphasis of this study is on incarceration and the prison environment. Further, while Massoglia and Uggen employ symbolic interactionism to understand the effects of delinquency of offenders’ sense of
adulthood, I shift the focus of their interactionist theory to explore inmates’ beliefs on the impact of confinement on their identities.

Scholars in the symbolic interactionist tradition generally emphasize the significance of role appraisals, which refer to individuals’ perceptions of how others (and especially significant others) view them. Per Cooley’s (1922) concept of the “looking-glass self,” internalization of role appraisals in turn shapes individuals’ self-conceptions. If the significant others in incarcerated women’s lives view them as less “adult” because they are incarcerated, they in turn will feel like they have failed to reach full adult status. Specifically, if it is the case that women consider independence to be the most significant marker of adulthood status, using Massoglia and Uggen’s language, the women will be less likely to consider themselves adults (self-appraisals) and more likely to believe that others do not see them as adults (reflected appraisals).

Massoglia and Uggen’s application of symbolic interactionism can also be applied to interpret the prisonization process: In the prison environment, inmates may begin to internalize the appraisals of fellow inmates rather than members of conventional society. In this case, women inmates may adapt to the environment by adopting a worldview that differs dramatically from that of conventional society. In this scenario, their perceptions of adulthood would be contingent less on the norms of mainstream society, and more on the norms of adulthood in the prison environment. To the extent that these understandings of adulthood differ, application of a symbolic interactionist perspective will permit an examination of both the inmates’ perceptions of adulthood, and of which people constitute their primary reference group.
Symbolic interactionism is particularly relevant as a theoretical framework for this study because of its focus on actors’ agency, which is in turn rooted in the theory’s emphasis on the cognitive processes that shape the development of actors’ identities. Symbolic interactionism in its original forms, however, has been criticized for failing to take into consideration broader social forces. Indeed, this structure-agency debate has played a central role in sociological theory more generally (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

Of course, the fact that this study will focus on inmates’ identities as adults does not mean that these identities are divorced from broader social patterns. To the contrary, although I invoke symbolic interactionism to emphasize the inmates’ identity construction and negotiation processes, broader adulthood norms that structure the life course (Neugarten et al., 1965; Massoglia and Uggen, 2010) play a central role in the conceptualization of this study. In fact, the study is explicitly geared towards exploring the relevance of these broad social norms in inmates’ lives. More specifically, these norms are likely to affect the development of an “identity standard” (Dyer, 2005) that guides how inmates feel they should enact roles that are meaningful to their identities, such as that of a wife, partner, or worker. Inmates’ self-conceptions are thus contingent in part on their perceptions of how others view them (their reflected appraisals) compared to the “identity standard” that defines how they wish to be viewed.

To take a concrete example, if inmates consider motherhood an important element of their identities as adults, an “identity standard” may stipulate that they should be closely involved in their children’s day-to-day activities (Enos, 2001). Given the salience of this type of “mothering discourse” (Griffith and Smith, 1987), the inmates may believe
that others view them negatively as a result of their inability to mother conventionally. In other words, there may be a discrepancy between the inmates’ reflected appraisals and their “identity standard” for being a good mother. Unable to modify their behavior to reconcile it with their beliefs about “good” mothering, the inmates may be forced to define “good” mothering differently (Dyer, 2005) or even minimize the importance of motherhood for their sense of adulthood. The use of symbolic interactionism in this study permits a close examination of these identity construction and negotiation processes while simultaneously acknowledging and incorporating the importance of social norms that dictate how and when adulthood is attained.

Ultimately, following the path set by Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002: 1004), I emphasize in this study that “both the ways in which respondents describe and actually accomplish (or fail to accomplish) life changes depends heavily on the particular repertoires (cognitive, linguistic, behavior) to which they have access.” I do not endeavor to trace each connection between structure and agency that emerges in inmates’ narratives. I do, however, seek to examine the ways in which dominant norms and timetables regarding adulthood in women’s lives affect how women in prison define adulthood and whether they are able to feel like adults while they are incarcerated. The inmates’ subjective sense of adulthood may be particularly affected by inmates’ perceptions of how others view their status as adults (their reflected appraisals) based on their adherence to, or divergence from, normative timetables for attaining adulthood.

Overview

This dissertation is laid out as follows: In Chapter 2, I outline the methodology employed in this study. Here, in addition to describing the site, sample, and analytic
method of the study, I also outline the data collection methods I employed. Specifically, I provide details on the interviewing process, followed by a discussion of the process of doing prison research by mail as a means to supplement interview data collected in prisons.

Chapters 3 through 6 present the key analyses and findings of the study. Chapter 3 focuses on women prisoners’ conformity to conventional markers of adulthood such as marriage, motherhood, employment, and independence. In Chapter 4, I present a life-course perspective on the inmates’ definitions of adulthood. Here, I present an in-depth view of the inmates’ early childhood and adult experiences to highlight the roots of their current views on adulthood and their sense of adulthood. This chapter also serves to familiarize readers with important details of the inmates’ lives. Chapter 5 delves into the prison world to present findings related to the two most central issues of the study: The inmates’ constructions of adulthood in the prison environment, and their beliefs regarding the impact of confinement on their subjective sense of adulthood. In the final analytic chapter, Chapter 6, I focus on the inmates’ self- and reflected appraisals. Here, I describe both how women perceive themselves (their self-appraisals) and their beliefs regarding how others perceive them (their reflected appraisals). In the discussion of these findings, I highlight the role that the women’s status as inmates plays in their self-conceptions.

Finally, the dissertation concludes in Chapter 7 with a summary of the major findings and implications of the study, as well as suggested directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2

METHODS

In this chapter, I introduce SCI Muncy, the site at which this study was conducted, and I highlight the issues that were involved in gaining access to the prison. Next, I describe the sample and analytic method of the study. Finally, I outline the benefits and drawbacks of conducting prison research by mail as a way to overcome some of the obstacles involved in maintaining access to prison facilities.

The Site

As of 2011, women made up 5.4% of the state-wide prison population in Pennsylvania, and there are currently only two women’s prisons in the state: SCI Muncy and SCI Cambridge Springs. The former was the site for this study. Built in 1920 as a training school for imprisoned women between 16 and 30 years of age, SCI Muncy is now a close-security women’s prison 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” (the number of inmates that the facility can accommodate by filling all beds based on a number of logistical factors) of 1,410 inmates. In 2011, 56.8% of inmates at Muncy were White (compared to 38.9% in the entire state), 34.8% were African-American (compared to 49.4% in the entire state), 6.6% were Hispanic (compared to 11% in the entire state), and 1.7% were classified as “Other” (compared to 0.7% in the entire state). 13.2% of the inmates were under 25 years of age (compared to 14.6% in the entire state), 50.2% were between 25 and 39 years of age (compared to 47% in the entire state), and 36.5% were 40 years of age or older.
(compared to 39.5% in the entire state). Also in 2011, 3.1% of the inmates housed at Muncy were serving a life-without-parole sentence \((n = 152)\), up 2% from 2010. There were 4,971 lifers in the entire state in 2011, up 2.9% (142 more inmates) since 2010, and 3.6% of these were housed in the two women’s prisons in Pennsylvania.

SCI Muncy is located 2 miles into Muncy, Pennsylvania, and is surrounded by mountains and impeccably well-maintained grounds. The waiting room is located next to the front gate, and all visitors are required to show identification there, pass through a security check, and wait for an escort before being let out of the waiting room into the facility grounds. The most prominent building, located in the center of the grounds, is the main office/ Superintendant’s building, which can be reached by following a straight route from the gate of the grounds. To the far right upon entering the gate is the yard, and the main office building is flanked on both sides by cottage-style cell-blocks. These housing units are labeled by letters and are organized in part by needs. For example, there is a specific housing unit for inmates with special needs. Overall, the facility grounds had the feel of a college campus. Indeed, many inmates spoke of the “campus” when referring to the facility grounds.

**Gaining initial access**

Before approaching the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections for approval to conduct this study at SCI Muncy, I attempted to gain approval to conduct the study in a women’s prison in a different state. Although the first site was chosen before Muncy primarily for logistical reasons related to ease of access to the facility, my proposal was rejected by the Department of Corrections at that state. Following an unsuccessful
attempt at revising the proposal for reconsideration by the first state’s Department of Corrections, I then submitted the proposal in its initial form to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. Approval from the PADOC came easily, and I was fortunate to have the full cooperation of the Superintendent’s Assistant at SCI Muncy.

However, my attempts at gaining access to facilities in two different sites raises interesting issues related to the role of gate-keepers in the creation of knowledge about women prisoners. Specifically, in an era marked by increasing difficulties in gaining access to prisons, examining the role of gate-keepers in the production of knowledge about inmates is particularly crucial. This is because what we know about women inmates could be greatly affected not only by which inmates prison researchers are granted access to, but also by which questions they are allowed to ask. I present a detailed discussion of this issue in the appendix of this study.

The sample

After gaining approval to conduct the study at SCI Muncy, I obtained a final sample of 35 adult women (18 years or older) incarcerated at the facility. I 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, and 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, and so on). One goal of this project is to investigate the extent to which women inmates reconcile their status as prisoners with a belief in conventional norms that suggest that adulthood is
closely tied to financial independence, marriage, and parenthood. To attain this goal, the participants must be old enough for these norms to be culturally relevant to them, which may not be the case among younger inmates. Since the research topic is ultimately intended to probe women’s experience of adulthood, rather than young women’s aspirations of adulthood, I restricted the sample to adult women.

I also excluded women who were above 55 years of age because their experiences were likely to be sufficiently different from other inmates’ so as to render their narratives difficult to compare to those of other inmates. Morse (2008) has 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. To do this, they obtain samples that consist of participants who are similar to one another based on the specific experience or phenomenon being studied. Women over the age of 55 are likely to have undergone their transition to adulthood in a very different social and political climate decades ago, and recalling experiences of this transition from decades ago might also have been problematic. Ultimately, a key research goal in this study is to examine whether women in prison adhere to the same markers of adulthood that modern women in the community do. Women who attained adulthood before the “post-feminist” (Aronson, 2008) age that women currently live in are likely to have experienced adulthood in a very different way. With a sample of 35 participants, I thus excluded older inmates because an examination of their notions of adulthood would likely be a separate research project in itself.

One final issue regarding sample selection involves my inclusion of recently admitted inmates. It is possible that very recently admitted women may have little to say
about how the prison environment has affected their views on adulthood, given the short amount of time they have been exposed to this environment. The incarceration event, however, is likely to be extremely salient in the minds of recently admitted women, and this event alone may suffice to alter their sense of adulthood. Since, in addition to examining women’s perceptions of the prison environment, I also seek to examine how women reconcile their loss of independence with their sense of adulthood, examining the perspectives of women who recently underwent the incarceration event is valuable. Moreover, including recently incarcerated women is important in understanding how time served appears to affect how women perceive the prison environment, other inmates, and the prison culture. I thus included recently admitted inmates in the sample, even though they may have less to say about the prison environment than women who have been incarcerated for longer periods.

**Recruiting the inmates**

After gaining initial access to Muncy through the process described above, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections provided me with a list of all the inmates housed at SCI Muncy. Using this list, I recruited participants through purposive sampling. In particular, I selected participants to obtain diversity in age, race, and sentence length. I sought diversity in race and sentence length because these variables have been documented by prior research as important in shaping prisoners’ responses to imprisonment (Clemmer, 1940; Enos, 2001; Kruttschnitt et al., 2000). I also sampled for diversity based on age because of the salience of normative timetables for attaining adulthood (Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe, 1965; Massoglia and Uggen, 2010).
Once I had developed a preliminary list of inmates whom I wished to interview, I sent the selected inmates a recruitment letter introducing myself and the research project to the participants. I instructed inmates to tear off the bottom part of this letter and return it to the Superintendent’s Assistant if they were interested in participating in the study. After constructing a list of inmates who responded to my recruitment letter, I followed the examples set by other penologists (Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2005) by categorizing participants based on their sentence length. Specifically, I placed inmates into three categories: Long-term inmates (those who have been in prison 5 years or longer); short-term inmates (those who have been in prison for 7 months- 2 years); and recently admitted inmates (those who have been in prison for 6 months or fewer). In each of these categories, I sought to ensure diversity in age and race as well. The final sample generally reflected the broader prison population, since 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, and Table 2 provides detailed information on each inmate.

*Tables 1 and 2 about here*

An important issue that merits discussion pertains to the difficulty I faced in recruiting recently admitted inmates. As Figure 1 indicates, I sent letters to very many inmates who had arrived in Muncy within the six months prior to the commencement of data collection. The response rate for the recruitment letters sent to this group of inmates

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1 Due to facility rules, I had no choice but to instruct the inmates to inform the Superintendent’s Assistant of their interest in participating in the study. This is because he was responsible for coordinating inmates’ movement to and from the interview room.
was quite low. While it is difficult to state conclusively why these inmates were less inclined to participate in the study, there are a number of plausible reasons for this. First, and perhaps most importantly, SCI Muncy serves as the diagnostic and classification center for the state’s women inmates, and it is thus likely that many of the inmates who recently arrived were scheduled to be moved to a different facility or had already moved. Indeed, some letters were returned to me undelivered because the inmates had been moved to different facilities by the time the letters arrived. Further, two inmates wrote to me from different facilities, asking to participate in the study even though they had been moved. Since I had received IRB approval to conduct the study only at Muncy, I could not interview these inmates.

More generally, recently admitted inmates may simply have been insufficiently “settled” at Muncy to be interested in participating in the study. As I will describe later, there is some evidence to suggest that the period immediately following inmates’ incarceration are the most tumultuous. One inmate who had been incarcerated for some time told me directly that, had I attempted to recruit her for the study when she had just arrived in the prison, she would not have been interested in participating. As I will expand on later, inmates describe the months following the incarceration event as particularly chaotic because of their involvement in fights, gossiping, and same-sex relationships as they adjusted to prison life. Some of these actions are punishable in Muncy, there were thus also some recently admitted inmates who wished to participate in the study but were not allowed to participate because they were serving some of their sentence in the Restricted Housing Unit. Although I was unable to get a full list of the inmates who were barred from participation, it is thus likely that recently admitted
inmates were uninterested or unable to participate in the study because of the turmoil that is typically triggered by the incarceration event.

Although I was ultimately able to obtain a number of interviews with recently admitted inmates that was comparable to the numbers I obtained in the other categories, the lack of response from recently admitted inmates has implications for how the findings of this study should be interpreted. Specifically, it is possible that the findings described in the study are not applicable to the whole prison population at Muncy because of the sub-group of recently admitted women especially who may not be represented in the sample. As I present the findings of the study, I also highlight specific results that should be interpreted cautiously because of the possibility that recently admitted women who did not indicate an interest in participating constitute a unique group that I had difficulties reaching.

The interviews

I chose qualitative interviewing as the primary means of data collection in this study because it is especially suited to obtaining participants’ interpretations of their biographies (Warren, 2002). Since research has established the significance of a subjective sense of adulthood (O’Brien 2001; Shanahan et al. 2005), and since there remain questions about how women in prison negotiate their prison lives (Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2003), gaining women’s personal interpretations of their lives was crucial. Furthermore, the emphasis in qualitative interviewing on individuals’ biographies (Warren 2002) was appropriate for the study because how women adjust to prison may depend on their unique histories (Kruttschnitt, Gartner, and Miller, 2000). The flexible
model of qualitative interviewing lent itself to letting participants share relevant information on their personal biographies. Perhaps most importantly, previous research had not examined women prisoners’ sense of adulthood, and much of this study was thus exploratory. Interviewing is especially suited for exploratory research because it requires researchers to remain open to issues that emerge during data collection that might not have been expected when the project began.

Although 35 was the target number of interviews, I was prepared to conducted more interviews if necessary based on whether data saturation had been reached. Data saturation is achieved through conducting constant comparisons of the data until indicators or properties of a given theme become interchangeable. While determining data saturation is ultimately a subjective decision made by the researcher, 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 by the time 20-25 interviews were completed, I collected 35 interviews to meet the target sample size. I chose to continue collecting interviews also to attain consistency in the number of participants in each category of inmates.

The interviews with inmates were conducted in private rooms in the Superintendent’s office building. This served the dual purpose of protecting participant confidentiality and maintaining appropriate security measures. 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. Following this, I asked the inmates a series of open-ended questions aimed at understanding how they define adulthood, and the extent to which they believe that being in prison has affected how
adult they feel. The interviews thus consisted of a series of questions pertaining to: inmate characteristics (age, marital status, parental status, and so one); their beliefs regarding adulthood and adult status generally; and finally, their prison experiences and how the women believe these have affected their definitions and sense of adulthood. I obtained information on the crime the inmates were convicted of through the list provided by the PADOC. This list also contained the inmates’ full name, race, age, and sentence length.

Interviews were conducted between September and December 2012, and were scheduled at the convenience of the officials at Muncy. Before the interview commenced, participants signed a consent form, and were given the option of once again reading the recruitment letter that I had sent them. I also asked participants at this point whether they had any questions or concerns about the research project before the interview began.

With the permission of the participants and the correctional facility, I recorded the interviews using a voice recorder, and thereafter transcribed them using a word processor. Pseudonyms were chosen to maintain participant confidentiality. In addition to the audio recordings of the interviews, I also took detailed field notes while at the correctional facility. Like the interviews, I converted these into document form, adding in additional comments where necessary. The purpose of these audits and memos was to record in detail the decision-making processes at every stage in the research in order to maximize replicability.

Maintaining access
It has been noted by qualitative researchers that obtaining IRB approval for a study must not be considered the main ethical event in the research process (Holland, Williams, and Forrester, 2013). Access in qualitative research is a process of constant negotiation (Bondy, 2010; Reeves, 2010), and access to prisons may be especially tenuous because prisons—whether in the U.S. or elsewhere—are volatile institutions subject to frequent local tensions (King and Liebling, 2007).

Throughout the interviewing phase, maintaining access to participants for the study proved to be almost as difficult as gaining initial entry into the prison. My goal was to conduct interviews on a weekly basis over a span of approximately four months. However, it soon became apparent that permission to enter the facility could be denied at any point due to day-to-day events at the prison, despite the full co-operation of the Superintendent’s Assistant. For example, I received notice on the morning of one of the scheduled interview days (half an hour before departure to the prison) that the facility was in lock-down mode, and all the interviews for that day had to be cancelled. Two weeks later, the Superintendent’s Assistant informed me that all interviews for the ensuing two weeks had to be cancelled, despite already scheduling the interviews and confirming the schedule two days earlier.

It should be emphasized that despite his occasional interference with the research process, the Superintendent’s Assistant at Muncy was wholly supportive of the research. Our relationship was not adversarial, nor was I unsympathetic to the difficulties he faced in juggling multiple responsibilities related to management of the facility. In fact, reminding myself of “the constraints under which the so-called powerful operate” (Liebling, 2001: 476) was helpful in maintaining a relationship with the Superintendent’s
Assistant that facilitated completion of the study. The flexible model of qualitative research, which allows for a high degree of unpredictability during fieldwork, was especially useful in adapting to the fluid nature of field research in a prison.

While I was necessarily at the mercy of the prison officials in gaining access to the facility itself, this power dynamic shifted drastically when interacting with inmates, many of whom viewed me as a privileged “outsider.” For example, one participant asked me at the end of her interview if I could help her with her plans for buying a building so that she could run a day-care for low-income mothers. Another inmate asked me in a letter whether I could assist her in her goals to write a book and open a business. Despite the differences that inmates seemed to perceive between myself and them, there were key ways in which they maintained a position of power over the research process. There were weeks, for example, where I would visit the prison only to be told that inmates did not wish to participate any longer, despite their initial interest in the project. Inmates scheduled to participate in the study would report feeling unwell or simply being uninterested in the project. Especially because there was no pattern evident with regard to the “type” of inmate that cancelled, I could do little more than accept the inmates’ unwillingness to participate and attempt to find a replacement for the lost participant.

Fortunately for the study, inmates did not back out of participation frequently enough for this to become an issue for sampling. Their power to affect the research process, however, underscores the extent to which access to the inmates could not be considered complete even after initial approval to conduct the study was obtained.
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. Charmaz (2003) notes that all variations of the grounded theory approach have certain common elements: simultaneous data collection and analysis; the search for emerging themes during early data analysis; the search for basic social processes within the data; the inductive construction of abstract categories that explain and synthesize these social processes; sampling to refine the categories through comparative processes; and finally, the integration of categories into a theoretical framework that sheds light on the causes, conditions, and consequences of the social processes. Per the tenets of the grounded theoretical approach, I weaved the data analysis and collection phases of research. This is especially important in qualitative interviewing because it grants the researcher the opportunity to revise the interview schedule if necessary before advancing too far into the research process.

Grounded theory has taken two approaches: that of the constructivists, and that of the objectivists. The biggest difference between the two is that the former believe that reality is created through the shared experience of the researcher and the researched while the latter argue that there is an objective reality that it is the researcher’s job to reveal, rather than create. Charmaz describes her own approach (and the one employed here) as one that “builds upon a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective with constructivist methods.” (Charmaz 2003: 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: 319). Grounded theorists bring to their coding their own disciplinary tools and perspectives. Since this study is grounded in symbolic interactionism, coding was conducted according to that theory. Specifically, as Charmaz describes, a symbolic interactionist approach to coding focuses on concepts such as (for example) “identity,” “self-image,” “negotiation,” and “definition of the situation.” Initial coding was thus conducted using “sensitizing concepts” drawn from the symbolic interactionist theory of desistance outlined earlier, as well as 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 and Strauss, 1967).

Following the emergence of core themes, I conducted focused coding to construct more abstract concepts and theoretical generalizations that unified the data in a meaningful way. In focused coding, the grounded theorist makes use of frequently reappearing initial codes to sort and synthesize large amounts of data. Throughout the coding process, I also kept detailed memos that ranged from “loose free-writes” to tightly written analytic notes. These were helpful in developing a coherent thought process that effectively reflects the data.

Prison research by mail

The letters
Following the collection and initial analysis of the interviews, I sought and received IRB and PADOC approval to continue communicating by mail with a sub-sample of the women I had already interviewed. 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. The length of the interviews was, by necessity, limited to a maximum of 1.5 hours to avoid participant exhaustion and excessive disruption of the prison regimen. Since this precluded obtaining detailed information on the inmates’ life histories, I decided to obtain supplementary data on some of the participants’ life-course patterns by corresponding with them through letters. Table 3 provides demographic information on the women who participated in the mailing portion of the study.

**Table 3 about here**

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. In addition to asking the inmates about their incarceration history, I sought the inmates’ opinions on, for example, how their childhood affected their later years; what kind of neighborhood they grew up in; what their friends and intimate relationships were like throughout their lives; their job histories, and so on. In these letters, I also solicited feedback and clarification from the participants about my interpretation of their interviews and letters. 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.

**The Process of Conducting Prison Research by Mail**
Bosworth et al. (2005) have noted that “doing research by mail offers a new approach for criminologists and others dealing with what are routinely referred to as ‘problem’ populations” (Bosworth et al. 2005: 251). The most obvious benefit of corresponding with inmates by mail in this study was that I was able to gather more in-depth qualitative data without having to repeatedly negotiate physical access to the prison facility. Instead, consistent with a grounded theoretical approach, I was able to complete initial data collection and preliminary analysis of interview data before collecting further data in the form of the letters.

That researchers can conduct prison research from afar should not be taken to mean, however, that gate-keeping issues are no longer relevant. To the contrary, conducting prison research by mail exacerbates these issues because prison officials are likely to monitor incoming and outgoing inmate mail. Inmates who are wary of officials reading their letters thus may be reluctant to participate. Although it was impossible for me to guarantee the confidentiality of the information that inmates share in letters, I left the decision to participate in the hands of the inmates themselves. Specifically, I stipulated in the informed consent form and recruitment letter for the mailing portion of the study that inmates’ mail would be handled according to normal Department of Corrections policies. Many inmates were more than willing to write letters to me, despite this fact, and some offered me even more detail than they did in the interviews.

Perhaps the most significant obstacle to conducting prison research by mail is that prisoners’ literacy levels might exclude certain inmates from participation in prison research by mail. Using mail correspondence with inmates to supplement interview or ethnographic data, however, goes some way in alleviating this concern. In this study, for
example, participants were required to sign an informed consent form before the interview began. This permitted a loose and informal assessment of the inmates’ literacy levels. Before they signed the form, I asked the participants whether they had any questions or concerns about the research process generally or the information on the form specifically. There was no participant in this study who expressed discomfort or confusion with the language used in the informed consent form. It is no doubt possible that there were some inmates who did have literacy difficulties, but who were reluctant to voice their discomfort. There was, however, no evidence that this was the case. Mailing the inmates was especially useful after the interviews because I was able to establish a rapport with the participants before asking for their participation via mail. Meeting the inmates for an interview also gave them a chance to ask questions and/or seek clarification about the project face-to-face.

Aside from concerns about practicality, corresponding with the inmates was particularly helpful in attaining the goal of giving women voice at a time when insufficient research is being conducted on women inmates’ prison lives. In several interviews, the women I spoke with mentioned that receiving mail was something they looked forward to as one way of breaking the monotony of prison life. As such, continued contact with participants after conducting interviews was gratifying for inmates because it lent itself to added contact with the outside world. Moreover, through extended interaction with me through letters, participants felt that the significance of their contribution went beyond simply a one-hour interview. This was true especially because, as Bosworth et al. (2005) have noted, mailing with inmates involves some back-and-forth
This conversation gave the women in this study the freedom to voice opinions that went beyond the specific questions related to the study.

In the interviews, some participants may have felt compelled to confine themselves to succinct, targeted answers to interview questions. When corresponding with me by mail, however, inmates were able to collect their thoughts at leisure and write about issues that they believed were the most relevant and helpful. For example, one inmate mentioned that there had been a delay in responding to my letter because the block she lived in had been condemned, and moving had been chaotic. She noted in her 8-paged, single-spaced letter that since things were now more settled, she would be able to answer my questions “in peace.” Giving inmates the time to reflect on their thoughts thus yielded very deep, rich, and personal data that inmates took the time to pen down. Admittedly, this sometimes resulted in the letters containing excessive information that was not helpful for the precise purposes of the study. However, sorting through this information was important because the grounded theoretical approach requires that researchers not impose restrictions on the data they collect because of their own preconceived notions of what is or is not important (Glaser, 1972).

Ultimately, the letters I received from the inmates contained a great deal of new, intimate information that many inmates might not otherwise have shared with me had I ceased data collection at the interview stage. In her article on conducting research in an English prison, Liebling (1999) describes in detail the frustration of a prisoner who wanted to use the research interview to talk ‘free flow,’ and who found the structured format of the interview frustrating. For such participants experiencing intense frustration, writing letters can be cathartic. The excerpt below from the first letter an inmate wrote to
me in response to my questions about her childhood reveals the attitude that some participants took towards the mailing portion of the study:

> You know, I would also like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to be a part of your research, for not only will I be helping you out, but you will be helping me out in the process as well. I take this like some kind of therapy to be able to dig deep inside of myself and be able to talk about some of the things that perhaps some of my closest family members don’t even know about me. So again, thank you so much.

Barbara, 40 years old, serving 10-20 years for kidnapping to inflict injury

The collection of data through both interviews and mail correspondence also stands to have the benefits of mixed-methods research designs. In this study, the integration of the two methods (interviewing and mail correspondence) occurred at the analytic stage. Here, I employed a process of triangulation such that the narratives from the inmates’ letters supplemented, deepened, and saturated interview data (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). As such, collecting data using different methods was used to “generate an overarching account of the phenomenon” of women inmates’ constructions of adulthood (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006: 56). While the inmates’ self-written narratives were used to supplement interview data, however, they were not considered less significant data in the project. Rather, they served the purpose of obtaining “thicker” data designed to answer the same research questions as the interview data.

I also used the letters as an opportunity to gain participants’ perspectives on some of the conclusions I was drawing from the interview data. This gave participants the

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2 The grammar in this excerpt was edited very slightly so as to facilitate readability.
opportunity to respond to my analytic thoughts, which is something that many scholars
describe as a key component of qualitative research (Bloor, 2001; Tracy, 2010). As Tracy
(2010: 844) has argued, researchers “do have control in providing the space and
opportunities for member reflections, and in doing so, provide opportunities for
additional data and elaboration that will enhance the credibility of the emerging
analysis.” The letters thus permitted me to refine and revise analytic thoughts as the
project unfolded and as the inmates’ sentence progressed. Conducting research by mail
thus proved to be a useful way to collect further qualitative data, obtain participants’
reflections on my analysis of the interview data, and extend my interaction with the
inmates in a way they appreciated. I draw on the data obtained from the letters most
heavily in Chapter 4 when I present a life-course perspective on the inmates’ definitions
of adulthood.
CHAPTER 3

MARKERS OF ADULTHOOD AMONG WOMEN INMATES

The transition to adulthood is a formative life-course period that has historically been marked by a handful of key transitions, primarily entrance into the labor force, independent family formation, and movement toward residential and economic independence (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010). Although there are key disagreements about the reasons behind the so-called “age-crime curve” (which reflects the way in which offending spikes in adolescence and decreases steadily thereafter) theorists generally agree that the transition to adulthood is also marked by a movement away from crime (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Reasons for the reduction in crime include the possibility that by marrying and finding work, offenders establish a “stake in conformity” (Sampson and Laub, 1993) and “knife off” delinquent attachments (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Warr, 2002).

As outlined in Chapter 1, Massoglia and Uggen (2010) have also posited that, in addition to the more conventional markers of adulthood, desistance from crime is a key marker of adulthood, such that individuals who persist in their delinquency are less likely to make timely adult transitions, and are also less likely to feel like adults. It is important to note that some offenders, however, may use crime specifically to enact conventional adult roles (Enos, 2001; Giordano, 2010). Some inmate mothers, for example, insisted that they engaged in crime so that they could provide for their children (Enos, 2001). In fact, an inmate in this study noted that nothing would bring her back to prison except a need to provide her children. As such, although some offenders may consider desistance
from crime a marker of adulthood, this may not be the case for offenders for whom crime is a pathway to enact adult roles.

In this chapter, I examine the extent to which the narratives of the women I interviewed and corresponded with suggest that they believe marriage and motherhood especially (both conventional markers of adulthood among women) are important aspects of their identities as women. I also explore whether, instead of using these traditional markers, women prisoners (like the women in Aronson’s study) instead use independence—be it financial or emotional—as a key marker of adulthood. Finally, I investigate whether, because of the constraints the inmates face in prison, they construct alternative markers of adulthood.

Motherhood

In Chapter 1, I described how women prisoners’ lives have often been examined exclusively in the context of their roles as mothers (Celinska and Siegel, 2010; Enos, 2001). This focus is unsurprising considering that a greater number of incarcerated mothers than fathers were the primary caregivers of their children prior to their incarceration (Mumola, 2000). Researchers investigating inmate mothers have studied how these women manage the motherhood identity and how they demonstrate fitness as mothers (Enos, 2001). Importantly, studies on incarcerated fathers have placed more emphasis on the adverse collateral consequences of paternal incarceration for children (Kruttschnitt, 2010; Turney and Wildeman, 2013); scholars studying inmate mothers have focused far more on the emotional difficulties that women face in trying to mother from prison (Celinska and Siegel, 2010; Enos, 2001). This points to the central position
of the mothering role for women even while they are incarcerated—a position not always matched by the fathering role in the case of incarcerated men. The focus on women’s emotional responses to mothering from prison also highlights the emphasis that women inmates place on the mother-child bond, even while they are incarcerated.

Consistent with prior literature, the findings in this study indicate that women inmates value motherhood a great deal. More relevant to the purposes of this study, the women in this sample saw motherhood as a key marker of adulthood. Given the significant role that the motherhood theme played in the women’s narratives, I present the findings in this section in two parts. I first explore how the women defined motherhood. In this section, I also describe the salience of the mother-child bond in the women’s narratives. Next, I explore the women’s mothering practices and identities, building on Enos’ conclusions about how inmates manage their identities as mothers.

**Definitions of motherhood**

In their study on definitions of fatherhood, Haney and March (2003) argued that policymakers engaged in welfare reform define paternity biologically and materially, rather than socially and emotionally. In other words, they focus on fathers’ form over their function when constructing definitions of fatherhood. The low-income women that Haney and March interviewed, however, viewed fatherhood in entirely different terms—they emphasized function over form. To these women, biological ties and material assistance from fathers of their children do not naturally justify granting these men the “father” identity. The women instead argue that what makes a man a “father” is the social and emotional connection that he has with his children.
Although there is unfortunately no analogous study on competing definitions of motherhood, Haney and March’s study is helpful for framing a discussion of how the inmates in this study defined motherhood. Specifically, given dominant family ideologies that stipulate that children should be the center of women’s lives (Griffith and Smith, 1987), I build on prior discussions (Enos, 2001) of how inmates define their roles as mothers. The narratives of the women in this study reflected their adherence to definitions of motherhood that emphasized both function and form. Interestingly, this was evident both when inmates talked about their own mothers and when they discussed their children. This finding highlights the generational embeddedness of their definitions of motherhood, a topic I build on in Chapter 4. Kayla, for example, described in detail the abusive childhood she had endured with an addict mother and a father who was incarcerated for child molestation. Despite this, Kayla’s narrative reflected her commitment to the view that nobody could replace her biological parents:

_I just, um...all my sisters were adopted, and I just never thought that, um, somebody else could take the place of my mom and dad. Yeah, I was mad at my mom and dad for what they did to me, but I felt like nobody could be my mom or my dad. My mom and my dad were my mom and my dad. I just...I didn’t feel comfortable with calling somebody else Mom and Dad._

Kayla, 18 years old, serving 2.5-5 years for aggravated assault

Similarly, Tandy’s narrative reflected a firm commitment to a definition of parenthood that focused on parental form over function. Specifically, she emphasized the
strength of a parent’s biological tie to their child, arguing that nobody could ever replace a child’s biological parents.

*I personally feel when it comes to a child, that you know, their mother is their mother and their father is their father and nobody in the world is going to replace that. Like no matter what. That’s their biological parent, and nobody’s gonna replace that.*

Tandy, 33 years old, serving 3 years and 8 months - 7 years and 4 months for homicide by vehicle by DUI.

Enos found similar evidence that inmate mothers tap into biological definitions of motherhood as a strategy of protecting their identities as mothers while incarcerated. Indeed, Tandy’s emphasis of parental form over function was likely caused in part by the fact that, at the time of the interview, she was struggling to gain custody of her younger child. She had given birth to this child while she was incarcerated, and the father of her child refused to let her family see the child or bring her to Tandy for a visit. (The father was on parole and thus could not bring the child to visit Tandy even if he wanted to.) In a letter several months later, Tandy informed me that she and her mother had jointly obtained custody of her child. Like the children of many incarcerated women (Enos, 2001), Tandy’s child is now living with her mother.

Kayla’s description of her biological tie to her parents, however, was at odds with her attitude towards them, and in a letter she sent some months after we met, she went as far as to deny their status as parents, directly contradicting her earlier remarks. Although this apparent contradiction could indicate a simple inconsistency in her views, Kayla’s narrative repeatedly reflected her simultaneous resentment towards and connection with
her parents. Despite her refusal to be placed in an adoptive home because of her belief that nobody could replace her parent, she said the following in her letter to me:

*I met my mother at 15 years of age and that did not go good or as planned at all. That lady is sick in the head. I’m very angry at the people that had me. In my eyes, they are not parents; they were donors to make me! I have met many people—friends or friends’ parents that have taken me in and call me their daughter or I call them my parents because they have played that role in some way.*

Kayla, 18 years old, serving 2.5-5 years for aggravated assault

Despite her initial comments in the interview regarding her belief that her biological parents were her *only* parents, Kayla’s clarification in her letter indicates that her definition of motherhood was far more complicated. Indeed, her adoption of friends’ parents as her own parents is reminiscent of Haney and March’s findings. In their study, the women they interviewed were more likely to consider male friends and relatives who are engaged with their children the father of their children than they are to grant their children’s biological father that title. To these women, there was a key difference between “fathers” and “daddies.” “Daddies” were socially and emotionally tied to their children, while fathers were only biologically connected to them. By reducing her parents’ status to that of “donors,” and by instead considering the parents of friends as her “real” parents, Kayla emphasized parental function over form.

Although reversing the meanings of the colloquial and formal terms, to describe how she felt about motherhood, Alyssa used language that was remarkably similar to that

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3 The grammar in this extract was altered slightly to facilitate readability.
used by the women in Haney and March’s sample. In particular, Alyssa employed a definition of motherhood that emphasized function over form by distinguishing between “Moms” and “Mothers.”

*Like I was saying about a man, like I have been a Mom to my kids. I haven’t been a mother to my kids even though I have all the knowledge and the skills to do something different....*

*So I would want to be a better mother to like, maybe with my grandkids, to be able to...I guess I’ll say, yeah, make up for what I didn’t do with my kids so they can see that I at least have that, and to me that would be mothering, and that would be the best thing for me right now.*

Alysa, 47 years old, serving 9 months – 2 years for prostitution, emphasis in the interview

*There was less consistency in this sample than in Haney and March’s in the way that the women defined parenthood. However, it is possible that the inmates draw on definitions of motherhood that combine both function and form to make sense of their roles as mothers and their mothering practices while incarcerated. Indeed, this is perhaps the biggest difference between the women in Haney and March’s study and those in this research: While the former do constitute a demographic group that likely has insufficient resources to conform to dominant parenting ideologies (Griffith and Smith, 1987), inmates are in a unique position insofar as their status as mothers is called into question socially (because they are separated from their children and segregated from society generally) and often legally as well. This questioning of their status as mothers likely*
compels them to define motherhood in any way necessary to preserve the stability of what is perhaps their most central role.

Moreover, it should be emphasized that, unlike Haney and March’s study, the emphasis in this study is on definitions of **motherhood** rather than fatherhood. The inmates’ narratives demonstrated their conformity to conventional **mothering** ideologies that stipulate that children should be the center of their mothers’ lives (Enos, 2001). As in Enos’ sample of incarcerated women, however, the inmates in this study faced serious challenges in reconciling their (or their mothers’) actual mothering practices with their (or their mothers’) desire to mother conventionally. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the inmates emphasized both maternal form as well as maternal function. The inmates believed that mothers **should** invest time and emotional energy in their children (maternal function). But since they were unable to do this, or since their mothers had been unable to do this for them, they relied on biological definitions of motherhood to preserve their relationships with their mothers or their children.

Zelda’s narrative perhaps best reflects the attitude of inmates who were committed to the view that a biological connection to one’s child cannot be surmounted. Serving a sentence of 20 – 60 years, Zelda firmly believed that her influence on her children was evident despite her absence in their day-to-day lives. Importantly, by defining motherhood biologically and therefore committing herself to the belief that she could influence her children, her children became a significant source of strength and optimism for her as she coped with the prison environment.
And your kids, they’re really the cloth of you. You’ll find out how they talk like you. Even if you’re not around, they act like you. So I was like, okay, I gotta make some changes. And then they had threatened to like house me in this program at RHU, and I was like I’m done, I’m done, I’m done. I’m just done, because at the end of the day, my business is more important, my children are more important, everything else is more important.

Zelda, 34 years old, serving 20-60 years for kidnapping

Inmates’ mothering practices and identities

Scholars studying inmate mothers have argued that these women undergo emotional turmoil when faced with pending or actual separation from their children (Celinska and Siegel, 2010; Enos, 2001; Ferraro and Moe, 2003). The findings in this study are consistent with those of prior researchers who have concluded that being separated from their children results in inmate mothers experiencing a great deal of guilt and shame:

I’ve never felt that...I’ve never stolen anything in my life, but I have stolen time from my kids, and I hate that. So my...my importance of being a mother...what I used to believe is stronger now since I’ve stole time from my children. And you don’t know how.... [crying] That’s hard...that’s really hard for me because I’ve never not been there for my children, all these years. And coming here has just really devastated me and I have a lot of guilt and shame and that’s something that I really have to work on when I get out.

Penelope, 37 years old, serving 4 months – 5 years for DUI
Penelope’s narrative also demonstrates the extent to which the inmates prioritize mothering. In fact, every single woman who was interviewed said that motherhood was something that was important to her, regardless of whether she actually had children. As mentioned, even more relevant for the purposes of this study is the fact that the women described motherhood as the reason they felt like adults. For example, in a letter to me, one inmate said “having my oldest child (my daughter), I knew I had to be an adult because this baby depended upon me.” (Samantha, 39 years old, serving 7.5-15 years for aggravated assault). Similarly, May noted that her transition to motherhood was the point at which she began to feel the sense of responsibility that she linked with adult status:

_Mm, I still felt like pretty much of an adult 10 years ago. After I had my first baby, I think that’s…that’s when everything hit me, with the responsibility and everything. So I think I feel about the same about adulthood 10 years ago as I do now._

May, 47 years old, serving 10-20 years for attempted murder

Like the women in Enos’ study, the inmates engaged in “identity talk” by “taking up a variety of strategies to make [their] actions with respect to motherhood congruent with [their] claim to that identity” (Enos, 2001: 74). Enos has argued that the inmate mothers in her sample demonstrated their fitness as mothers by distinguishing themselves from other inmates who they considered “bad mothers.” Like the inmates in Enos’ sample, the mothers in this study reconciled their belief in their ability to mother effectively with their status as inmates by distinguishing themselves from other “bad” inmate mothers. More importantly, the women in this study described other inmates who displayed what they deemed to be non-normative mothering behavior as lacking the traits
that were constitutive of adulthood. In other words, not only did the women in this sample established their own identity as “good” mothers by distancing themselves from other inmates, but in so doing, they also established themselves as adults as well.

*I think [the other inmates are] very ignorant. Um...they’re selfish, they’re rude, disrespectful. Um, they just...it seems like they just having a good time here. Like they not worried...maybe...it all depends on them because the majority of them, they was in and out of jail, so this is all they know. They don’t worry about their kids because somebody else done took them, the state took them away or family’s raising them for years, since they’ve always been in and out of jail. So they’re just happy! It seems like they’re happy. And I don’t understand that.*

Camila, 34 years old, serving 3-10 years for robbery

Importantly, when asked what kind of behavior in prison she views as adult-like, Camila said, “Well...a quiet person that keeps to herself and is only thinking about going to parole, doing the things that they have to do here to complete and go home to their family and kids.” Motherhood then, for the women in this sample, did in fact serve as a key marker of adulthood. However, unlike the women in Enos’ study who distanced themselves from other inmates generally and from specific kinds of inmate mothers in particular, the women in this study displayed a range of responses to other inmate mothers. Although many distanced themselves from “bad” mothers, others noted that they sought other mothers to forge friendships with, and that all inmate mothers faced some of the same issues. Being incarcerated, then, did not simply call into question the inmates’ status as mothers; it also had the positive impact of bringing together women
who faced many of the same issues, and who relied on each for support and guidance as they did time away from their children:

*I’m in a 4-man quad, so my bunk bed is here, which I’m on the top and she’s right next to me. So I believe that she was put there for a reason and she believes the same thing. She has 2 boys; I have 1. Um…they’re the same age, and uh, we just talk about our boys and you know, things outside this place.*

Christine, 44 years old, serving 2-4 years for forgery

Finally, while some women distanced themselves from those inmates who they perceived as bad mothers, others did the opposite by describing how all inmates were unfit as mothers because they were in jail, even if some did not recognize that:

Because I’ve learned like, like I hear people hollering at their family on the phone because their money is not here on time. Well, who told you to come to jail? Like their life is not gonna stop because yours did. Do you remember that they have your kids? And that your kids is dressing [sic] the best they can? And that they’re eating? And it’s not because of you? You’re….We’re unfit. We’re in jail….I don’t care how good you were when you were home; you’re not there now, being a parent. So you’re irresponsible.

Alysa, 47 years old, serving 9 months-2 years for prostitution

As such, rather than distinguishing themselves from other inmates, some inmate mothers internalized the notion that an incarcerated mother simply cannot be a good mother. Related to this finding, the majority of women in this study very clearly acknowledged the ways in which their criminal behavior affected their mothering
practices. This finding is at odds with prior research that has suggested that offending mothers are able to separate their criminal lives from their practices as mothers (Enos, 2001; Giordano, 2010). There was no inmate in this sample who “bracketed” her criminal behavior by suggesting that her identity as a criminal was independent of her ability to mother successfully. Instead, for some mothers, incarceration served as a time for self-reflection where they came to terms with the impact of their criminal behavior and resulting sentence on their relationship with their children (Edin and Kefalas, 2004). As I will describe in a later chapter, however, the inmates did bracket their incarceration to preserve their identities as “good” mothers. Although they recognized that their criminal behavior affected their children, therefore, they focused on their mothering practices outside prison when describing their roles as mothers. The finding that the inmate mothers in this sample recognize the impact of their criminal lives on their children is thus inconsistent with prior literature only in terms of what the inmates bracket (their criminal behavior versus their incarceration).

Um...I thought that the things that I would do that weren’t legal weren’t harming my kids, but in actuality, they were...the consequences harmed them. But because I was getting away with this lifestyle and it was providing for my family, I thought I was doing a good thing. But now being here and sitting through the consequence, it makes me kinda look at being a mother, like no, I wasn’t a very good mother to have been doing the things I was doing. It was kinda like I was fooling myself. So that...that particular part has changed.

Jordan, 33 years old, serving 10-20 years for burglary
Interestingly, the women in this sample did not deny responsibility for their crime. To the contrary, they admitted that they had committed the crime they were serving time for, but framed their crimes as mistakes or the enactment of identities they no longer felt tied to. Chapter 6 will go into further detail on how inmates reflected on their past (criminal) identities and their current (conformist) identities. In this chapter, however, it is important to note that despite their admission of guilt, the inmates who had children pursued a range of strategies to justify their status as mothers, despite their incarceration.

In conclusion, motherhood was a clear marker of adulthood among the women in this study. However, rather than demonstrating fitness simply by distancing themselves from other inmate mothers who they perceived a “bad mothers,” the inmates in this study responded in a number of different ways to other inmate mothers. The inmates sought out other mothers as friends; felt a degree of empathy for other mothers because of the difficulties they all faced; or internalized the idea that all inmate mothers were bad mothers. Regardless of the specific strategies they employed in demonstrating fitness as mothers, the most pervasive and recurring theme in the data was that of motherhood.

The findings also reveal that inmates engage in a variety of strategies to reconcile the importance they place on their roles as mothers with the fact that they cannot mother conventionally because they are incarcerated. In Chapter 1, I outlined the possibility—derived from symbolic interactionism—that being incarcerated may destabilize the motherhood identity by preventing inmates from parenting in the conventional sense. Dyer (2005) has argued that, among inmate fathers, incarceration serves as a “general interruption of the confirmation process of the fatherhood identity.” He further theorizes that, because inmates cannot modify their behavior to meet the standard they have set for
“good” parenting practices, they are compelled to change this standard to preserve their identities as fathers. In this study, the inmates did not change the standard for what constitutes good mothering as much as they changed the definition of motherhood to encompass both maternal function (what mothers do for their children) and maternal form (the biological ties mothers have to their children). Due to their inability to be involved in the daily lives of their children in the way that mothering discourses would require (Enos, 2001; Griffith and Smith, 1987) therefore, the inmates protected their identities as mothers primarily by defining motherhood broadly. Additionally, by distinguishing themselves from other inmates who they consider to be inadequate mothers, the inmates position themselves not only as good mothers, but also as adults. I go into further detail in the next chapter on how the inmates constructed definitions of adulthood in the prison environment. It is important to note here, however, that motherhood served as a key marker of adulthood that inmates drew on to define their own sense of adulthood.

**Marriage**

Chapter 1 described recent research in life-course sociology that suggests that marriage is losing its place as a key marker of adult status (Arnett, 1997, 1998; Aronson, 2008; Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Furstenberg, 2010). There is a widespread belief that a “culture of poverty” has eradicated marriage as an ideal for poor, young women (Cherlin, 2005). The empirical evidence (Cherlin, 2005; Edin, Nelson, and Paranal, 2004; Fussell and Furstenberg, 2005), however, suggests that women—even low-income women—are not foregoing marriage as an ideal, but simply delaying marriage. Women, according to
these researchers, still hold marriage as an ideal, but are amenable to waiting longer than women in past decades to undergo that transition.

The narratives of the women in this study, however, suggest that marriage is not an important marker of adult status for women. As I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 4, the women’s beliefs about marriage were closely tied to early childhood and adulthood experiences that had reverberating effects on their life-course trajectories. For the present discussion, the key point is that marriage is not—and has never been—important to some women (n=7) in this sample:

*I: What about before you came here, how important was being married to you?

*S: It wasn’t important at all.

*I: No? Why is that?

*S: I guess because I didn’t grow up in a house where my parents married. Like my father and my sisters...they have, we have different fathers. And my mom has never been married, so I think that maybe if that example was set in front of me growing up, then maybe it would be important to me. But it wasn’t an example that was set for me growing up.

Shirley, 29 years old, serving 3-10 years for involuntary deviate sexual intercourse

However, contrary to prior research that has suggested that women are foregoing marriage entirely, the majority of the women (n=21) in this study fell into one of two categories:
1) Those who had previously valued marriage, but no longer did because of bad experiences in previous relationships. These women reported experiences of abusive relationships and marriages that had made them wary of long-term commitment to a partner, of which marriage was the ultimate reflection:

I: What about being married? How important was it to you before you came here?

A: For me, that’s all I ever wanted, because I was raised around a whole bunch of family members that…they had good marriages. We had good family relationships. And that’s all I wanted in my life. You know, I just so happened to get the short end of the stick and got screwed (laughs). The whole process. And that’s how I felt. You know? Because I didn’t know how to deal with being abused; I never saw it before. You know? I just was naïve, I was young, and I just thought my love could change him, and it didn’t.

Anne, 43 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first-degree murder

Later, when asked how important marriage was to her now, Anne replied, “it has changed my life completely. I do not believe that any person needs to be in a marriage to make themselves complete, when before I did.” Similarly, Marie explained that although she considered marriage as a marker of adulthood prior to her incarceration, this was no longer the case because of her abusive marriage, which played a major role in the crime that she is now serving a life-without-parole sentence for:

Um, from what I went through, I’m scared. I would definitely want to know somebody for many, many years before I would ever trust that. I just…it’s just...you involve your family and for…and it’s sad when something like that happens and you get divorced and it’s not
something I wanna put myself in a position. Because if I would have actually taken time to know him, nothing...none of this would have ever happened.

Marie, 31 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first degree murder

Haney and March (2003) have argued that policy-makers must recognize the realities of women’s lives before advocating for policies that propose marriage as a solution to the social problems that low-income families face. Specifically, their findings provided little support for the idea that marriage would assist low-income women in dealing with the difficulties they face in parenting with limited resources. The findings in this study build on Haney and March’s by demonstrating that some women in prison did in fact hold marriage as an ideal until they had first-hand experiences in abusive marriages. In fact, Marie noted that the reason she got married in the first place at a very young age is that she believed that it “just meant you’re an adult and, you know, that you can make your own decisions.” While some policy-makers—like those in Haney and March’s study—might mourn the loss of marriage as an ideal, it should also be noted that breaking the tie between marriage and adulthood might be beneficial to young women like Marie who rush into marriage simply because they associate it with adulthood.

Given that marriage was a major factor in the crimes of inmates such as Marie and Anne (both of whom were convicted of first-degree murder), this study lends further support to Haney and March’s call for policy-makers to take seriously the lived experiences of women before advocating for a return to a “traditional” family structure. Indeed, despite the humor with which it was said, Laura’s comment was representative of many of the women’s narratives when she said “being in a relationship gets me in trouble.” For some women, then, a return to conventional values that prioritize marriage
for a woman not only fail to assist them, as Haney and March demonstrate, but can actually be harmful to them. In this sample, there were women who entered into abusive relationships and marriages because of unresolved issues related to early abuse and victimization; others simply “get into trouble” when they are in relationships. Although statistically speaking, marriage may assist offenders generally in the process of desistance (Sampson and Laub, 1993), this broad conclusion may thus mask the more nuanced ways in which marriage can be harmful for some women offenders. Instead, as Haney and March argue, these women may benefit more from policies designed to assist them with parenting and forging an independent lifestyle more generally.

2) Many of the women who did not disavow marriage as an adult status marker fell into the second category of women who value marriage now (and did not necessarily value it before their incarceration) but who do not consider it a priority. Women in this category hoped to be married one day, but were more concerned about reuniting with their children and focusing on their desistance efforts. Zelda, for example, explained that in her past, she had never taken relationships seriously, and partners were simply “toys” that she kept in her life because of the convenience that came with splitting bills. Like the women who rejected marriage as an ideal, Zelda explained that she never aspired to marriage because of her own upbringing:

Z: It wasn’t a norm to me. It was a joke to me. People get married, and get divorced, get married, get divorced, get married, get divorced. Like it was a joke to me. What was...why even waste your time? Why change your name? You know?

Zelda, 34 years old, serving 20-60 years for kidnapping
However, when asked about whether her opinion on marriage had changed, Zelda responded, “Yeah, it has! You know? I be thinking about that a lot, like I wonder what it feels like to walk down the aisle in a white dress, you know? I think about that a lot now.” Zelda said that she hoped to be married “eventually,” but that it had to be to the right person so that it did not end in dissolution. Zelda explained that her opinions had shifted with age and a confrontation of her mortality (“I’m getting older and I don’t think no man wants to die by himself”). Other inmates said that they hoped to be married because they believed they could be good partners in a marriage following the rehabilitation that came with prison, while still others said that they wanted marriage because they did not wish to remain in a “stagnant” relationship by simply cohabiting upon their release.

Whatever their reasons, all these women were emphatic about the fact that marriage and relationships were not a priority to them upon release; they instead were preparing to prioritize themselves and, for those who had them, the emotional, financial, and social wellbeing of their children. Even for women who were not opposed to it in principle, therefore, marriage was an ideal they only vaguely aspired to attain. Finally, it must be noted that although the majority of women fell into one of the two categories described, two women (Amy and Denise) both valued and prioritized marriage:

I: What about being married? Before you came here, how important was being married to you?
A: Oh, it was very important. I mean, I love being married.
I: Why do you think that is?
A: Um, I just love being it because we’re so connected. We...you know what I mean? We never fought, we never argued, we get along great. Couldn’t ask for a better marriage (Laughs).

Amy, 40 years old, serving 3-10 years for intimidation of a witness/victim

I: So how important is marriage to you now?

D: Very important. Very strong. I’m again trying...we’re both trying to work on our issues that we have and the things that we have going on with ourselves...to be able to fix our marriage. So it’s very important.

Denise, 29 years old, serving 2 months, 11 years, and 29 days – 6 years for involuntary manslaughter

These women were in the minority, however, not only because they believed in the marriage ideal, but also because they were women who were in marriages already. In fact, not one participant who did not already have a husband advocated for the importance of marriage. The finding that married women extolled the significance of marriage highlights the extent to which women in prison are similar to, rather than different from, women in the community: Much like women outside prison, the women in the sample who were married displayed a conformity to conventional beliefs about commitment and the institution of marriage.

As other researchers have concluded, these findings also suggest that although most women are not foregoing marriage, they do not consider marriage a priority the way motherhood is. Marriage thus represents a unique marker of adult status that most of the inmates neither rejected nor accepted entirely. Instead, the women expressed a great deal of ambivalence about the importance of marriage as an ideal, with a quarter of the sample
concluding that the circumstances of their crimes and their subsequent incarceration had led them to value marriage and the dependence that came with it somewhat less.

**Employment and independence**

Almost 70% of the women who were interviewed expressed that independence is what made a woman feel like an adult, and related to this, that completion of a high school education was crucial for women. Despite their conformity to conventional markers of adulthood, like the women in Aronson’s (2008) study, the inmates repeatedly concluded that to be an adult woman was to be self-reliant. Being independent to the women in this sample meant, as Kayla described, not having to rely on a man or anybody else. Also like the women in Aronson’s sample, the inmates described how paying bills, owning her own house and car and being able to purchase her own clothes contributed to a woman’s sense of adulthood. As Samantha (29 years old) said in a letter to me, “I first felt like an adult when I got my own place, paid my own bill, paid my own way through life.” Similarly, Kayla (19 years old), explained why having a job was important for women’s sense of adulthood:

*I think making...what makes a woman feel like an adult—being able to take care of themselves, where they can work and not have to depend on a man to do things for them. Because a lot of women and girls depend on men to do things for them, so I feel like when us as woman, we can do things on our own more, I feel like um, we feel more independent, and like, more like, better about ourselves and stuff.*

Kayla, 19 years old, serving 2.5-5 years for aggravated assault
It is important to note, however, that contrary to arguments suggesting that a sense of independence has replaced motherhood and marriage as a marker of adulthood, for every inmate who had a child, motherhood did in fact play a large role in defining the women’s experiences of adulthood. In the same letter, for example, after describing how her financial independence was the first step in her sense of adulthood, Samantha added, “Having my oldest child (my daughter), I knew I had to be an adult because this baby depended on me.” Ultimately, however, the inmates noted that while motherhood accelerated their transition to adulthood by requiring them to “grow up” quickly, taking responsibility for themselves is what contributed to their subjective sense of adulthood. Tandy, for example, noted in her interview that she “grew up a lot” when she had her son. In a letter she sent to me some months later, however, she said that “taking on more adult responsibilities made me feel more like an adult, beyond becoming a mother.”

Despite the emphasis that the women placed on being independent and handling one’s own responsibilities, the women’s narratives also reflected gendered patterns of socialization. These norms were evident in the value the inmates placed on their ability to maintain a household and “look after” their husbands, and in turn, be able to rely on their husbands for assistance. The inmates believed that employment was important because it contributed to the independence that they considered the primary marker of adult status. Despite this, however, the inmates’ narratives simultaneously reflected a complicated attitude towards the more traditional gender norms. Specifically, they struggled with reconciling the premium they placed on their independence with their belief that women should also be prepared to support their husbands and children emotionally and maintain
a comfortable, secure home. For example, although Kayla valued independence, she also said the following regarding what she believes it means to be a good wife or girlfriend:

I think that um, always being there, you know, making sure your husband has what he...or boyfriend has what he needs. You know, being able to cook and clean and you know, help take care of him and yourself, and you can give 50% of yourself to him and that relationship, because in a relationship I believe that there is 50-50%. He should be giving 50 and you should be giving 50.

Kayla, 19 years old, serving 2.5-5 years for aggravated assault

When asked what it takes to be a good husband or boyfriend, rather than repeating the idea that men should contribute 50% of the effort required to sustain a relationship, Kayla noted that “a lot of men are cheaters” and that “faithfulness and loyalty and honesty would be what they need.” Despite her firm belief that independence was crucial for a woman’s sense of adulthood, her views on relationship dynamics ultimately drew on traditional and stereotypical gender roles that prioritize nurturing for women, while portraying men as promiscuous and irresponsible. Similarly, Denise had some trouble articulating her belief that, although women should be independent and take responsibility for their own lives, they should also be able to rely on a man for help once in awhile because men have social advantages stemming from gender norms that women do not benefit from:

I: What is the most important part of a man’s life, do you think?

D: Um, I guess I could say responsibility, because that falls on both women and men, though...but, I’m not trying to sound like stereotypic, but you know, you’re raised to take
care of yourself, but yet, let a man help you too. You know? So I’m not trying to sound stereotypic, like the man has to do this, this and this, and the woman has to just be quiet and fold her hands. No. I just think that, you know, men get treated better in the world.

Denise, 29 years old, serving 2 months, 11 years, and 29 days – 6 years for involuntary manslaughter

Gender thus played an important role in the women’s narratives about adulthood. In fact, in spite of the conviction with which the women said that independence is what makes a woman feel like an adult, they struggled with the notion of what it meant for a woman to be independent: The “relationships should be 50-50” refrain emerged repeatedly in the women’s narratives, which reflects the women’s desire for equal status in their interpersonal relationships. However, as described, several of the women also recognized the salience of traditional gender norms that stipulate that women should be prepared to take care of their children and manage the household, while men should be ready to be the source of support and strength in a relationship when needed. Alysa’s narrative is perhaps the perfect example of the conflict that many of the women faced when explaining why and how they valued their independence:

I see myself doing some good things, but I still want some things handed to me. I want to find somebody that will meet me halfway but I don’t understand how my grandmom was able to stay in the house and take care of all the kids, and Poppa worked and she still had all the things that she wanted. Now I don’t know that I would be able to do that because I’m also independent so...and I’m also the type that don’t like to want to...I want somebody to be able to...if I want them to take care of me, but not really take
care of me. Because I wouldn’t be able to say well I take care of you. No, we take care of each other. Tch.

Alysa, 47 years old, serving 9 months – 2 years for prostitution, emphasis in original interview

Conclusion

In conclusion, the women in this sample did express a great deal of conformity to conventional markers of adulthood, with motherhood being the most salient element of the women’s narratives. In addition to believing that being a mother made a woman feel like an adult, the women repeatedly described in great detail their relationships with their mothers as well as their children. This finding is consistent with prior literature that has stated that motherhood remains an important priority for women even while they are incarcerated. Marriage is a more complicated marker of adulthood that some women expressed measured support for, while others disavowed entirely. Although marriage was not a key marker of adulthood, it was a life goal that almost 40% of the women hoped to attain some day. It was not, however, a priority for the women in the sample; and it certainly was not an important marker of adulthood.

For the women in this study, the most significant marker of adulthood was independence. Almost 70% of the sample noted that self-reliance and independence were what made a woman feel like an adult. Indeed, despite the fact that motherhood was by far the most significant overall theme in the women’s narratives, when asked directly what makes a woman feel like an adult, few inmates framed their responses around motherhood. This is not to say that motherhood is not a marker of adulthood for the
women in this sample. As described, every inmate who had a child concluded that being a mother did in fact play a significant role in her sense of adulthood, primarily because the transition to motherhood compelled them to adopt more adult-like roles and behaviors. When asked directly what makes a woman feel like an adult, however, the inmates framed their responses in language related to independence and self-will.

It bears mention that there were no consistent patterns that emerged in the data based on sentence length, specifically with regard to the inmates’ conformity to conventional markers of adulthood. Although I will describe in Chapter 6 how the women rely on more intangible markers of adulthood, even those women who had been incarcerated for decades and who had forged close interpersonal ties within the prison did not express conformity to anti-social markers of adulthood. Age played a role in Zelda’s interest in marriage, but there was little other evidence that it was significant in shaping the inmates’ adherence to traditional adulthood markers. In the following chapters, however, I will describe in detail the significance of the concept of age in how inmates defined adulthood as well as in how they assessed their own status as adults.

Finally, for the purposes of this chapter, it is sufficient to say that, although there was mixed support among the women for conventional markers of adulthood, there was no evidence that the women replaced these markers with anti-social ones developed in the prison among inmates. This finding should be interpreted particularly cautiously, however, given the sampling limitations of this study. Specifically, because of the difficulty I faced in reaching recently admitted inmates who are most likely to be involved in the typical “mix” (Owen, 1998) of the prison culture, my ability to gauge the prominence of anti-social markers of adulthood is limited. Although recently admitted
inmates are a part of this study, those involved in the anti-social sub-culture of the prison may also be the ones who did not respond to the recruitment letters. For this reason, the possibility that anti-social markers of adulthood do exist in the prison culture remains open and is one that future research can explore by focusing exclusively on the prison “mix” that is characterized by fighting, gossiping, and the politics of same-sex relationships.
CHAPTER 4
A LIFE-COURSE PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN INMATES’ DEFINITIONS OF ADULTHOOD

The life course and women’s transition to adulthood

The life-course paradigm rose in the 60s in response to scholars’ search for a framework to explain continuity and change in human behavior over the life course. The paradigm specifically focuses on: a) lives and historical times; b) the timing of lives, including the sequencing and duration of transitions; c) the concept of “linked lives,” or the idea that human behavior is embedded in social and intergenerational ties; and d) the notion that human agency is constrained by social structure (Elder, 1994, 1998). The life course itself may be defined as the pathway through age-grade life spans (Elder, 1985; Sampson and Laub 1992), and is based on two central concepts: Trajectories and transitions. Trajectories are long-term patterns and sequences of behavior, while transitions are “marked by specific life events” and embedded in trajectories (Sampson and Laub, 1992). The interlocking nature of trajectories and transitions are what give rise to change over the life course (Sampson and Laub 1992, 2005).

Life-course criminologists have been particularly concerned with the investigation of transitions and turning points that contribute to the onset, persistence, or desistance of crime (Sampson and Laub, 1992, 1994). Although this chapter is not exclusively focused on the patterns of criminal behavior exhibited by women inmates, I contribute to the theoretical life-course literature by focusing on “the duration, timing, and ordering of major life events and their consequences for later social development” in my sample of incarcerated women (Sampson and Laub, 1992). The life-course perspective on women prisoners’ definitions of adulthood presented here provides a well-rounded understanding
of the transitions and events that contribute not only to the onset of crime and offending, but also to the development of inmates’ subjective sense of adulthood and the meaning they give to the concept of adulthood.

Life-course criminologists also emphasize continuity and change over the life course (Giordano, 2010; Sampson and Laub, 2005), especially with regard to patterns of criminal behavior. Giordano (2010), for example, has argued that the intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior occurs both directly and indirectly, but that children’s responses to their parents’ criminal identities are not uniform. In examining intergenerational continuity and change, therefore, Giordano (2010) argues that researchers should take seriously issues related to the self and identity; agency; and the role of emotion in intergenerational processes. In this chapter, I examine intergenerational continuities and changes not only in crime and offending, but also in enactments of adulthood and adult roles. In so doing, I also explore how the inmates critically reflect on their parents’ roles and construct their own identities as adults based on their unique histories and experiences (Giordano, 2010).

**The impact of early childhood and adolescent experiences**

In this section, I describe the key events and transitions that the inmates experienced in their childhood and adolescence that shaped their conceptions of adulthood and adult roles. I discuss in particular the **timing and sequencing** of these events to highlight the ways in which they shaped the inmates’ transition to adulthood and, in turn, their views on adult roles and responsibilities.

**Histories of abuse**
40% of the women in the sample reported histories of abuse and/or rape. 3 more women (1 in each sentence length category) described having difficult childhoods without specific references to experiencing abuse. The extract below reflect the seriousness of the abuse that some women reported:

*Um, I was raped when I was 7...by my step-grandfather. Um...I thought I can trust that man. I got really close to him. That was my mom’s step-dad. Um, he raped me for...almost 2 years. Um, and then I got older...I got into some bad relationships where I was beat up, I lost my baby, I had 5 miscarriages, so...I’ve had boyfriends. Like the one I told you earlier about, the one I was with for 7 and a half years—3 and a half years he was beating me. I couldn’t get away. Every time I left, he found me, dragged me back, yeah, so....Plus when I was younger, like I was telling you, I had a rough time with her [Laura’s mother]. She beat me also when I was growing up.*

Laura, 36 years old, serving 5-10 years for rape of a child

The prevalence of rape and abuse histories in this sample is consistent with scholars’ conclusions regarding the extent of physical and sexual abuse histories among incarcerated women (Moloney, Van den bergh, and Moller, 2009), and is thus perhaps unsurprising. More relevant for the purposes of this chapter, the women’s experiences of abuse strongly influenced their own transition to adulthood:

*I think enduring all the things I endured...because I was like molested and raped, verbally, mentally, physically abused. Like I endured so much abuse in my life that I think that changed...that stripped away that naiveness that childhood away from me.*

Zelda, 34 years old, serving 20-60 years for kidnapping
Similarly, Sheila described how her experience of abuse led her to develop a strong sense of independence that was at odds with the innocence that she thought was integral to a healthy childhood. Moreover, Sheila’s personal experience with violence and neglect played a strong role in defining her views on what it meant to be a parent:

*S: The most important part of a woman’s life, if she got a baby, I think that should be the most important part. Their kids and their stability to take care of the baby.*

*I: Okay. Why do you think that is?*

*S: I think it’s because there are so many kids out there like me, without a mother figure and a father figure, and when they grow up...then some of them might be stronger than others, but some of them just take the wrong turn. Like I did. And I’m thinking back—if I had a mother and a father to really care for me, and guide me as...like structure, this won’t happen.*

Sheila, 45 years old, serving 8.25-20 years for aggravated assault

Recall from Chapter 2 that Marie, a lifer, said that she was “scared” of marriage after her experiences in an abusive marriage that she entered into when she was “just 18” and that was closely tied to her conviction. The inmates’ experiences with abuse (both in their childhood and thereafter) thus affected both their own transition to adulthood as well as their current views on adult roles such as parenting and marriage. The early onset of the inmates’ victimization experiences is particularly important because the timing of these experiences resulted in many of the women believing that they were “stripped” of a conventional childhood because of their abuse. Though the prevalence of histories of abuse and trauma in this sample is not a novel finding, a life-course perspective on these experiences reveals the extent to which the women draw on their unique biographies
when defining and conceptualizing adulthood, and it highlights the lasting impact of significant short-term events long after they are completed (Pettit and Western, 2004). Importantly, as I will describe in the next section, the inmates’ definitions of adulthood are affected not only by their histories of abuse, but also by a range of premature transition to adult roles. A life-course perspective on women inmates’ perceptions of adulthood thus requires a consideration of how experiences such as childhood and intimate partner abuse interact with other transitions related to adulthood to shape how inmates construct their own definitions of adulthood.

**Premature transitions to adulthood**

While some women pointed to their experiences with abuse to emphasize that they were forced to “grow up” quickly, others pointed to specific transitions that they underwent (and corresponding roles that they took on) prematurely because of structural and familial difficulties. The inmates’ premature adulthood transitions and roles can be categorized into three groups: Premature care-giving; early onset of crime and antisocial behavior; and other premature role entries (Carbone-Lopez and Miller, 2011). Before proceeding with a discussion of these transitions, however, it should be noted that the women in this sample who were serving life-without-parole sentences (the lifers) experienced transitions to adulthood that were accelerated, but more conventional than those of the other inmates in the sample. Since there were only 3 such women out of the 35 women I interviewed, it is impossible to draw meaningful conclusions based on this finding. However, it is important to acknowledge that the lifers in the sample were the exception to some of the patterns described in this section. Instead, these women came
from middle-class, generally stable households, and all of them were serving time for the first time:

M: Um, I was always with my parents. I just…um, I had a good life growing up. Like I had really good parents and I was sheltered a lot, but when I turned into a teenager and got more freedom, I just ran into the wrong people.

Marie, 31 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first degree murder

T: For me, that’s all I ever wanted, because I was raised around a whole bunch of family members that…they had good marriages. We had good family relationships. And that’s all I wanted in my life.

Anne, 43 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first-degree murder

T: I wasn’t financially stable. Like I was still dependent on my parents and it was me and my little brother, so they had to basically take care of me, my baby, and my little brother.

Elicia, 22 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first-degree murder

1) Premature care-giving

Approximately 17% of the sample reported having care-giving responsibilities for others’ children before they felt like they were fully adults themselves. Importantly, however, despite prior research on the negative effects of premature role transitions (Carbone-Lopez and Miller, 2011) inmates like Alyssa and Khloe felt that being caregivers for their siblings from a very early age reinforced their sense of adulthood. Alyssa, for example, said that she was “very mature” for her age because of her early care-giving responsibilities.

I: And you said earlier that you had taken on a lot of adult responsibilities when you were younger. Can you tell me what kind of responsibilities you’re talking about?
A: Um, like watching children at a young age. Because my aunts and stuff were gamblers, so they were out and they drank back then from under the age of 12.

Alyssa, 47 years old, serving 9 months – 2 years for prostitution

Similarly, Kayla, who had taken on the role of mother to her fiancé’s children, noted that the enactment of this role made her feel like an adult:

\textit{And then my fiancé has 2 kids of his own—I helped take care of them, so I kinda started to feel more like...more like a woman. Like being...being kind of like a mom. You know, like a parent figure. You know, I felt like...it made me feel better about myself.}

Kayla, 18 years old, serving 2.5-5 years for aggravated assault

Despite the fact that some women responded to their early childhood care-giving responsibilities positively by arguing that these obligations reinforced their sense of adulthood, others believed that such responsibilities had stripped them of a well-rounded sense of adulthood. The inmates’ premature transitions to adult roles and responsibilities moreover frequently facilitated the onset of the women’s antisocial behavior (Carbone-Lopez and Miller, 2011). Joanna, for example, whose mother began abusing alcohol when Joanna’s father died, had to raise her younger sister and described the loss of her childhood in great detail:

\textit{My dad died when I was 9, and again, I didn’t grieve properly. I didn’t...had to grow up really fast, so when it came time to deal with myself, I didn’t know any other way to deal with myself. If I wasn’t in a structured environment, I wasn’t structured at all. I was reckless and I was out of control. And I went through this process of wanting to numb myself. And it didn’t matter what I was numbing myself with, whether it be sex, men, women, drugs. I needed something to take the focus off me.}
Joanna, 25 years old, serving 3 years, 1 month, 29 days – 10 years for theft.

The women’s precocious entry into care-giving responsibilities was problematic to the extent that their structural and familial difficulties lay at the root of the premature transitions, and these responsibilities sometimes precipitated their antisocial behavior. In Alyssa’s case, for example, she was the care-giver for her cousins because their mother (along with her own) were gambling addicts and alcoholics. Similarly, Joanna raised her younger sister because she felt that her mother was incapable of doing so following Joanna’s father’s death.

The women’s varied attitudes towards their early care-giving responsibilities, however, reinforce the importance of taking seriously individuals’ agency when examining their life-course patterns (Giordano, 2010; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002; Sampson and Laub, 2005). In spite of their awareness that taking on care-giving responsibilities at an early age represented a deviation from traditional life-course trajectories, the women drew on their unique social and familial histories when reflecting on the impact of these responsibilities. Regardless of the objectively problematic nature of taking on care-giving responsibilities prematurely, therefore, the subjective impact of these responsibilities varied from one woman to the next and was contingent on each inmate’s personal history.

2) Early onset of antisocial behavior

In addition to premature care-giving, a key pattern that emerged in the data was that of early onset of antisocial and criminal behavior. Over 20% of the sample described childhood/early teenage experiences of excessive drinking, drug use, and criminal activity, as can be seen in the interview extracts below:
I: [W]hen you got into a relationship in here, do you think you were prepared for it? To be in a relationship?

J: Um...I don’t know if I was prepared. Um, I’ve been jailing since I was 12 years old, so I’m familiar with jailhouse relationships.

Jamie, 40 years old, serving 5-10 years for aggravated assault with serious bodily injury

I: And when did you start using drugs?

T: Um, I actually started drinking when I was 13, 14. Heavy, heavy drinking when I was 14.

Tricia, 38 years old, serving 3.25 months – 12 years for escape.

The significance of this finding lies in the fact that the onset of early antisocial behavior accelerated their transition to adulthood and later had a reverberating impact on the women’s sense of adulthood. Drug use represented a particularly interesting theme in the sample because (as I describe in further detail in the next chapter) the women repeatedly referred to how drug addicts got “stuck” at the age they began using drugs. A subjective sense of adulthood, according to the women in the sample, was thus inhibited by persistent drug use. At 40 years of age, Barbara, for example, described in her interview and her letters how she was only now beginning to feel like an adult, because she was in the process of resolving her issues with drug addiction. Similarly, Sheila noted that her reasons for feeling like an adult now were closely tied to her efforts to confront and resolve her history of anti-social behavior.

I: Can you tell me now what you think makes a woman feel like an adult?

B: Responsibility. Being able to take care of yourself, be dependent.
I: Okay. And based on that, do you feel like an adult now?

B: I feel like I’m getting there. I’m learning more about myself. Feeling more comfortable with myself.

I: Okay. Compared to when?

B: To when I was out there getting high and stuff.

Barbara, 40 years old, serving 10-20 years for kidnapping to inflict injury.

So to me, what changed is I don’t wanna get high no more. And I’ve been doing that since I was 11 years old. I’m tired. I wanna live something normal. Like going to work, coming home, going out to dinner, watching TV, stuff like that.

Sheila, 45 years old, serving 8.25-20 years for aggravated assault

Importantly, the inmates’ narratives highlight the necessity of considering the cumulative, long-term effects of multiple “off-time” transitions. Sheila, for example, had described a particularly tumultuous childhood consisting of abuse, unstable residential arrangements, criminal behavior, periods of incarceration, and drug use. Studying the life course patterns of inmates in particular (rather than individuals in the community) underscores the long-lasting impact of multiple premature transitions. Early engagement in anti-social behavior, and corresponding periods of incarceration, for instance, had the impact of disrupting inmates’ life-course trajectories by derailing specific transitions to adult roles (Pettit and Western, 2004). Camila, for example, had struggled with the lingering effects of drug use, multiple sexual assaults and injuries she sustained in an accident. These difficulties had contributed to her suicidal thoughts, and as a result, she was already “off-time” in making the transition to full-time work and marriage. She noted that it was now “too late” to get married, and she was thus not invested at all in this role. To the extent that marriage is a key adult role that contributes
to offenders’ desistance (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010; Sampson and Laub, 2003), understanding the separate—but related—events that contribute to inmates’ lack of interest in pursuing marriage is an important task that is best accomplished by viewing inmates’ lives through a life-course lens:

*I: Actually I thought about it more when I was younger, of being married, but now I just don’t wanna get married ever.*

*C: No? How come?*

*I: Um, just...since I’m 34 now, I kinda think it’s too late (laughs a bit).*

Camila, 34 years old, serving 3-10 years for robbery.

As a life-course event, however, incarceration appeared to have mixed effects on the inmates’ views on adult roles. Zelda, for example, was 34 years old and is currently serving a sentence of 20-40 years. Having undergone the transition to adulthood in prison, at several times Zelda expressed a keen awareness of her age in her interview. As I described in the previous chapter, moreover, Zelda’s views on marriage had become *more* conventional since she entered prison.

The women’s experiences with drug and alcohol abuse, criminal activity, and incarceration thus played an important role in shaping their sense of adulthood as well as their views on adult roles. Their efforts to confront their histories of antisocial behavior reinforced their sense of independence and bolstered their subjective sense of adulthood. On the other hand, however, early experiences with crime and offending often disrupted the inmates’ transition to adulthood because of spells in detention facilities and/or other social and psychological difficulties. Inmates like Camila felt that, as a result of their early experiences with abuse and anti-social behavior, they had passed the life-
course stage at which the transition to marriage was appropriate. The inmates were now focused instead on resuming other adult responsibilities such as full-time employment and parenting. Although some women thus “missed” the life-course stage in which marriage is normative, others underwent a very premature transition to marriage, as I describe in the next section.

3) Other precocious role entries

A large majority of the women in this sample, like the women in Carbone-Lopez and Miller’s (2011) study, experienced a range of premature transitions. The women described these precocious role entries as life-changing, leading some of them to feel a subjective sense of adulthood from an early age. The specific transitions that were the focus of the inmates’ narratives were motherhood, marriage/relationships, and residential independence.

a) Motherhood

40% of the women in this sample who were mothers had their first child before they were 20, and all of them described the age they were when they first became mothers as being too young. For some women, becoming mothers at a young age accelerated their transition to adulthood. Although these women felt that they ought to have waited to have children, their experience of motherhood made them “grow up really fast.”

I: So how old were you when you had your son then?
I: Do you think that was the right age to have a child?
T: Um, no. I think...personally, I think I should have waited. I mean, it happened and I took the responsibility, and it makes you grow up really fast....to assume a responsibility especially when you’re that young. Just out of high school, not exactly sure what you want to do with your life. Um, just stuff as far as that is concerned, I think. But am I happy that he’s here? Yes, absolutely. It was...it was one of those where you kinda grow up with your child.

Tandy, 33 years old, serving 3 years, 8 months – 7 years, 4 months for homicide by vehicle while DUI.

The women’s sense of adulthood was closely tied to their status as mothers, and the majority of the women were aware that their transition to motherhood was premature, concluding that the long-term effect of becoming mothers at an early age was to accelerate their overall transition to adulthood. Many of the women, however, noted that this acceleration had a positive impact on their life insofar as they “knifed off” (Sampson and Laub, 2005) certain activities and peers that were harmful to their new roles as mothers:

A: Like I adapted to parenthood like that (clicks fingers). Like, I was still young and I thought I was gonna have a problem with it, like, “oh, I’m so young; I still wanna run the streets.” But soon as my babies were born, I was like, “I’m staying at home!”

Elicia, 22 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first-degree murder.

Other women, however, expressed the opinion that they wished they had waited so they could pursue their education more seriously and develop a career. As described in Chapter 3, like the women in Aronson’s (2008) study, approximately 70% of
the women in this sample believed that independence was the most significant marker of adulthood. For some women who became mothers at very young ages, the transition to motherhood was accompanied by a loss of the freedom that they associated with childhood and adolescence (Arnett, 1997). Motherhood thus disrupted their transition to adulthood by undermining their attempts to complete their education and build the foundation for a successful career:

J: I was in high school; I went to a really, really good high school in Philadelphia, I had really good grades, and I didn’t want it to be a setback because I was already taking care of my niece, so now it was like I was gonna have 2 kids now, you know? So it was like I was already carrying the load of caring for one child, and here comes another. And I’m in high school; I was only in the 10th grade and it was just... it seemed like so much, you know?

Jordan, 33 years old, serving 10-20 years for burglary.

b) Marriage/Relationships

Over half of the women in the sample concluded that they entered relationships and/or a marriage at too young an age. Highlighting the significance of a subjective sense of adulthood, the women noted that they entered into serious relationships and marriages early on in life because they already felt like adults. Marie (31 years old), for example, noted how she was convinced that she was prepared for the marriage that she began at 18:

I: What about being married? How important was it to you before you came here?
M: It was but for the wrong reasons. I thought it just meant you’re an adult and you know, that you can make your own decisions, and now I definitely don’t know if I would ever want to be married again.

Marie, 31 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first degree murder

Hannah (20 years old) similarly believed that she was “grown” at 16, but her relationship played a key role in her current conviction, for which she is serving 6-12 years, after obtaining a reduction from a sentence of life without parole:

I wasn’t really old enough to understand, like the whole concept of how a relationship’s supposed to go. I didn’t really have a good example of it growing up and I don’t think I was at the right place to even attempt to be in a relationship.

Hannah, 20 years old, serving 6-12 years for robbery.

The eagerness with which many of the inmates in the sample embraced the adult role of spouse/partner was thus a significant element of the women’s narratives. When asked to consider their decisions retrospectively, however, few women believe that they were prepared for the serious relationships or marriages that they entered at a young age. Yet they noted that, even at the time that they made the decisions, they recognized the seriousness of commitment they were making. These decisions were made because the women did feel adult at the time, and were eager to attain what they perceived as a key indicator of adult status—a committed relationship. As such, although the timing of the women’s transitions to marriage and serious relationships is non-conformist, their reasons for undergoing this transition at that age reflects a conformity to a conventional, age-old marker of adult status.
c) Residential Independence

Along with marriage and relationships, many of the women simultaneously established a residence outside of their parents’ home, a transition that is yet another conventional marker of adulthood (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010). Over 20% of the women in the sample established residences on their own or with a partner in their teenage years.

Although scholars (Furstenberg et al., 2004; Furstenberg, 2010) have noted that youth in contemporary America are taking longer to establish residential independence than they were in the post-war years, the women in this sample did not reflect this trend of extended reliance on parents and families. This is unsurprising to the extent that, as Foster et al. (2005) have noted, “vulnerable” youth often undergo unique life-course transitions that are riddled with difficulties at various stages. It is important to note here that establishing residential independence during one’s teenage years is not necessarily “premature,” especially among lower-income youth who cannot rely on their families for financial support (Foster et al., 2005). I discuss this transition here because of the inmates’ belief that they were unprepared to handle the responsibilities that came with living on their own. While many young adults in the community leave their parents’ homes during their teenage years, this transition was interpreted as premature by the inmates in this sample, and they believed that it set the stage for a tumultuous and disorganized transition to adulthood.

During their transition to adulthood, the women in this sample bore striking similarities to the vulnerable youth that are the focus Foster et al.’s research. Reflective of
the concept of “cumulative disadvantage” (Sampson and Laub, 2005), many of the women in this sample had (as mentioned earlier) experienced early childhood and adolescent traumas followed by incarceration periods, drug abuse, alcoholism, and in one case, homelessness. The extent to which conclusions about modern American youth’s transition to adulthood generally can apply to women in this sample is thus questionable. Instead, it is perhaps helpful to draw on Foster et al.’s (2005) discussion of the transition to adulthood for vulnerable youth.

Foster et al. (2005) have noted that although “vulnerable” youth do not constitute a homogeneous group, they are most often poor and members of racial minority groups. Unlike other youth whose transition to adulthood has grown longer, in part as a result of their ability to rely on financial help from their families, vulnerable youth lack such family support. Moreover, they frequently come into contact with multiple systems that can exacerbate the young people’s disadvantages because of administrative issues. For example, youth who grow up in the foster care system “age out” of the system when they turn 18, at which point a youth may have difficult finding his/her bearings. Additionally, youth who come into contact with prison have an even more delayed transition to adulthood, and they are treated radically differently by the criminal justice system as soon as they turn 18 (Osgood et al., 2005; Pettit and Western, 2004). Importantly, removal from home and frequent placements is also associated increased criminal activity, which points to the multiple disadvantages youth lacking a stable home face. Kayla, 18, exemplifies the difficulties that youth growing up in the foster system face, specifically in the context of establishing residential independence. The extract below describes the unique challenges Kayla faced while trying to establish
residential independence, which happened in her mid-teens, and it provides strong support for the argument that the transition to adulthood is particularly strenuous for youth lacking residential stability (Osgood et al., 2005).

I was put in foster cares, I was in group homes, I was in residential treatment facilities, and then as I got older, I got put in lock-down facilities, juvie hall and stuff. And um, so I just was never able to get an apartment by myself or anything. And when you’re with children, you have to be a certain age to live on your own and you have to show them proof that you can live on your own and stuff, and with the way that I was, and my behavior and my criminal behavior....Um, I had a really bad drug problem for awhile. It just...they wouldn’t let me.

Kayla, 18 years old, serving 2.5-5 years for aggravated assault

While Kayla represented a distinctive case insofar as she was forced to establish residential independence because of state interference, many of the participants reported leaving home during their teen years because of familial issues. Zelda, for example, left her family’s home at the age of 17 because of her mother could no longer handle her antisocial behavior, and she noted the effect that residential independence at such an early age had on her sense of adulthood at the time:

If I look back now, you know, I wasn’t ready for it. Wasn’t ready for none of it. I managed what I could manage, but I didn’t make a lot of choices right because, you know, I was getting support checks, working, and you know, welfare was trying to help but it was never enough money. So it made me start selling drugs and stuff like that. I didn’t know how to be like “hey, help me” or anything like that. It was very prideful. I
didn’t even feel like ooh, I’m independent…I just felt like I got so much on my plate. And then I look at it now and I’m like wow, why couldn’t I just be a kid?

Zelda, 34 years old, serving 20-60 years for kidnapping

Similarly, because of an abusive grandmother and a drug-addicted uncle, Sheila experienced a great deal of residential instability. Sheila reports that she raised herself from the young age of 11, and after committing a felony at the age of 12, for which she was sentenced to a juvenile prison, much of her adolescence was tumultuous and spent moving in and out of prison.

In addition to residential independence established out of coercion and due to familial issues, the final category of women who lived on their own while still teenagers did so because of the relationships that they were in at the time. As mentioned earlier, many of these women believed that they were “grown” enough to handle the commitments and responsibilities that came with adult transitions. When considered retrospectively, however, many of them concluded that they were far from ready to handle these transitions. Marie, for example, hoped that marriage and the move out of her parents’ home at 18 would make her feel adult, but she notes now that these transitions were not ones that she was prepared for at that age:

Um…I think I thought that I…well, when I was a teenager I thought I was grown up. Like I was in a rush to grow up, to get away from the rules of home and you know, I thought I would be okay on my own, you know, that life would be better.

Marie, 31 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first degree murder
Although establishing residential independence at an early age was crucial to some women’s subjective sense of adulthood, the majority of women who made the transition to residential independence in their teen years acknowledged that such an accelerated transition was non-normative. Further, in many cases, the inmates’ initial departure from their family’s home represented the first of a series of short-term events that ultimately resulted in their incarceration. Marie, for example, lamented her “rush to grow up” and, when asked what her advice to a young girl growing up in the U.S. would be, said “To listen to her parents and to not grow up too quickly, because it is not as fun as you think it might be.”

In conclusion, the inmates in this sample experienced a range of premature transitions that affected not only their criminal career trajectories, but their sense and definitions of adulthood as well. Studying the impact of women inmates’ transitions and trajectories on their views and sense of adulthood builds on the life course literature that has demonstrated the negative and long-lasting impact of events and transitions that contribute to offenders’ “cumulative disadvantage.” Specifically, studying the life-course patterns of inmates demonstrates the importance of considering the ways in which multiple “off-time” transitions interact with one another to shape inmates’ views on conventional adult roles such as marriage and motherhood.

In Sheila’s case, for example, her early experiences of serious abuse resulted in an extremely unstable residential arrangement as well as her early onset of drug abuse. The combined effect of these life-course patterns is that her sense of adulthood was stunted until she recently began therapy in prison. Moreover, for some inmates, these adverse life-course patterns resulted in an explicit disavowal of
conventional adulthood roles or a failure to attain these roles because of their divergence from the age-normative timetable for attaining adulthood. It is important to take seriously offenders’ subjective sense of adulthood (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010); understanding how inmates define adulthood as well as what shapes their subjective sense of adulthood requires a close look at the multiple points at which inmates’ lives diverge from those of non-offending individuals in the community. Having examined the transitions and events that shaped inmates’ views on adulthood, in the following section, I explore the generational embeddedness of these views.

**Breaking “generational curses”: Intergenerational continuity and change in the enactment of motherhood**

Although the lives of the women in this sample were “linked” to those of previous generations insofar as there was continuity across generations in criminal behavior and incarceration, my focus in this section is on the ways in which the inmates diverged from their own mothers’ enactment of the mothering role in particular. Approximately 35% of the women in this sample discussed at length the role their mothers played in their lives, often bringing the mothers into their narratives spontaneously and with no prompting from me. To the contrary, those inmates who discussed their fathers did so only when asked specific questions about the roles their parents had played during their childhood and adolescence. The salience of the inmates’ mothers in their narratives is perhaps rooted in the importance of the inmates’ belief in the close tie between motherhood and adulthood. Indeed, discussions of what it meant to be a good mother frequently revolved around narratives of the women’s own mothers,
and some women even made explicit reference to the salience of intergenerational ties when describing their views on motherhood:

*I:* Okay. *I know you don’t have children, but before you came here, how important was being a mother to you?*

*N:* Um...well just being a child, you know, it just shows me the importance of being a mother. Because I know without my mother, I wouldn’t have anything. You know, unfortunately I’m here, but still my mother still supports me. And her mother still supports her. So it’s always been that legacy of mother support, you know?

Nicole, 21 years old, 3.5-7 years for robbery

Anne, despite the fact that her current life sentence was related to the death of her son, similarly described how the value she placed on motherhood was rooted in her relationship with her own mother:

*I:* How important was being a mother to you before you came here?

*A:* Oh, I was—that was the most important thing in the world to me.

*I:* Okay. Can you tell me why?

*A:* Just having that little person to love. And just to give back. Because my mother gave it to me, so I always wanted to give it to my child.

Anne, 43 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first-degree murder.

Although some inmates’ positive opinions on motherhood were rooted in their perceptions of their own mothers, there was far more evidence of intergenerational
change than continuity in the enactment of the mothering role. This is a particularly interesting finding because a majority of the women in the sample reported feeling very close to their mothers. In fact, their mothers were often the primary caregivers of their children while the women were incarcerated, a finding that is consistent with the conclusions of most penological research (Enos, 2001; Mumola, 2000). Evidence of the women’s attempts to diverge from the mothering practices of their own mothers was particularly salient in Jordan’s interview:

*I’m the type of person that...I try to break what they consider “generational curses.” You know, like, there were a lot of things that my mother did or certain ways that she behaved when I was being brought up that I didn’t want to, you know, pass on to my kids. I didn’t want to be that way to my children, so it was like I was determined not to be that way, you know? So it was like I focused on that as far as like...I’m big on open communication, which is something that we didn’t have when I was growing up, so that’s something that I wanted to instill in them.*

Jordan, 33 years old, serving 10-20 years for burglary

Similarly, Alyssa described the ways in which her mothering differed from that of her own mother:

...because my mother to me was a great woman, but at the same time, the way that they did parenting back then, you might look at it today and say that she was a...she abused me. Because I got beaten, but then you see, I was a bad kid. But I don’t, I don’t beat my kids. Like, I never, ever hit my kids. Like, I talk to them; I communicate with them.

Alyssa, 47 years old, serving 9 months – 2 years for prostitution
The women’s relationships with their own mothers affected not only how they enacted their roles as mothers, but also how they felt about themselves, as well as their opinions on how their children felt about them. The inmates thus expressed concerns about replicating their mothers’ lives too closely despite efforts to construct their own trajectories:

All those things I felt negatively about my mother...is the same thing I bet my daughter felt about me now, and I wanna be able to build some kinda bond with her to know that even though I made a mistake and I left her in the process, that that mistake helped me be a better person for her.

Khloe, 21 years old, serving 5.5-12 years for robbery.

Um, I did juvenile hall when I was little, and I used to tell myself, you know, I’m never gonna go to jail, and here I am in jail. And it just made me give a...um, it made me feel kinda like more like my mother than I actually wanted to be like.

Denise, 29 years old, serving 2 years, 11 months, and 29 days – 6 years for involuntary manslaughter

The life-course patterns of the inmates in this study were thus deeply embedded in generational ties that affected how they viewed motherhood—the importance of which every inmate in the sample emphasized, regardless of parental status. Despite the women’s reliance on their own mothers’ experiences as they construct their own identities as mothers, their narratives lend strong support to prior scholars’ (Giordano, 2010; Sampson and Laub, 2005) argument that, in any life-course perspective, a consideration of individuals’ agency is crucial: The women did not simply emulate or
contradict their own mothers’ parenting practices; rather, they engaged in an active process through which they selected which elements of their mothers’ parenting practices they wished to continue and which they wished to diverge from. The intergenerational passage of messages regarding mothering was thus critically interpreted by the women, who ultimately compiled their own “toolkit” to build a mothering identity by drawing on—and diverging from—their own mothers’ practices. In addition to the explicitly active process of identity construction that the women engaged in, the women’s narratives showed evidence reflexive awareness of the extent to which their life-course trajectories were embedded in generational ties, which was evident in the concerns the women voiced about the similarities between their parents’ lives and identities and their own.

**CONCLUSION**

The life-course paradigm has greatly expanded our understanding of the trajectories that contribute to the onset of offending (Giordano, 2010; Sampson and Laub, 1992, 2005) as well as to desistance efforts (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010; Uggen, 1999, 2000). Life-course sociologists have also examined definitions of adulthood among young adults (Arnett, 1997, 1998) as well as changing trends in the transition to adulthood in contemporary America (Furstenberg et al., 2004; Furstenberg, 2010). Combining these two bodies of research, Massoglia and Uggen (2010) found that desistance from crime is a key marker of adulthood among offenders. In spite of the demonstrated connection between desistance and adulthood, researchers have not examined adulthood among a sample of prisoners. An investigation of prisoners’ sense of adulthood is particularly important because of the possibility that their conformity to
traditional markers of adulthood—and the timeliness of their attainment of these markers—could be undermined by their incarceration (Pettit and Western, 2004). To gain a fuller understanding of how women prisoners conceptualize adulthood, the life-course perspective presented in this chapter reveals the transitions and events that shape women prisoners’ subjective sense of adulthood as well as their constructions of adulthood more broadly.

This chapter contributes to existing literature on the transition to adulthood and the life course in a number of ways. The finding that over 40% of the inmates in this sample experienced early childhood and adolescent trauma and/or victimization is especially significant because these experiences appear to have a reverberating impact on the women’s transition to adulthood. Specifically, many women recalled having to grow up very quickly as a result of early childhood and adolescent trauma. Some women, for example, experienced a great deal of residential instability because of their victimization experiences at home. Considering the deleterious impact of precocious role entries on women’s offending trajectories (Carbone-Lopez and Miller, 2011), the finding that women prisoners’ early victimization experiences contribute to premature entry into adult roles should thus be taken seriously.

Moreover, the inmates’ experiences with abuse and trauma strongly affect their current views on adult roles and relationships. Some inmates are disillusioned with the prospect of marriage after experiencing intimate partner violence, while others are even more resolute in the importance they give to good parenting because of their own experiences with parental abuse. Although the prevalence of abuse histories is not surprising, the finding that early victimization experiences shape the women’s transitions
to adulthood and their views on conventional adult roles thereafter is worthy of further attention. It should be noted, however, that there was no uniform response to early victimization experiences; rather, some women noted that it undermined a healthy transition to adulthood, while others concluded that it had reinforced the sense of independence that they equate with being an adult.

What is crucial, however, is the fact that women’s early victimization experiences affect their interest in conventional adult roles. The interviews that Massoglia and Uggen (2010) draw on indicate that desistance was a key marker of adulthood among their sample of offenders in part because these offenders conformed to conventional markers of adulthood, such as marriage, employment, and parenting. If women inmates’ early experiences of abuse undermine their interest in these conventional markers (as was the case for some women), desistance from crime may be less central to their own subjective sense of adulthood. It is for this reason that an examination of the inmates’ victimization experiences through a life-course lens is helpful, since such a perspective sheds light on the ongoing and long-term impact of these experiences.

Perhaps most importantly, the findings presented in this chapter point to the importance of considering the cumulative impact of a range of premature transitions and early experiences such as abuse. For example, many inmates experienced premature transitions to marriage, motherhood, and residential independence as a result of their early experiences with abuse and anti-social behavior. On the one hand, the inmates’ premature transitions bolstered their subjective sense of adulthood; but on the other, premature movement into adult roles and responsibilities disrupted a successful transition
to adulthood. The interaction of unhealthy marriages/relationships with residential
instability, drug use, and abuse experiences resulted in incomplete or unsuccessful
transitions to adulthood among most inmates. Indeed, the majority of inmates noted that
they were only now beginning to feel like adults as they confronted these early
experiences through therapy and other programs in prison. As such, if we are to take
seriously offenders’ subjective sense of adulthood, we must first understand the roots of
their views on adulthood and the specific experiences that shape their sense of adulthood.
The findings of this chapter indicate that viewing the interactive nature and cumulative
impact of inmates’ early life events and transitions through a life-course lens
accomplishes this goal.

Life-course criminologists (Giordano, 2010; Maruna; 2001; Sampson and
Laub, 2005) have also argued recently that researchers studying crime and offending
should take seriously human agency and emotion. The findings described in this chapter
lend support for this argument insofar as the women’s responses to premature role
entries, and even prior incarcerations, were varied and defined by each woman’s unique
social biography. The role of women’s agency was particularly salient in their narratives
regarding the intergenerational transmission of messages about motherhood. Specifically,
the women reconstructed their own views on adulthood by selecting which elements of
their mothers’ parenting practices they wished to carry forward, and which “generational
curses” they wanted to break.

Giordano’s (2010) emphasis on the self and identity in her study on
intergenerational continuities and change in offending is very relevant here. Although this
study is not focused on crime and offending, the narratives of the inmates in this sample
indicated that interactions with the family “expose children to specific behaviors and definitions” (Giordano, 2010:30). The women recalled their mothers’ parenting practices in vivid detail, but they reflected on these practices and constructed their own identities as mothers by drawing on their childhood experiences and the emotional responses they had to their mothers’ parenting. While “the parents’ identity portfolio is readily available to draw upon,” (Giordano 2010: 31), therefore, the inmates do not passively mimic parents’ enactment of adulthood. Instead, they use their own identities as a “cognitive filter” (Giordano 2010:31), thereby emulating certain of their mothers’ practices while discarding others. Many of the inmates’ emphasis on open communication, for example, reflect their divergence from their own mothers’ parenting practices, which often involved physical disciplining.

Regardless of the inmates’ awareness of the flaws in their mothers’ parenting practices, however, many of the women insisted that their mothers would always be their primary supporters. Indeed, the women entrusted their children with their mothers, and some said that they would not trust anybody else with the care of their children while they were incarcerated. Despite the emphasis that criminologists have placed on women’s roles as mothers, and on the fact that women’s children often go to their mothers while they are incarcerated, the relationship that women inmates have with their own mothers is thus one deserving of more scholarly attention.

The role of agency was also evident in how the women responded to their premature transitions into adult roles such as marriage, motherhood, and care-giving for children other than their own. While finding in this chapter lend ample support for Carbone-Lopez and Miller’s (2011) conclusion that precocious role entries can facilitate
antisocial behavior, they also suggest that inmates believe that their premature transitions to adult roles had the positive impact of strengthening their subjective sense of adulthood. This finding should be interpreted cautiously, however, because although some women argued that their early care-giving responsibilities strengthened their sense of adulthood when they took on the responsibilities, many simultaneously acknowledged feeling like their transition to adulthood was still ongoing. It is thus more likely that the inmates’ belief in the positive impact of their premature role entries reflects their efforts to maintain consistency in their identities as adults by “connecting negative past experiences to the present in such a way that the present good seems an almost inevitable outcome” (Maruna, 2001: 87). Like some of the offenders in Maruna’s (2001) sample, many of the inmates expressed in some form or the other the belief that “Because of all that I have been through, I am now this new way” (Maruna, 2001: 87). Despite their awareness of the deviation from normative timetables that their transition to adult roles represents, for example, the women recast the difficulties they faced during these transitions as challenges they have overcome to become the kind of adults they are now. In so doing, they avoid the need to reconstruct their identity in a whole new light and instead incorporate their past experiences with early adult responsibilities into their current definitions and sense of adulthood.

A life-course perspective on women inmates’ definitions of adulthood thus highlights the roots of these women’s conformity to, and departure from, traditional markers of adulthood. It moreover demonstrates that short-term events and experiences that occurred during the inmates’ childhood and adolescence have long-lasting effects not only on the inmates’ views on these markers, but also on how adult the women feel.
Since women inmates’ desistance efforts can be bolstered with an in-depth understanding of the factors that contribute to their desire to attain—and maintain—conventional markers of adult status, the finding that early experiences shape inmates’ current views on adulthood is an important one.
CHAPTER 5

INCARCERATION AND ADULTHOOD

As described in Chapter 1, there are reasons to believe that incarceration can affect women prisoners’ sense of adulthood in both positive and negative ways. To the extent that engagement in criminal activity undermines offenders’ sense of adulthood (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010), inmates may feel like they have not attained conventional adulthood. In addition to the negative effect of criminal behavior itself, contact with the criminal justice system interferes with offenders’ transition to adulthood (Osgood et al., 2005). Finally, given that the women in Aronson’s sample argued that independence is the most important marker of adulthood, being deprived of such independence (which is arguably the most salient aspect of punishment) could undermine the women’s sense of adulthood. On the other hand, however, incarceration may be a “turning point” for some inmates (Edin, Nelson, and Paranal, 2004). O’Brien (2004), for example, has argued that women can see their period of incarceration as a time to “grow up.” In this chapter, I explore three related questions:

1. How do women define adulthood in prison?
2. Do the women prisoners believe that their experience of incarceration has affected how adult they feel? If so, do they believe that incarceration has bolstered or undermined their sense of adulthood?
3. What are the inmates’ views on the status of other inmates as adults?

“Age is just a number in here”: Definitions of adulthood in prison

In spite of the prevalence of age-related norms that dictate adult behavior and interaction in the community, 29 of the 35 women in the sample were emphatic in their
belief that other inmates’ age did not affect whether or not they perceived these inmates as adults. Importantly, many women drew a distinction between what they believed the importance of age was for adult status before they entered prison and their beliefs following their incarceration. At the time of the interview, Keysha (who had been at Muncy for 15 months at the time) was struggling to adapt to the prison environment because of how different prison life was from her life outside prison. Like other inmates who were serving their first prison sentence at Muncy, one of the aspects of prison life that she was surprised by was the lack of significance of age in prison.

_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!_

Keysha, 23 years old, serving 1-2 years for endangering the welfare of a child

Like Keysha, over 60% of the sample expressed the belief that age simply did not affect whether or not inmates in Muncy were adult-like. Keysha had served only 15 months of her sentence at the time of the interview, and the emotional nature of her narrative made it evident that she was struggling to adjust to the new prison environment, since she had never been incarcerated before. 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. These inmates instead remarked on the irrelevance of age with wry humor rather than the confusion and frustration that characterized Keysha’s interview. Saila, for example, had been incarcerated 3 times
before her current incarceration, and was thus unsurprised by the lack of significance of age in the prison environment:

‘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 to put this place in a movie, they would get an Oscar for it. They definitely will. It’s too much.

Saila, 29 years old, serving 2.25-6 years for a drug offense

The amount of time inmates had spent in prison thus appeared to shape how they responded to specific elements of the prison environment, such as the irrelevance of age norms. However, most of the women who noted 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 guided transitions into adult roles. These women recognized that age should be related in some way with maturity and adult status, and it was indeed related to adulthood 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.” The following interview extracts demonstrate the consistency with which the women emphasized that age was not related in any way to adult status in Muncy:

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.

Jordan, 33 years old, serving 10-20 years for burglary

You have these old ladies that...they’ve been through their whole lives, got kids, their kids have kids, their kids have kids, and y’all wonder why you’re 70-something still sitting in jail! Y’all don't like...when are y’all planning on growing up?!

Saila, 29 years old, serving 2.25-6 years for a drug offense

It must be noted that, 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. 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, 40 years old, serving 7.5-15 years for aggravated assault
Note that Samantha 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 beyond a certain age (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010; Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe, 1965). Katie’s 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.*

Katie, 30 years old, serving 3-6 years for robbery

As such, despite their commitment to the idea that age is “just a number” in Muncy, the inmates’ narratives demonstrated a deep reflection on the meaning of age in the context of their own incarceration. Age, therefore, was significant in the inmates’ assessment of themselves even though they argued that it was irrelevant in their assessment of other inmates’ status as adults. To this extent, it is important to note that women prisoners resemble adults in the community in their awareness of age norms that
shape definitions of adulthood. The inmates made this exceedingly clear by highlighting the ways in which the prison environment had altered their views on the relevance of age as a marker of adult status. 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 women’s sense of adulthood—and their corresponding behavior—was often deeply 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”:

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.

Zelda, 34 years old, serving 20-60 years for kidnapping

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.

Barbara, 40 years old, serving 10-20 years for kidnapping to inflict injury

Regardless of age, then, the inmates believed that some women who were caught 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 behavior and responsibilities, age was largely irrelevant as a factor affecting adulthood for drug addicts.

In addition to drug use, some women argued that women got “stuck” at the age they were when they were first incarcerated:

*I: And which ones do you see as adults?*

*H: A lot of them are the lifers. But then you have some lifers that are stuck at...you know, they came in as juveniles and they’re still considered...they still look at themselves as juveniles. But yeah, the lifers.*

Hannah, 20 years old, serving 6-12 years for robbery

Hannah’s comment is especially interesting because, as I describe in the next section, she and the majority of women in the sample believe that lifers and other inmates who have been incarcerated for a long time most clearly represent the “true” adults in Muncy. Despite this theme, Khloe (20 years old) expressed the same opinion about the impact of incarceration on her own sense of adulthood:

*Being as though that I had to grow up here, I’m still stuck at that age when I first came in.*

Khloe, 20 years old, serving 5.5-12 years for robbery

When inmates are removed from conventional society, an age-defined transition to adulthood hold little weight in the prison environment and, as will be discussed shortly, inmates rely on alternative, more intangible markers of adulthood instead.
However, the finding that inmates believe that they experience a disruption in their sense of adulthood when they enter prison is important because it has implications for offenders’ reentry into the community. Women who continue to age in prison, yet 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 (Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe, 1965; Furstenberg, 2004). Given that offenders’ beliefs regarding how adult they feel are important in shaping their motivation to desist from crime (Massoglia and 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.

As prior research (Pettit and Western, 2004) has noted, moreover, incarceration is a life-course event that has reverberating consequences for individuals long after they are released. The stagnation of the inmates’ sense of adulthood upon incarceration is one way the women might feel the effects of their incarceration even after their sentence concludes. The inmates’ belief that age is not a defining feature of adulthood is especially important because researchers (Foster et al., 2005; Pettit and Western, 2004) have argued that offenders coming into contact with the criminal justice system are already “off-time” in making key transition to adult roles. 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.
Constructions of adulthood in prison

In Chapter 3, I described how, like modern American women in the community, the vast majority of the inmates considered independence to be the most significant marker of adult status. Yet unlike their counterparts in the community, the women in this sample, by virtue of their status as prisoners, are deprived of the independence that they consider essential for their subjective sense of adulthood. If age is not considered an important marker of adulthood, and independence is not a feasible marker in the prison environment, what do the inmates then use to define adulthood in prison? In this section, I present findings on the intangible markers of adulthood that the women employ instead of age and independence.

Being “messy” and the “Muncy world”

When inmates were asked what they thought of other inmates at Muncy, the women frequently responded with sardonic humor, expressing a continued amazement at the wide variety of women they met. Many of the women referred to the phenomenon of being “messy” as a marker of a lack of adult status in Muncy. Reminiscent of Owen’s (1998) description of the “he-said/she-said” phenomenon in the women’s prison she studied, a “messy” inmate in Muncy is one who gossips, spreads rumors, and initiates conflicts and disagreements. To use Owen’s term, a messy inmate at Muncy is one who is involved “in the mix.” Keysha (23 years old, serving 1-2 years for endangering the welfare of a child) 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.” In contrast to a “messy” inmate, a truly “adult” inmate is one who refrains from getting involved in the politics and gossip of the inmate population. Keysa, after describing what it meant to be messy, for example,
described a cellmate who she considered an adult: “*She wasn’t messy, you know, she was always talking about her kids, positive things, you know, stuff that she wanted to achieve and all that. Stuff that I would like to be around.*”

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. In describing why she felt that some inmates did not behave like adults, Hannah 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. And then when they do...a lot of them when they do get out, they come right back because they’re so stuck in what they’re used to, which is this now. And they don’t know how to function with things that really do matter on the outside._

Hannah, 20 years old, serving 6-12 years for robbery

Importantly, Hannah’s comments imply that those women who have grown accustomed to prison life were also the inmates most likely to make Muncy their world to the point where they can no longer adjust to the “real” world. This belief is consistent with Clemmer’s (1940) argument that inmates who have longer sentence lengths are more likely to become assimilated into the prison culture.
(a key feature of the “Muncy world”). Hannah herself, however, directly contradicted this idea when she described those inmates who she viewed as the most adult-like in prison: The lifers and other inmates who had been incarcerated for a very long time.

**The “adults” in Muncy: 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, they also noted that prolonged periods of incarceration appeared to bolster inmates’ 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 were the ones most likely to behave like adults. Another 4 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 themselves noted that their sense of adulthood had strengthened over the duration of their sentence.

It is important to point out before proceeding that the inmates referred to those inmates who had been **incarcerated a long time** as long-termers and lifers. One could just as easily 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, however, was the same definition I chose to use in this study because of its intuitive appeal. For example, Elicia (22 years old), who is currently serving a life-without-parole sentence, did not represent the group of inmates that the women in this sample considered “lifers.” In spite of her life sentence, Elicia had been
incarcerated for under 1 year at the time of the interview, whereas the inmates that the women in this sample thought of when they described “lifers” were those who had been incarcerated for many years. It is for this reason that they often discussed “long-termers” and “lifers” simultaneously.

Consistent with Wheeler’s (1961) argument that the relationship between sentence length and prisonization is far from linear, the inmates described how those who had been incarcerated for longer periods had passed through the different responses to incarceration:

*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.*

*Hannah, 20 years old, serving 6-12 years for robbery*

Implicit in the extract above is the notion that shorter-term inmates were less frequently perceived as adults. Indeed, Zelda, in describing the different “categories” of inmates, argued that inmates with short sentences did not conduct themselves as adults because they had little invested in their prison lives. Related to this fact, it is possible that inmates who had been incarcerated a long time were perceived as adults because their lives had for many years not been characterized by the behavior that the inmates associated with a lack of maturity, such as drinking and drug use. In contrast, inmates who had recently arrived in Muncy, or who expected to be released after a short sentence, were more often perceived as immersed in this “street life” behavior. This finding also gives weight to the possibility that recruiting recently admitted inmates was difficult because they are simply not invested enough in their prison lives to be interested in talking to an outside researcher about these lives.
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.

Zelda, 33 years old, serving 20-60 years for kidnapping

Notably, both Zelda and Hannah had long sentences themselves, and their opinion that those with longer sentences are more adult-like is plausibly affected by this fact. Indeed, five inmates in the long-term category described long-termers and lifers as the adults in prison. Further, four of these women concluded that being in prison had helped them feel more adult and/or assisted them in handling adult responsibilities. Jordan, who had been incarcerated for 7 years at the time of the interview, explained that her first 3 years at Muncy were the hardest. She described herself as “being in denial” during these years, and her narrative provided support for the finding that the period directly following the incarceration event is the most chaotic when she said that “if people slightly kinda attacked me, I would like come back really, really hard.” 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, 33 years old, serving 10-20 years for burglary

Note in the extract above that Jordan’s narrative reflects her commitment to conventional markers of adulthood, such as employment. Importantly, she emphasized that her interest in conventional adult concerns such as retirement and life insurance developed only after several years in prison. Like Jordan, most of the inmates in the long-term category concluded that they had developed this sense of adulthood over the years, following a chaotic initial response to their incarceration. 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:

I: What kind of inmate do you see as an adult?

J: 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.

Joanna, 25 years old, serving 3 years, 1 month, 29 days – 10 years for theft

Although the inmates’ emphasis on sentence length is evident in their narratives, they conflated age and sentence length, specifically in the context of their descriptions of long-termers and lifers. This is an especially interesting finding because, as mentioned, one of the most consistent themes in the data was that the inmates did not think that age mattered in defining adulthood at Muncy. Despite this belief, the extracts below reflect how the women whom other inmates were most likely to see as adults were older women who had been incarcerated for a long time:
I: Do you see the other inmates here as adults?

T: Some, some. Like the elderly women…I’ve grown fond of a lot of the lifers here, so I’m really close to a lot of them. And I kinda live in a senior citizen home (laughs) but I like living there because I love the women there.

Tricia, 38 years old, serving 3.25-12 years for escape

M: Um, it’s bad with the younger ones and good with the older ones. Like and…the ones of us that have been here…you can tell which ones of us have been here awhile versus the ones that have just come in and kinda wanna see what boundaries they can cross.

Marie, 31 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first-degree murder

In spite of her comment about being especially fond of the older inmates who she viewed as adults, Tricia soon after emphasized that age did not affect whether or not she saw an inmate as an adult in Muncy. As such, although there were young inmates who had been incarcerated for many years (such as Hannah and Khloe), the inmates perceived older long-termers and lifers as the “adults” in prison. This finding is further supported by the fact that, like Joanna, younger long-termers such as Hannah and Khloe saw older long-termers and lifers as “mother figures.”

You look up…I use…a lot of them are kinda like role models for us younger ones.

Hannah, 20 years old, serving 6-12 years for robbery

I wanna speak for the lifers. They inspired me. They have this sense of peace with them and they accept it for what it is, and they’re not miserable people. They have good hearts.

Khloe, 21 years old, serving 5.5-12 years for robbery
When asked 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. Since the inmates disavowed the significance of age as a marker of adulthood, and since they lacked the independence that would otherwise serve as a marker, they instead pointed to intangible markers of adulthood such as the way inmates conducted themselves in the prison environment. Specifically, they noted the lifers’ lack of involvement 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. In other words, the long-termers were adult because they were not “messy.”

*Um, an officer would say something, and it may not be in the best way they say it, but instead of responding how most women would respond and getting attitude and they’d curse him out, you know they do a lot of stuff. Instead of doing that, “okay Sir, have a nice day.” They’ll humble themselves.*

Hannah, 20 years old, serving 6-12 years for robbery

As such, for analytic purposes, it can be concluded that lifers and long-term prisoners in Muncy were perceived as the “adults” in Muncy for three reasons:

1. Long-termers and lifers had already cycled through the range of responses to their incarceration. Specifically, many inmates reported that their first few years in Muncy were the hardest. During this time, they fought, got placed in the Restricted Housing Unit, became involved in the politics of same-sex prison relationships, and so on. As would be predicted by the prisonization literature, sentence length appears to be tied to the inmates’ perceptions of adulthood in prison: The inmates perceived long-termers and lifers as having already passed through this phase in their response to incarceration—they were now at a stage of acceptance, and they strove to help
other (often younger) inmates. For this reason, they were considered role models and mother figures.

Importantly, both inmates in other categories and the long-termers themselves provided support for this interpretation of the finding that long-termers are the “true” adults in Muncy. Like Jordan, Zelda, for instance, noted that she had spent “a lot of years in RHU” when she was first incarcerated because she “was always fighting.” Over the years, however, Zelda transitioned away from the rebellious behavior that characterized her early years in Muncy.

Z: And I’ve come across so many situations where literally back in the days, I would have tried to took somebody’s head off behind, where I had to just be like (long breath).

Zelda, 33 years old, serving 20-60 years for kidnapping

As described earlier, Zelda noted that she was now at the stage of her incarceration where instead of entering into conflicts with other inmates, she was most concerned with her legal rights, healthcare, and so on. Like Jordan’s interest in traditionally adult concerns such retirement and life insurance, Zelda emphasized that her focus on substantive issues such as healthcare and her legal rights had emerged only after she had passed her initial response to her incarceration.

2. 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, although 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 in Muncy. Lifers and long-termers were thus perceived as more adult-like partly for the mere reason that they were older, in spite of most inmates’ belief that age was unrelated to adulthood in Muncy.

It is important to note here, however, that age was relevant here only insofar as it was tied to
sentence length. In other words, the lifers and long-termers were viewed as adults because they had aged in prison. There were, however, no consistent patterns of difference or similarity in the narratives of older inmates compared to younger ones.

3. Finally the women in this sample considered lifers and long-termers 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. As Zelda described, she had conditioned herself over the years not to lose her temper in confrontations. In addition to their belief that long-termers and lifers had already been through the phase of their incarceration where they were involved in the “messy” side of Muncy, the inmates recognized that lifers and long-termers like Zelda were also most likely to be the inmates that now behaved in a mature fashion, especially in stressful situations. Their lack of involvement in the “Muncy world,” along with what inmates perceived as genuine efforts to better themselves and give back to the community (or other “newer” inmates) convinced inmates in other categories that the inmates who had been incarcerated the longest were the true “adults” in Muncy. Hannah, a long-terms, herself noted that, when she first arrived in prison facing a life sentence, she “didn’t wanna’ do anything.” Over time, however, she surrounded herself with other inmates with long sentences, and she described the efforts she and her friends had made to do her time productively. Unlike the inmates serving shorter sentences who saw their time in prison as (according to Zelda) “just temporary,” inmates such as Hannah attempted to serve their sentence as peacefully and constructively as possible.

H: The ones I surround myself with, they’ve done the same things as I’ve done. We’ve done everything we could do here; we’ve never sat around and did nothing. We’ve always been involved,
we’ve always been doing things, and I do a lot...we’ve done a lot of things together. And we kinda want the same things in life and just keep each other up.

Hannah, 20 years old, serving 6-12 years for robbery

Sentence length thus was tied closely to adult status among the women in this study. It is possible to infer from the theoretical prisonization literature that those inmates who have been incarcerated the longest (and especially those who have no prospects for release) would be the least likely to abide by conventional markers of adulthood, having absorbed the norms of the prison culture. However, the inmates in this sample repeatedly concluded that prisoners who have been incarcerated the longest were the most likely to behave in an adult-like manner, specifically because they had cycled through the more problematic responses to their incarceration. The inmates who had been incarcerated for longer periods (such as Zelda and Hannah) confirmed these views by highlighting the ways in which their attitudes towards their incarceration had evolved over their sentence length.

In this way, there was evidence in this study of a process of “maturational prisonization,” whereby 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. Their roles as peer tutors, mother figures, and role models for newer inmates reflects their belief that it is possible to be an adult in prison. In Marie’s case, for example, she looks to another older lifer as a role model for the kind of inmate she foresees herself being in the next 10 years:

I: Okay. Can you describe how you see your life in 10 years?
M: 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.

Marie, 31 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first degree murder
Whereas the literature on prisonization has thus far focused on the ways in which inmates absorb anti-social prison norms, the findings from this study thus indicate that the process of prisonization also involves an immersion in the prison culture that, over time, shifts from being negative and tumultuous to stable and even positive in some ways. By positioning themselves as role models and mother figures for newer, younger inmates, the long-termers and lifers adopt prosocial identities that develop over the duration of their sentence length. Over time, therefore, the inmates who serve long sentences come to both feel more adult and be perceived as adult-like by the other inmates.

The implications of the positive elements 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 towards 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 research 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. However, 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 seen as adults in the mainstream community. In fact, their status as adults may be limited to the prison environment alone because they stand in contrast to inmates involved in a chaotic prison culture—
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 clear. The findings described here instead suggest that, based on the distinctive markers of adulthood that the inmates in Muncy employ, the long-term inmates and the lifers play an important role in the prison culture by functioning as role models and mother figures to other inmates. Though the inmates in the long-term category noted that they had become more interested in traditionally “adult” concerns such as employment, parenting, retirement, and so on, it is crucial to note that these concerns emerged in a distinctive environment. 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 more “adult” once they are released.

**Incarceration and women prisoners’ subjective sense of adulthood**

Having examined how adulthood is generally defined in prison, I turn now to a discussion of inmates’ beliefs about the impact of their incarceration on their own subjective sense of adulthood. The findings suggest that women prisoners’ attitudes towards their incarceration, specifically in the context of its impact on their sense of adulthood, are remarkably complex. In particular, the inmates simultaneously noted that being incarcerated had helped them in meaningful ways and concluded that incarceration ultimately undermines their sense of adulthood.

A majority of the women expressed gratitude for their incarceration specifically because they recognized the opportunities it provided them for self-reflection and self-improvement. Like Christine, who described how her entire perspective on life had
changed since her incarceration, many believed that incarceration had been a major “turning point” in their lives:

*I think it’s just about…just waking up and being thankful for the day, you know? And maybe going to work or school whatever you do. You know, enjoying your friends and your family. Just one day at time. You know, if y’all get to sit down and have dinner together, you know what I’m saying? That’s the important stuff. That’s the stuff I miss.*

Christine, 44 years old, serving 1 year, 2 months – 4 years for forgery

Women such as Emma made even stronger statements, noting that they believed that their incarceration had saved their life. The finding that women prisoners express neutral and/or positive attitudes towards their incarceration is one that prior research has uncovered. The “offending mothers” in Haney’s (2010) study, for example, demonstrate how the control of “deviant” mothers often involves direct and formal punishment, as well as “softer” approaches that push women to reassess their attitudes towards parenting, children, and their lives generally. Although the mothers in Haney’s study were incarcerated, they were exposed—and expected to conform to—discourses that attempted to bring their mothering in line with conventional parenting practices. One of the institutions in Haney’s study, for example, was geared towards changing “women’s minds, bodies, and souls” (Haney, 2010: 116). That women prisoners in this study expressed gratitude for their incarceration is thus unsurprising to the extent that this might reflect their exposure to penal discourses.

The strength of some of the women’s sentiments of gratitude, however, was surprising. Emma, for example, explained how she believed that incarceration quite
literally saved her life. Women who had particularly severe pre-prison histories of alcoholism, drug abuse, or victimization most frequently expressed these strong sentiments; but the finding that the inmates were thankful for the opportunities that incarceration offered them was one that was consistent throughout the interviews.

*And I think that I’m doing like a lot of soul-searching, you know, and trying to figure out who I am and where I wanna go in life, and you know, I wanna get it together, you know? I’m 20 years old and I’m in prison, and you know? I made mistakes and I…I mean, I don’t wanna say that I wish I could go back and change them because I feel like being here saved my life, you know, because I was so deep into my addiction and so young.*

Emma, 20 years old, serving 2-5 years for robbery

Particularly relevant for the purposes of this study is Emma’s emphasis on her age in her narrative about the positive impact her incarceration has had. At only 20 years of age, Emma represents the type of “vulnerable” youth that Osgood et al. (2005) described. With a father in prison and an abusive mother, Emma had to “grow up fast” because of her dysfunctional family. Yet her transition to adulthood appears is incomplete, and she is still engaged in a self-reflective identity formation process. Osgood et al. have noted the negative effect of contact with the criminal justice system when undergoing the transition to adulthood. Emma’s comments suggest, however, that her incarceration has facilitated a more considered and reflective transition to adulthood.

In an era where the transition to adulthood is marked by increasing class inequalities (Berlin, Furstenberg, and Waters, 2010), however, young people such as Emma experience the period of emerging adulthood very differently. While Arnett
describes this period as one of exploration and freedom from responsibility, Emma is experiencing this phase of her life in prison—a setting defined by constraint and lack of freedom. Nevertheless, the questions that Emma is asking herself are characteristic of the emerging adulthood period. In fact, describing her life at the time of the interview, Emma said, “I’ve been...I’m at a stage right now where I’m just kinda trying to figure out who I am and what I want to do.”

Osgood et al. are no doubt correct in their conclusions that contact with the criminal justice system is detrimental to a successful and timely transition to adulthood. However, it is also important to note that, for youth such as Emma, incarceration can also serve as a time to engage in the self-reflective thought that characterizes the period of emerging adulthood. This opportunity, however, does not negate the structural and social difficulties that young adults undergoing the transition to adulthood in prison face. Kayla (18 years old), for example, expressed broad identity concerns in a letter to me. In the letter, she described how the structural and emotional disadvantages that she had faced in her life so far had brought her to a point where she struggled to decide what kind of woman she wanted to be:

*I did tell you that at a younger age I was not okay with myself and I was so unsure of who or what I wanted to be. At some points I wanted to be an educated, well-presented, class, money-making lady, but at other times I wanted to be a stripper and a hustler’s wife. I tried to conjure them together and I still have that issue of what way I want to go. I find myself at times wanting to be them two people. I continuously try to put them together to equal one happy life.*
Kayla, 18 years old, serving 2.5-5 years for aggravated assault

Recall that in Chapter 4, I described Kayla’s adolescence as characterized by frequent periods in youth detention facilities. At 18, Kayla is on the crossroads of choosing to lead a conventional or a deviant lifestyle, and her experience in prison has not assisted her in making the decision to choose a conventional future. It is thus likely that, despite the positivity expressed by Emma, contact with the criminal justice system (and prison especially) during the period of emerging adulthood does not simplify young women’s process of identity exploration. To the contrary, being in prison can pose serious problems for young women attempting to define who they are and who they want to be. At 21 years of age, for example, Khloe noted that she is still “learning how to be an adult,” and—like Emma—is at the stage of her life where she is confronting questions related to her current and future identity. Similar to the women in Haney’s (2010) study, Khloe expressed frustration with the way in which the prison administration did not seem to recognize the realities of her life.

*Um, I’m still trying to learn how to be an adult (laughs). Um, the growth. Knowing that you think differently than you used to. Um, there’s a lot of different ways to...that make a female feel like an adult, you know? It could be the way she carries herself or the way she thinks, like, in certain situations and...like I’m in a program right now and it’s, like, really frustrating for me because it’s just like, how do you want me to be this when I already feel like I am? A woman. I feel like I’m responsible. I can do all of this if I wanted to, but then they speak about your “inner child” and it’s just like, I don’t know what you’re talking about. And it’s just like I’m still growing. Like I’m still learning how to be a woman, and how to conduct myself like one.*
Khloe, 21 years old, serving 5.5-12 years for robbery

Despite the fact that Khloe felt that she was “lack[ing] in a lot of areas because of the environment that [she] had to grow up in,” she did feel like an adult sometimes, a reality that the officials at her prison program did not recognize. Ironically, although prison programs insisted that she should confront her “inner child,” Khloe noted that she felt like less of a child because of the prison environment. In fact, Khloe described that she had lost her childhood because of her prison experiences. Although her prison experience had contributed to her sense of adulthood in positive ways by teaching her structure and discipline, it had made her feel like less of a child in far more pernicious ways:

*When I was raped and that veil was lifted of no longer being innocent? It feels like that sometimes. It’s like I was telling my friend the other day there’s different ways to rape people. It’s not just physically; it’s mentally, emotionally, and that’s what this place does to people and that’s the difference.*

Khloe, 21 years old, serving 5.5-12 years for robbery

The narratives of Emma, Kayla, and Khloe—who are all on the cusp of adulthood—demonstrate their starkly different responses to their incarceration. While Emma felt that being in prison had saved her life, Khloe compared her prison experience with her rape—an event that she described in a letter to me as the subject of her worst childhood memory. Importantly, however, all the young women’s narratives reflect the complexity of the women’s attitudes towards their incarceration, specifically in relation to their sense of adulthood. Khloe’s narratives in particular reflected a great level of
ambivalence. She recognized that being in prison had taught her the discipline she believed was necessary to carry herself like an adult, but she also resented the infantilizing way in which she was instructed to talk about her “inner child,” of which she concluded that the prison itself had stripped her. Recall, moreover, that it was Khloe who remarked that, because she had made the transition to adulthood while she was incarcerated, she felt “stuck” at the age at which she was first incarcerated. This is a particularly significant finding because it highlights the dangers of concluding that longer sentences are beneficial for inmates. Inmates such as Khloe, who were serving long sentences but who had been incarcerated at a very young age, did not yet feel like adults even though they believed that they had passed through the more tumultuous phases of their incarceration. Given that the group of women serving long sentences have diverse backgrounds and demographic characteristics, and since most inmates who enter prison will be released, much more large-scale data are needed before it is safe to draw strong conclusions on the impact of incarceration on inmates’ subjective sense of adulthood.

Inmates going through the period of emerging adulthood, therefore, believe that prison life can be both beneficial and harmful. More specifically, while the women believe that prison programs assist inmates in confronting issues that contributed to their criminal behavior, they argued that the prison environment itself undermined their sense of adulthood. Inmates who had histories of drug/alcohol abuse and/or physical or sexual abuse were particularly emphatic about the benefits of specific prison programs. Although Emma described how she believed incarceration had saved her life, for example, she ultimately concluded that it was one program in particular—the Wings of Life program (an prison-based substance abuse program) administered at Muncy—that
had helped her work on several social and emotional problems she has been struggling with. Describing prison itself, however, Emma said, “I mean, jail really sucks (laughs), like bad.” Interestingly, regardless of the ways in which she noted that being in prison had given her the time to engage in some self-reflection, prison, she concluded, ultimately was an infantilizing experience, and because of her status as a prisoner, she did not feel like an adult:

*I mean, they do everything for you. You’re told what to do as if you’re like a little kid. Like you don’t make your own decisions; they make them for you.*

Emma, 20 years old, serving 2-5 years for robbery

On the other hand, Hannah, another young (22 years old, serving 6-12 years for robbery) inmate noted that being in prison has the potential to make a woman feel like an adult because “you feel like you’ve done everything. You haven’t...you’ve experienced most things people your age haven’t experienced. Um...you’re surrounding yourself with women who are pretty much old enough to be your mom, your grandmother. So...it kinda makes you feel a little bit past them.”

Inmates at Muncy thus held that being in prison was simultaneously helpful and harmful to their sense of adulthood. Although this finding is seemingly contradictory on the surface, the women’s narratives revealed very specific elements of prison life that they believed bolstered their sense of adulthood, such as the group therapy and drug rehabilitation programs. Some women like Christine and Hannah also spoke of the prison experience in general terms, noting that as a key event in their lives, incarceration had bolstered their sense of adulthood by forcing them to confront and overcome a very
stressful life experience. For these women, their incarceration was a “turning point” that resulted in a sharp overhaul of their perspective on life, and that they believe resulted in a more robust sense of adulthood.

However, the women were quite consistent in their belief that the prison environment undermined their sense of adulthood. The inmates emphasized that the lack of control and overall infantilization that is characteristic of prison life disrupted the women’s sense of independence, which was damaging to their subjective sense of adulthood. It is for this reason that many women drew on more intangible markers of adulthood while they were incarcerated. As a result of their inability to handle their own responsibilities and take control of their lives, the women felt that being incarcerated made them feel less adult, especially because many women had to rely on their families outside prison for financial support. As such, although the experience of incarceration had a positive impact on many women’s sense of adulthood, close analysis of the women’s narratives revealed a subtle distinction between the impact of the incarceration event (and the opportunities that incarceration afforded the women) and the impact of the prison environment on the inmates’ sense of adulthood.

Discussion

In her study on young inmate mothers, Haney (2010) noted the mothers’ frustration at institutional officials’ lack of appreciation for the realities of the social women’s lives. By failing to recognize these realities, the institution disempowered the young mothers and instead controlled the women through discourses of dependence. The findings in this study reflect a similar theme. Inmates such as Khloe expressed frustration
not about the lack of recognition of her social reality, but of her subjective sense of adulthood. Khloe emphasized that she did feel like an adult in some ways, but she also felt stuck at the age at which she first became incarcerated. Her views on how adult she felt were thus very complicated, and she was dismayed at the program officials’ discussions of her “inner child” because these failed to recognize the ways in which she did feel like an adult and her belief that the prison environment had stripped her of her childhood. The inmates’ views on the impact of incarceration on how adult they feel were thus particularly complex in the case of inmates who had made the transition to adulthood while they were incarcerated. Emma, for example, said that being in prison had saved her life, while Hannah noted that being in prison was a life experience that made her feel adult. The diversity in views of these young inmates reflects the extent to which inmates construct and give meaning to their prison identities by drawing on their unique biographies.

The women’s narratives further suggest that, since they use independence as a key marker of adulthood, they believe that the infantilization that characterizes prison life greatly undermined the women’s subjective sense of adulthood. Despite their loss of independence, however, many women argued that being incarcerated was a positive life event for them in many ways, since it provided them with the time and resources they needed to confront a range of social and emotional issues they had been facing for many years. Although this finding may reflect inmates’ attempts to cope with their lack of independence, inmates who had struggled with addiction and abuse drew a distinction between the positive impact they believed specific prison programs had had on their lives and the negative impact of a depersonalizing prison environment. There is thus reason to
believe that, in some ways, incarceration can be a time for self-improvement for certain inmates who may otherwise lack the will and resources to pursue therapeutic programs in the community.

In spite of the lack of independence in prison, the women in this sample insisted that it is possible to be an adult in prison. Instead of independence as a key indicator of adulthood, therefore, the inmates relied on intangible markers of adulthood (Arnett, 1997) such as carrying oneself with class and dignity. The inmates’ adoption of alternative, intangible markers of adulthood reflects a deep-seated process of identity formation that is based on resistance to the prison environment and the limitations it places on inmates’ physical independence. Bosworth and Carrabine (2001: 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 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 distanced themselves from the “messiness” of Muncy in a way to resist further control from the institution in the form of disciplinary action. These inmates had already cycled through the more tumultuous responses to their incarceration; rather than accepting the authority of the prison environment, their attitudes now reflect a 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, now strive to adopt the identity of role models and “mother
figures” to younger and newer inmates as a way of “giving back.” Presenting themselves as “real” adults who play a prosocial role in the prison environment serves to crystallize lifers’ and long-termers’ identities through what Maruna (2001) has called “redemption scripts.”

Importantly, the distance they maintain from the politics of same-sex relationships and conflict in Muncy does not mean that they are distanced from the prison culture generally. To the contrary, these inmates are closely involved in prison programs, and they are eager to support newer inmates as they transition into their time at Muncy. Consistent with the concept of prisonization, 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: 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. For this reason, the assimilation of the long-termers and lifers into the prison culture is perhaps better understood as a process of “maturational prisonization” through which the inmates slowly and gradually move away from the “he-said/she-said” prison culture. According to the women I interviewed, these long-term inmates eventually join networks of other inmates serving long sentences that form a closely-knit subculture that is generally prosocial and, according to many inmates in this study, the best manifestation of adulthood in prison.
Prison sentence is a particularly important variable also because, as Schmid and Jones (1991) have noted, inmates’ identity construction efforts are affected by how much time they have spent in prison. Although the data used in this study do not permit an analysis of the causal effect of prison sentence on inmates’ definitions and sense of adulthood, there is strong evidence that the inmates’ believe that such an impact exists. The inmates, for example, 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 age for their own sense of adulthood. 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. Like the offenders in Maruna’s (2001) sample, the inmates in this study engage in an active process of identity reconstruction that permits them to reconcile their lack of independence with their subjective sense of adulthood. The specific manner in which they do this is by defining adulthood through intangible markers instead of age or independence.

Contrary to literature positing the development of anti-social norms in the prison environment, when asked about their definitions of adulthood, the women 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 sub-culture (the “Muncy world”) where age-prescribed norms do not hold weight as they do in the
mainstream community. 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. As mentioned, young inmates who are already undergoing a delayed transition to adulthood may be less likely to abide by a conventional timetable if they no longer believe that age is a marker of adult status. This concern, however, is mitigated by the fact that age appears to retain its importance in how inmates describe their subjective sense of adulthood, even if it has lost its significance in shaping how inmates view other inmates’ status as adults.

Given literature that suggests that offenders are more likely to desist if they feel like adults (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010), the inmates’ belief that some women get “stuck” at a certain point in their life course because of their incarceration is both practically and theoretically significant. The transition to adulthood in particular 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 when women’s social and emotional growth is stalled 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 chapter 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 anti-social 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, 1998) studies. Although women prisoners are in some ways compelled to seek out alternative markers of adulthood while incarcerated, therefore, the markers they employ are similar to those employed by young adults in the community. Massoglia, Remster, and Uggen (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 findings described here suggest that criminology might benefit from a similar shift away from examinations of how prisoners are different from individuals in the community towards an investigation of how the lives and views of inmates resemble those of individuals outside prison. As Marie remarked, educating people outside prison of the fact that inmates are in many ways similar to them could go a long way in alleviating the extreme stigma that continues to be a part of women prisoners’ lives (Kruttschnitt, 2010).

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. Several inmates noted that the women serving the longest sentences were the most adult-like because of the way they carried themselves. 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. As mentioned, however, the finding that inmates who have been incarcerated the longest are the most adult-like should be interpreted with caution because of the context in which
these inmates function. The distance that long-termers keep from the he-said/she-said of
the “Muncy world” was a major reason other inmates see these long-termers as the “true”
adults in Muncy. The prison culture of the “Muncy world” is a unique setting, and the
extent to which long-term inmates would feel like adults, be perceived by others as adults
in the mainstream community, and be able to enact adult roles successfully once released
remains an open question. That long-term inmates adopt conventional adult roles in
prison vis-à-vis other inmates should thus not be taken to mean that there is virtue in
incarcerating offenders for longer periods. This conclusion would require comprehensive,
large-scale data as well as more in-depth research on lifers’ and long-termers’ responses
to incarceration over time. Such research is especially important because of the additional
finding that some inmates, such as Khloe, who were incarcerated at a young age feel
“stuck” at that age even after several years of their sentence had passed.

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” and who did not
participate in this study 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.
CHAPTER 6

WOMEN INMATES’ SELF- AND REFLECTED APPRAISALS

Chapter 1 outlined symbolic interactionism as the key theoretical framework I employ in this study. In that chapter, I also described recent literature that has focused on the modern transition to adulthood and on shifts in what individuals consider important markers of adulthood. Researchers (Arnett, 1997, 1998; Massoglia and Uggen, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2005) in this line of investigation have also examined the extent to which individuals feel like adults. Massoglia and Uggen (2010), for example, demonstrate the significance of this subjective sense of adulthood in their exploration of whether “desisters” feel more like adults than “persisters.” They find support for this hypothesis, arguing that age norms, role behaviors, and self-perceptions are closely linked to one another and together have strong implications for offenders’ desistance from or persistence in crime. In this chapter, I follow Massoglia and Uggen’s lead by highlighting the women inmates’ self- and reflected appraisals, and on the impact of age norms on these appraisals. Specifically, I argue that the women’s awareness of age-appropriate behavior guides their beliefs about their own status as adults as well as their views on others’ perceptions of their adult status.

Self- and Reflected Appraisals

The notion that actors’ self-conceptions affect their engagement in criminal behavior is not novel (Matsueda, 1992). In the development of their interactionist theory of delinquency, however, Massoglia and Uggen (2010) build on the link between self-conceptions and criminal behavior specifically in the context of studying desistance from crime as a marker of adulthood. They argue that, when actors make assessments of their status as adults, they compare their current behavior with their behavior earlier in the life
course; and they also compare their own behavior with that of important reference group members (social comparisons). Actors thus engage in both self- and social comparisons when assessing their own status as adults. For the purposes of this study, then, in constructing their appraisals, I expect women inmates to consider their current status as inmates (and the actions that resulted in that status) relative to their roles and identities earlier in their lives.

Moreover, in forming opinions about their subjective sense of adulthood, I expect the inmates to assess their own attainment of adulthood markers relative to that of members of important reference groups, such as siblings and friends. I expect that their own identities as adults will thus be contingent on a) whether they believe they have attained more markers of adulthood relative to earlier stages in their life, and b) their assessment of others’ perceptions of their status as adults. In Chapter 5, I described how long-term inmates, and lifers especially, were perceived as the “true” adults in Muncy, and how these inmates “accomplished” adulthood by acting as mother figures and role models for newer inmates. In this chapter, therefore, I also explore whether long-term inmates appear to use different reference groups to construct their self- and reflected appraisals in a way that might explain how they come to be the “true” adults in the prison.

Massoglia and Uggen find support for the hypothesis—derived from the symbolic interaction tradition—that “those who persist in delinquency will be less likely to be seen as adults by their reference group (others’ appraisals), more likely to perceive that others see them as less than adults (reflected appraisals), and thus more likely to understand themselves as less than adults (self-appraisals).” Building on Massoglia and Uggen’s
theory, I present findings in this chapter related to the possibility that women who are
incarcerated will similarly a) believe that others view them as less than adults and b) feel
less adult themselves. Although I do not test these hypotheses using statistical tests as
Massoglia and Uggen (2010) do, the qualitative findings in this study suggest that
inmates do consider their lives in the context of age norms that structure the timely
attainment of adulthood markers. I thus draw on the women’s narratives to demonstrate
how being incarcerated affects both how women see themselves and how they believe
others view them. In the following section, I describe the role of age in the inmates’
reflected appraisals, as well as the differences in the women’s beliefs regarding how
family (an important reference group) views them versus how society at large views
them.

**Women inmates’ reflected appraisals**

An important component of symbolic interactionism is role-taking, a process in
which actors project themselves into the roles of others in a specific interaction between
two or more individuals. Actors then appraise themselves from the standpoint of the other
whose role has been taken. Symbolic interactionists distinguish between specific
significant others (who actors use as a reference group early in the socialization process)
and the “generalized other,” which includes the “norms, rules, and expectations” that
dictate the workings of a community or society (Matsueda 1992: 1581). Central to
symbolic interactionism is the notion that actors take on the roles of both specific
significant others (such as family and peer group members) as well as the “generalized
other.” Matsueda (1992) has noted that actors more often appraise themselves from the
perspective of abstract societal norms, rules and expectations in institutionalized settings,
and that these appraisals constitute a stringent form of social control as actors internalize societal norms during the appraisal process.

Symbolic interactionism is particularly useful for the study of crime and criminals because it emphasizes the meaning that offenders apply to the self, specifically with respect to crime and delinquency (Matsueda, 1992). It is for this reason that Massoglia and Uggen argue that individuals who perceive themselves as less adult, or believe that others perceive them as less adult, will be more likely to persist in criminal behavior. I focus on the inmates’ self- and reflected appraisals in this chapter because the inmates’ status as adults may be called into question when they are incarcerated. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, the inmates perceive the strict supervision and control that they endure in prison to be infantilizing. However, I have also described the ways in which inmates construct alternative markers of adulthood to reconcile their belief in their status as adults with their status as inmates. I have thus argued that inmates, through a range of strategies, appear able to protect subjective sense of adulthood even while they are incarcerated. Prior research (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010; Matsueda, 1992) has concluded that how actors see themselves (and how they believe others see them) affects their offending patterns. For this reason, I build on my earlier discussions of how inmates define adulthood to examine the specific processes through which inmates construct their self-images.

Since symbolic interactionists have distinguished between close significant others and the “generalized other,” I present findings on inmates’ reflected appraisals in two parts. The first part describes how inmates appraised themselves from the standpoint of family members and friends. To obtain data on inmates’ reflected appraisals based on
significant others, I asked the inmates what they believed their family and friends thought of them compared to other women their age. In the second section, I present findings on inmates’ appraisals when they take on the role of the “generalized other.” To explore women’s appraisals based on the “generalized other,” I asked them what they believed society thought of women in prison compared to men in prison (to gain a sense of the women’s perceptions of norms related to gender and incarceration). Finally, to understand the inmates’ perceptions of age-related norms, I asked them how they believed society responded to older women in prison compared to younger women in prison.

**Reflected appraisals based on close significant others**

When describing what they believe their family thinks of them compared to other women their age, the women surprisingly expressed very positive reflected appraisals. Compared to inmates in the other two categories, inmates in the long-term category in particular more frequently reported positive reflected appraisals when asked about their families’ opinion of them. Specifically, all but two of the inmates in this category reported a great deal of support from their families, who gave them credit for being mature and adult-like. This is consistent with the finding (described in earlier chapters) that inmates who had been incarcerated for longer periods are perceived as the “true” adults in prison. Although the women in the long-term category expressed the most consistently positive reflected appraisals, women in the other two categories also spoke of the support they had received from their families in the form of positive messages about their character:

“Alysa is so smart; I don’t know why she don’t get herself together. She’s so compassionate and....” They say a lot of nice things about me, they really do.
Alysa, 47 years old, 9 months – 2 years for prostitution

In Chapter 3, I described the importance of the mother-child bond among the women in this sample. Building on this theme, the inmates described at length the development of their relationships with their own mothers, emphasizing how their mothers’ appraisals of them had shifted over the years, especially during their incarceration. It is worth noting that inmates’ narratives revolved around the appraisals of the inmates’ mothers, even though I asked about the inmates’ families more generally.

As I have mentioned in earlier chapters, motherhood and mothering were themes that frequently arose without prompting in the inmates’ narratives. This underscores not only the central place that motherhood continues to play in discussions of adulthood among women, but also of the importance of the mother-daughter relationship that I described in Chapter 3.

Matsueda (1992) has also noted that during the appraisal process, actors are more likely to select persons about whom they care deeply, or who have assisted in forming the actors’ self-image in the past. Given the significance of motherhood to these women—and of their own mothers in particular—their selection of their mothers as their primary reference groups is unsurprising. Indeed, the focus on their mothers’ views on them, and the sometimes complex relationship the inmates shared with their mothers, suggests that inmates’ mothers have in the past played a significant role (one that they continue to play) in shaping the inmates’ self-conceptions.

*My mom who has seen me grow this whole time... ’cause she’s been the only one really there. So she’s seen me at every point. Like she’s seen me at my worst, she’s seen me in the middle, she’s seen me at the transitional phase, she’s seen me get to where I wanna*
be, and I think she would say...she tells me all the time that she’s proud of me. Of where I’m at today.

Hannah, 20 years old, serving 6-12 years for robbery

I think my mum sees...when I talked to her on the phone last year, she said I had changed to where I was like, I’m more of an adult, like my...she said my attitude has changed, my looks, um...grown more, like....But back then she just really thought I, I dunno.

Laura, 36 years old, serving 5-10 years for rape of a child

Two inmates in the long-term category, however, felt that their families’ appraisals were too positive. For example, Marie—a lifer—said that she did not deserve the amount of support her parents gave her. It is important to note here that, although inmates like Marie have been incarcerated for many years and have no immediate hopes for release, there was no evidence in this sample of women that suggested that these long-term inmates relied on other inmates as their reference group more than inmates in other categories. To the contrary, Marie’s narrative—like the narratives of all but one of the other long-term inmates—centered heavily on her family. It is plausible that prolonged exposure to the prison environment might result in a shift in whom the inmates consider their close significant others. However, the finding that long-term inmates continue to use their family members outside prison as their reference group is consistent with the finding that these inmates make explicit attempts to distance themselves from most inmates in the prison culture. Moreover, they highlight the ways in which the inmates believed that their family members’ appraisals of them had improved during their incarceration. Laura, for example, believed that her mother respected her more than she did before she was incarcerated because Laura had “proven” that, in spite of her
disability, she had the strength to survive the prison environment. Similarly, Marie reported that her family was proud of her because of how she coped with her prison life; she, however, felt that such pride was undeserved:

_They’re [Marie’s family] proud of me. (Laughs). They are proud of me. Like they tell me all the time that they love me and they’re proud of me and it’s okay. And I’m like, “how is it okay?” (laughs). But um, yeah, they don’t see anything...anything wrong (laughs)._  

_Obviously they are very godly people. (Laughs)._  

Marie, 31 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first degree murder

Although there are obvious benefits for inmates who receive positive feedback from significant others and internalize these appraisals into their self-conceptions, some inmates’ narratives suggest that there are also drawbacks to _overly_ positive appraisals. In Chapter 3, I argued that the inmates’ views on motherhood and marriage reflect a reality that policymakers often fail to acknowledge, much like Haney and March (2010) have argued. There is evidence, however, that even inmates’ close significant others may fail to recognize the realities of the inmates’ lives, and that communication of overly positive appraisals may in some ways harm the inmates’ self-conceptions.

Khloe, for example, repeatedly mentioned her difficult relationship with her parents. Although she perceived them as viewing her as capable and mature, this belief did not bolster her sense of adulthood. To the contrary, she described the overly positive appraisal as exacerbating her sense of helplessness and frustration. In Chapter 4, I described Khloe’s sentiments that therapeutic counselors failed to acknowledge her subjective sense of adulthood when they repeatedly spoke of her “inner child.” On the one hand, she wished counselors in prison programs recognized that she _did_ feel like an
adult in some ways; but on the other hand, her family believed she was more capable of being independent than she felt she was. These mixed appraisals contributed to confusion and frustration in Khloe’s self-conceptions.

well I guess because I’m older now, they feel as though I don’t need them. And they feel like I can fend for myself but they never taught me to fend for myself.

Khloe, 21 years old, serving 5.5 – 12 years for robbery

In her very emotional interview, Marie described feeling undeserving of the unfailing support she received from her parents. Marie was very grateful for this support, but she described how her parents’ firm belief that she was mature, responsible, and adult-like made her feel an acute sense of shame for her perceived failure to live up to her parents’ expectations.

It’s like, I’m the only one that ever was in trouble and in prison. And it’s like cra—I think about them and it’s crazy ‘cause I’m like ugh, like how did I do this to them?

Marie, 31 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first degree murder

Although the inmates thus spoke fondly of their family members—and their mothers in particular—as sources of support and strength during their incarceration, it is also important to note that these positive appraisals did not translate into uniformly positive self-conceptions. This is perhaps because inmates also were aware of social norms that stigmatized incarceration, especially among women. Regardless of the strength of the positive appraisals they received from their family members, the inmates described negative self-conceptions upon consideration of the counter-veiling negative reflected appraisals when they used a “generalized other” as the reference group. I turn to these appraisals next.
Reflected appraisals based on the “generalized other”

While reflected appraisals using the women’s family as the reference group were mostly positive, when asked to reflect on society’s opinion of women prisoners, the women’s appraisals were negative. I present findings on these reflected appraisals in two sections. First, I describe women’s perceptions of the impact of socially constructed age norms on their reflected appraisals. Next, I outline how the inmates’ status as women affected their perceptions of how society generally viewed them. In other words, I first outline the inmates’ conclusions about how age norms affect how society views them, and then on the impact of gender norms in their reflected appraisals using society as the reference group.

The role of age in inmates’ reflected appraisals

Despite their repeated argument that age did not matter in prison, a quarter of the sample believed that society’s attitude towards younger women inmates is less harsh than its attitude towards older women prisoners. These inmates specifically recognized the salience of age norms that shaped the acceptability of criminal behavior and incarceration. Importantly, however, the inmates referred to these norms in general terms that extended beyond norms related to crime, delinquency, and/or incarceration. When appraising themselves using society as a “generalized other,” the norms that the inmates referred to were broad, but concrete. For example, the notion that older women “should know better” emerged repeatedly when women reflected on society’s opinions on them. On the other hand, approximately 15% of the sample believed that society treats young women more harshly to “teach them a lesson.” A small minority (n=5) did not think that age was relevant once gender was taken into account (usually because society was harsh
towards all women prisoners, regardless of age). Most, however, acknowledged the significance of age in shaping how society responded to prisoners.

*I think they respond better, because, you know, we’re at the age where our minds are still developing. And you know, we make rash decisions and get involved with certain things because, you know, we...don’t know any better. You know, older women, they see ‘em as you’re old enough to understand the consequences and responsibilities of your actions, so, you know, you’re held more, you know, accountable than someone younger.*

Nicole, 21 years old, serving 3.5-6 years for robbery

*I: What do you think people outside prison think of young girls in prison compared to older women?*

*E: Um...they say we’re babies in jail. That we have no business being in here.*

Elicia, 22 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first-degree murder

An interesting finding in this study thus pertains to the extent to which the inmates deemed age irrelevant within prison walls, but significant outside prison in the mainstream community. As mentioned in Chapter 5, a number of inmates reported being surprised by the lack of significance of age as a determining factor of adulthood in prison. Their discomfort with the irrelevance of age stemmed primarily from their awareness of how important age was outside prison. It follows, therefore, that when taking on the role of the generalized other (society, in this case), age was a major factor in inmates’ appraisals of themselves. The finding that inmates believe that older prisoners “should know better” than to be incarcerated is also consistent with Massoglia and Uggen’s finding that offenders are acutely aware of the age-based appraisals. Although I will turn to inmates’ self-appraisals later, for the purposes of this section, it is important to note
that the women were aware of age norms, and that this awareness shaped how they viewed themselves. This was especially the case when inmates who viewed themselves as “older” assessed themselves from the standpoint of society, generally construed.

*I think they actually look more harder on older women than they do younger women because they think older women should know better and be more responsible than they do younger women who come to jail when they’re like 16, 17, 18. Like I think they look at us harder than they do the younger ones.*

Denise, 29 years old, serving 2 years, 11 months and 29 days – 6 years for involuntary manslaughter

In spite of the salience of age norms, however, there were mixed findings on what the inmates considered “too old” to be in prison. Denise, for example, referred to herself as belonging to the category of “older” women who are judged more harshly by society; yet Denise was only 8 years older than Nicole, who argued that “younger” inmates like herself were treated less harshly. This finding points not only to the arbitrariness of socially constructed age norms, but also to the abstract nature of these norms (Matsueda, 1992). As such, an awareness of the significance of age was an important theme in most of the inmates’ narratives. However, the mixed findings regarding the “cut-off” age at which society judges women more harshly because of their age points to the simultaneous strength and ambiguity of age norms that affect how women view themselves.

**The role of gender in inmates’ reflected appraisals**

Gender emerged as a very important element of the women’s narratives when asked whether they think the attitudes of people outside prison (again, generally
construed) towards male prisoners are different from their attitudes toward female prisoners. The findings, however, were very mixed: 9 women were either unsure about society’s attitudes towards men or did not think inmates’ gender played a role in these attitudes, 12 women concluded that society is harsher towards men prisoners, and 14 concluded that women are judged more harshly by people outside prison.

The women who argued that women prisoners fare worse noted that a major reason for the differences in attitude and treatment was that men’s incarceration was normalized. The women’s belief that men being in prison is considered normal while women being in prison is not is consistent with scholarly literature that has concluded that women’s incarceration continues to be stigmatized to a greater degree despite the higher number of women now incarcerated (Kruttschnitt, 2010). It is worth noting that a discussion of the differences in society’s attitude towards men and women prisoners resulted in the only mention of race in the entire study: Latoya’s narrative reflected her knowledge of the racial inequalities in the penal system, although she pointed out these inequalities only in the context of men’s incarceration:

*I think men can do it more than females, but at the end of the day, me being a minority, it’s bound to happen to a young, Black man. I mean, or Hispanic. So I think uh…society, if it’s a Hispanic or a Black man, it’s just like oh, it’s nothing new.*

Latoya, 29 years old, serving 1-5 years for a drug offense

The extracts below further exemplify the views of many of the women in the sample who were very aware of the differences in how society viewed them compared to their male counterparts. Note that these extracts highlight the women’s awareness of gender norms regarding not only the acceptability of incarceration, but also regarding
women’s role in society. Specifically, many of the inmates who believe that women prisoners are treated worse than their male counterparts noted that this was in part because women were expected to play the caregiver role. Deviation from that role in the form of incarceration was thus considered even more problematic than in the case of men’s incarceration. Bianca, for example, expressed dismay with traditional gender norms that stipulated women’s role as that of the caregiver and nurturer. These norms, Bianca argued, had not caught up to the social realities of women like herself, who have to fend for themselves and their children without the support of a man in the breadwinner position.

P: It’s [incarceration] more acceptable for men.

M: Why do you think that is?

P: ‘Cause you’re a man. If you’re a woman you’re supposed to be there for [sic] pregnant and in the kitchen. Basically you’re not supposed to be out doing this stuff. If you’re a man, then you know, you do what you doing to take care of your family, but if you’re a woman, they look at you like…a woman in jail? They look at you differently, like, a man, okay, you gotta do what you gotta do…you gotta be a breadwinner, and a lot of times they think a lot of women in jail…they think that most of the women in jail…are drugs, which a lot of them are but there’s some of us who don’t do that. They just think that they be in jail for doing drugs or something like that. You know, they think something like that. But we gotta do what we gotta do too now. Most of our men are dead, locked up, turned gay, whatever, so (laughs)….

Bianca, 53 years old, serving 6.5-13 years for a drug offense
Gender norms were also salient in how the inmates assessed each other’s crimes. In spite of her frustration with gender norms that stigmatized female offending, for example, Bianca also very strongly argued that she would not associate with inmates who hurt children or elderly people. Regardless of her criticism of gender norms that placed women as caregivers and nurturers, Bianca drew on these same norms when expressing her views on other inmates. Despite the positive appraisals the women received from their family, therefore, gender norms that stipulate women’s roles as caregivers played an important role in inmates’ narratives.

Since prior literature has demonstrated that the appraisals of close reference groups are more crucial for individuals’ identities than those of more distant reference groups (such as “people outside prison”) (Matsueda, 1992), it is possible that the impact of the stigma women prisoners experience is tempered by the more positive appraisals the women receive from their family. The findings from this study, however, suggest that this is not the case. As mentioned in Chapter 3, inmate mothers feel a great deal of guilt and shame for failing to live up to a mothering discourse that demands that children be the center of mothers’ lives. Even inmates without children (like Marie) were ashamed about being in prison despite their familial support. Saila even went to the extent of lying to her children about where she was, in spite of her strong belief in the importance of honesty in her family.

C: ‘Cause right [now], to them, I’m in school for bad kids because I didn’t behave. So all the jail stuff? No.
I: That’s all they know.
C: Yeah. So they’ll be like “How’s your teachers, Mom? Are your teachers treating you right? Do they punish you?” And I’m like “oh my god.” “Do you have to go to detention?” I’m like… yeah, but I’d rather have them on that mindset. I know I’m lying to them and that’s number 1 rule in my house with my kids: we don’t lie. But I’d rather… I don’t wanna hurt them. ‘Cause they gonna look at me like “okay Mom, well you told us not to do this and do this and do this because we’re gonna end up here, but you did it.” So it’s…it’s a little hard.

Saila, 29 years old, serving 2 years and 3 months – 6 years for a drug offense.

Taken together, all these findings suggest that the negative appraisals the women receive when they take on the role of society as a “generalized other” do in fact shape their self-conceptions, regardless of the positive appraisals they receive from family members.

**Women prisoners’ self-appraisals**

In this section, I present more detailed findings on the women’s self-appraisals, highlighting the extent to which these appraisals appear to be contingent on comparisons both to the women’s peers and on self-comparisons based on the inmates’ enactment of adult roles prior to their incarceration. Once again, I present findings on the inmates’ self-appraisals in two parts: First, I describe the women’s self-appraisals based on social comparisons with their peers; next, I present findings on how age norms impact how the women view themselves. In doing so, I underscore the women’s assessment of their own lives and the timeliness of their transition to adulthood, highlighting the role of self-comparisons in the construction of the inmates’ self-appraisals.

**Self-appraisals based on comparisons to peers**
Despite the fact that many of the women’s reflected appraisals were positive, the women’s self-appraisals were largely negative when they compared themselves to women their age in the community. In few cases did the positive messages that the women received about themselves from family members and close friends translate into positive self-images. Recall, for example, that Marie expressed that she did not understand why her family was proud of her. When asked about what she thought of herself compared to her age-mates, Marie said, “I don’t think highly of myself because I’m here.” Moreover, when asked what they think of themselves compared to other women their age, the women often responded by noting the ways in which they were “off-time” in accomplishing professional and personal goals. Consistent with Massoglia and Uggen’s (2010) conclusions that “persisters” are more likely than “desisters” to feel like they are not making key transitions on time, the women in this sample concluded that being incarcerated made them feel less accomplished than their peers in the community. When expressing their opinions on how they “measure up” (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010: 550), therefore, the women noted that they lagged behind other members of their cohort in their social and emotional development:

*Well, I’m definitely not mentally and emotionally where I should be, and it’s frustrating. You know, sometimes it cane be very frustrating ‘cause I feel like I’m stuck.*

Jamie, 40 years old, serving 5-10 years for aggravated assault with serious bodily injury

*Well my age, there’s women at 34 years old that have a high position in a job, getting paid a lot of money, have a good education, and maybe don’t have no kids at my age. And I look up to them. On the other hand, I am not educated because I didn’t graduate*
Camila, 34 years old, serving 3-10 years for robbery

The significance of reference groups was clear in the inmates’ self-appraisals, since many explicitly distinguished how they viewed themselves when they compared themselves to women their age in prison from their self-conceptions based on comparisons to women in the community. Although they judged themselves negatively when they thought of women their age (peers, siblings, and so on) in the community, approximately 30% of the women expressed positive self-appraisals when they used other inmates as their reference group. Jamie, for example, followed up her comparison of herself with women on the outside with a comparison of herself with 40-year-old inmates at Muncy:

_How do I compare myself with the 40 year olds here? I think that I’m getting better and I think that with me dealing with everything that I’m dealing with, you know, trying to deal with all my issues and stuff like that, I think that I’m surpassing them in that aspect because I’m getting help for myself, as to where I think a lot of them are still stuck._

Jamie, 40 years old, serving 5-10 years for aggravated assault with serious bodily injury

Similarly, Sheila’s self-appraisals were positive because, compared to other inmates who were still absorbed in their addictions, she felt that she had made more progress in working on her own self-development while incarcerated than other inmates she interacted with:

_Now that I see they are my age, they’re still...some of them here still need some growing to do. They’re still in that mentality about “I wanna get high” and all this stuff. And_
they’re not ready to change or nothing. And I telling them, if you go out there again, that’d be your last run. “Oh, I got this, and....” You only could talk to them.

Sheila, 40 years old, serving 8 years and 4 months-20 years for aggravated assault

Inmates thus appear to reap some psychological benefits from positive self-appraisals when they compare themselves with other inmates. The implications of this finding, however, should be considered carefully. It is possible that continued interaction with other inmates (along with constant comparisons with these inmates) could result in overly positive self-appraisals that are difficult to sustain once inmates have been released. Specifically, if inmates’ self-conceptions are contingent on positive comparisons with other inmates who have themselves failed to enact adult roles successfully, these self-conceptions may suffer when the women are released and once again surrounded by age-mates who have fared better than they have in attaining key adulthood markers. The fact that the inmates assess themselves more positively when comparing themselves to other inmates may therefore be problematic because most inmates will be released from prison and lose close contact with the inmates from whom they derive these positive self-appraisals.

Even if inmates continue to use other inmates as their reference group once they are released, however, their positive self-appraisals would likely be of little use to them if they are unable to conform to age norms that structure the transition to adulthood outside prison. For this reason, the benefits of self-appraisals stemming from positive comparisons to other inmates may be limited, and in some ways, these appraisals may ultimately harm the inmates’ self-images once they are released.

**Self-appraisals based on self-comparisons**
According to structural symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980; Stryker and Burke, 2000), people begin to feel adult as they enact adult roles in separate domains, such as the home or the workplace (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010). Over time, the enactment of adult roles across different domains results in one’s sense of adulthood becoming a central element of one’s identity. In Chapter 5, I described the way in which the women reconciled their lack of independence with their sense of adulthood by using intangible markers of adulthood such as carrying oneself in a dignified and mature manner. Despite this, many of the women noted that their sense of adulthood was undermined by the fact that they could not engaged in the behaviors they equated with a sense of adulthood, such as paying their own bills and, more significantly, parenting. Just as enactment of adult roles across separate domains results in a sense of adulthood that is central to an individual’s identity, the women believed that disintegration of these roles through incarceration undermined their sense of adulthood, despite their strong belief that it was still possible to feel and behave like an adult while incarcerated. When the inmates engaged in a process of self-reflection by comparing their abilities to perform adults effectively in prison with their enactment of adult roles prior to their incarceration, therefore, their self-appraisals suffered:

I: Do you feel like an adult now?

S: Not here in jail.

S: Okay, can you tell me why?

I: (Laughs). Because I rely on my family to send me money!

Samantha, 39 years old, serving 7.5-15 years for aggravated assault
Although in most cases incarceration resulted in the loss of women’s abilities to enact adult roles that the women performed outside prison, some women continued to maintain some of their adult responsibilities even while incarcerated. Like the women in Enos’ (2001) sample, the inmates continued to enact their roles as mothers even from prison. For example, Tandy, who had given birth to her second daughter while incarcerated, read and recorded stories on tapes so that her daughter could listen to them. Theoretical propositions derived from structural symbolic interactionism would suggest that, to the extent that inmates like Tandy continue to enact adult roles to some degree, they would be more likely to feel like they are adults. Consistent with this hypothesis, women such as Tandy, who were able to continue enacting the roles they felt were crucial for the development of a sense of adulthood noted that they did still feel like adults, even while incarcerated:

M: ...Do you feel like an adult now?

T: Um, being in here? I mean, I’m an adult, but...I’m a very restricted adult. Like....

... Um, I don’t think it puts...I don’t think it puts a stop to your sense of adulthood. I mean, I’m still a mother, I still, you know, maintain the responsibility for my kids, I still, you know, do my best to be a parent from where I’m at, I take...I have tried to take care of my own finances.

Tandy, 33 years old, serving 3 years and 8 months – 7 years and 4 months for homicide by vehicle while DUI

Among the women who recognized that they simply could not continue earning money or mothering from behind bars, over 15% of the women “bracketed” their
incarceration by highlighting the ways in which they enacted adult roles on the outside, prior to their incarceration. In Chapter 3, I described Enos’ concept of “identity talk,” a process of identity construction that involved the inmates distancing themselves from other inmates or justifying their identities as mothers on other grounds. In that chapter, I also noted that the inmates did not bracket their criminal behavior by arguing—as some scholars (Enos, 2001; Giordano, 2010) have found offenders to do—that their children were not affected by their criminal activities.

Some women in this sample who could no longer mother appropriately did, however, protect their identities as mothers by bracketing their incarceration. In other words, they justified their identities as mothers by focusing on the ways in which they were good mothers when they were before they were incarcerated. In this way, despite their criminal behavior outside prison, the inmates focused on their pre-prison identities as a way of bracketing their identities as inmates in the context of mothering. Camila, for example, explained that she did think of herself as a good mother because of her attitude towards, and interaction with, her children when she was not incarcerated. Note that in the extract below, Camila ties her successful enactment of the motherhood role directly to her own sense of adulthood, but she focuses entirely on her mothering practices before she was incarcerated. Although it may seem that comparing their current identities with what they saw as their pre-prison successful performance as mothers would result in negative self-appraisals, by engaging in “identity talk” that bracketed their current status as inmates, the women protected their positive appraisals:

*Well, I’m very responsible with my kids. Unfortunately I’m here, but it just don’t seem like it ‘cause I’m incarcerated right now. But when I wasn’t, I was very responsible with*
my bills, my kids, my home, and even though I didn’t work and had income coming in, I still provided for my kids. So I consider myself an adult, yeah.

Camila, 34 years old, serving 3-10 years for robbery

Similarly, Saila passionately described her fierce protectiveness of her children. Unlike Camila—who excluded almost entirely from her narrative an opinion on the impact of her incarceration on her ability to mother—Saila expressed the guilt and shame that was common in most of the narratives of those inmates who were mothers. Despite this, Saila exclaimed “For me, I mean, I think I’m the best mother!” Like Camila, Saila too noted that the mothering of her children was a major component of her sense of adulthood. Her “identity talk,” like Camila’s, was thus centered on a discussion of the ways in which her mothering practices outside prison conformed to dominant parenting ideologies (Enos, 2001; Griffith and Smith, 1967).

I don’t know, but, you know, I just...I try to take care of my kids the way they’re supposed to be taken care of. You know, I wake up, they got full-course meals all day, you know, I bathe ’em, make sure they’re bathed right, make sure they’re fed right, I sit down and do homework with them, I teach them...I don’t let them watch certain things on TV and that’s one thing they always argue with me about.

In conclusion, the inmates’ self-appraisals were based on a) the inmates’ comparisons with other inmates; and b) self-comparisons, which involved the inmates comparing their current enactment of adult roles with their pre-prison performance of these roles. When engaging in the process of self-comparison, however, inmates’ self-appraisals were either positive or negative depending on the specific type of self-comparison occurring. On the one hand, some inmates recognized that they were unable
to sustain the practices that contributed to their sense of adulthood when they were outside prison, such as paying the bills. Awareness of their inability to perform adult roles effectively most frequently resulted in negative self-appraisals. On the other hand, however, some inmates bracketed their incarceration when they constructed their self-appraisals. In these cases, the inmates’ self-comparisons focused much more on their pre-prison lives: Although they acknowledged their current status as inmates, this status played an insignificant role when they assessed their enactment of adult roles such as motherhood. Like the women in Enos’ sample, the inmates’ strategy of bracketing their incarceration proved to be an effective strategy to sustain their positive self-appraisals, since these women noted that they enacted adult roles well when they were outside prison. While prior literature has noted the negative impact of incarceration on inmates’ self-images (Goffman, 1968), the findings of this study reveal that inmates’ identities as adults are contingent not only on the reference group they employ when assessing themselves, but also on the strategies they use to protect themselves from the harmful effects of the inmate label.

**Age norms and self-appraisals**

As mentioned earlier, despite their repeated opinion that age did not matter in defining adulthood in prison, the women were keenly aware of age-prescribed norms that problematize offending and incarceration as individuals age (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010). In fact, although they disavowed the importance of age in definitions of adulthood in Muncy, the inmates expressed strong support for age norms regarding marriage, motherhood, co-habitation, and employment, all markers of adulthood. In this final
section, I present findings on how the inmates’ reliance on, and attempted conformity to, age norms appear to affect their own self-conceptions.

The inmates in this study repeatedly noted that age was indeed a significant factor in timing key transitions to adult roles. Motherhood was the transition most strictly assessed in terms of age, with approximately half of the women arguing that young women should wait at least until they were out of their teen years before having children. The extract below demonstrates the salience of age norms in the women’s self-appraisals by highlighting the view, shared by the majority of women in the sample who were mothers, that they had become mothers at too young an age:

*I: And why do you think that you should have waited a little longer to have your first daughter?*

*C: Um...because I enjoyed being single. Being free. Not having no, um...no responsibility taking care of another person but myself. So um, I could have waited longer and pursued my education instead.*

Camila, 34 years old, serving 3-10 years for robbery

When asked whether she thinks there is an appropriate age for a woman to become a mother, Camila (34 years old) later said that, based on her own life, she would have waited until she was 30 years old to have her first daughter. Even among the women who did not believe that there was a specific age at which it was appropriate for a woman to become a mother, get married, or cohabitate, there was a general consensus that there was virtue in waiting to undergo these transitions. While some women held that there was no “right” age to undergo certain key transitions, many of these women concluded that they had been too young to undergo these transitions when they did. Leslie (45 years
old), for example, explained that her own daughters had children when they were 21, and their different life-course trajectories had convinced her that there was no “right age” to have a child; it simply depended on individual circumstances. However, she simultaneously noted that she believes she was too young when she had her first child at 20.

Once again, therefore, there was ambiguity about the specific age at which certain transitions switched from being “off-time” to “on-time,” but almost 80% of the women recognized that there were in fact age ranges during which specific transitions to adult roles were appropriate and timely. Here, it is important to note that, perhaps because of the lack of specificity in age norms, the inmates relied on their own life experiences to make these norms less abstract. Although over 30% of the inmates recognized that they had their first child earlier than would be considered normative, for instance, they did not rely on abstract norms regarding the transition to adulthood when asked about the right age to have a child. Instead, they reflected on their own lives and arrived upon a concrete age. As such, the inmates not only demonstrated an awareness of age norms; they also actively interpreted these norms based on their own unique life histories.

Similarly, the inmates related these norms to their own life experiences as they appraised themselves. For example, some inmates appraised themselves negatively after explicitly acknowledging the points in their life course at which they had deviated from what they perceived to be normative age-appropriate behavior. Despite the abstract nature of age norms, therefore, the inmates’ awareness of age-graded timetables often resulted in negative self-appraisals once the women recognized that they had not progressed through the transition to adulthood on normative timetables. Previous chapters have described in
detail the women’s opinions that they were “off-schedule” in making certain transitions because of their incarceration, and that they had made other transitions prematurely in their adolescent and early adult years. Although the details of those findings need not be repeated here, in the context of the women’s self-appraisals, the key finding is that inmates’ awareness of age-graded timetables regarding adulthood affected how they assessed their own lives.

Sheila, for example, established residential independence when she was 11 years old, and repeatedly described her experience of “raising herself.” Although she concluded that she had learned to be independent at a very young age, this fact alone did not result in a positive self-appraisal because Sheila was aware that 11 was too young an age for an individual to experience such a level of independence. Despite the seemingly positive valence of Sheila’s appraisal of herself as independent, her awareness and belief in age norms that problematized independence at such an early age contributed to a negative assessment of her pre-prison identity. When talking about her first relationship (which began when Sheila was 15 and led immediately to co-habitation), for instance, Sheila directly tied her unhealthy relationship with her premature transition to adulthood:

M: Okay. And now looking back at it, do you think it was an appropriate age to be in a relationship?

P: No, because I didn’t have no guidance, like, somebody to tell me what was right or wrong or whatever. I learned that on my own. So I don’t think it was healthy (laughed).

When reflecting on co-habiting at such an early age, Sheila commented, “Well since...on me, since I raised myself, I thought it was, but now after the years passed...now looking at that, it was too soon.” As such, although the inmates repeatedly
concluded that being independent was a key factor in their subjective sense of adulthood, Sheila’s early independence did not translate into a positive self-appraisal because of her recognition that she had attained this independence prematurely. In fact, Sheila concluded that despite her early independence, she currently felt like an adult (at 44 years old) because she was only now learning to attain her goals (such as overcoming her drug addiction) productively and responsibly. The result of comparing her current identity with her identity and behavior earlier in her life course was an appraisal that was both positive and negative: It recognized the ways in which her life-course patterns were non-normative, while simultaneously acknowledging her current efforts to restore her trajectory to a normative schedule.

Conversely, Hannah’s narrative reflected the salience of age norms in her life in a different way. Where Sheila was unsure even of how to define adulthood because of her premature transition to independent living, Hannah’s self-appraisals were more positive because she believed that she had overcome more challenges than most women her age. Although the women’s appraisals were most frequently positive when they compared themselves to other inmates, Hannah’s narrative suggests that the obstacles that women prisoners confront play a role in how the women view themselves relative even to their age-mates in the community:

I don’t put myself above anybody, but I do think I’m past some of the same...I do think my mind-frame is a little different than theirs. I think it’s a little bit more advanced than theirs as far as life experience.

Hannah, 20 years old, serving 6 – 12 years for robbery
In conclusion, some inmates acknowledged that they were unable to enact adult roles effectively, and this damaged their self-conceptions. Marie, for example, was deeply troubled by the fact that she did not think she would ever have the opportunity to have children (since she was serving a life sentence). She and other long-termers, however, sought alternative ways to fulfill adult roles such as motherhood. For instance, as mentioned, Marie hoped to be acting as a role model to newer inmates if she was still incarcerated in 10 years. She was also involved in the dog-training program at Muncy, and she described the puppy she was training as her “baby.” Though their inability to play conventional adult roles was frustrating, therefore, inmates who had been incarcerated for many years actively sought out ways to “give back” either to other inmates or to the community generally.

*Um, like here, like I kinda feel less sometimes because it’s hard when you want to feel like you’re needed for something and you know, it’s hard to be able to have responsibility here. That’s why I joined the dog program and um…’cause I need to know that I’m doing something and that I’m helping somebody else.*

Marie, 31 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first degree murder

Others like Hannah, however, rejected the notion that failure to conform to normative life-course timetables should undermine offenders’ sense of adulthood; to the contrary, Hannah argued that—rather than failing to meet the minimum standards required to attain adulthood—she had achieved more than other women her age in the community by confronting and coping with her prison experiences. While the specific outcome of the appraisal process varied from woman to woman depending on each
inmate’s unique life experiences, therefore, an awareness of age-appropriate experiences and roles drove women’s self-appraisals.

**Conclusion**

Symbolic interactionism has stressed the importance of appraisals in defining individuals’ identities. Building on Massoglia and Uggen’s (2010) argument that desisters are more likely than persisters to feel like they are adults and that they are making key transitions to adult roles in a timely manner, this chapter explored women prisoners’ self- and reflected appraisals in the context of adulthood and age-related norms. The findings in the chapter further emphasize the necessity of taking into consideration individuals’ reference groups when asking questions related to individuals’ identities. Specifically, the findings indicate that the women prisoners’ reflected appraisals are positive when they use their families—and especially their mothers—as their reference groups.

Despite this, the well-known stigma attached to prisoners generally (Goffman, 1968) and to women prisoners especially (Kruttschnitt, 2010) was not lost on the women in this sample. In fact, gender played a significant role in shaping the women’s reflected appraisals when asked to consider the opinion of *society* on women prisoners. The majority of women argued that men’s incarceration was more socially acceptable—and had even become normalized in recent years—while women prisoners continued to be condemned. Consistent with prior literature on women’s incarceration (Enos, 2001; Hannah-Moffatt and Shaw, 2001; Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2003), therefore, the findings of this study highlight the gendered nature of women’s punishment. Specifically, the women—like the young mothers in Haney’s (2010) study—expressed frustration with
society’s lack of acknowledgement of shifting gender norms that have altered the social reality of women who now take on the role (previously occupied primarily by men) of financial provider for themselves and their families.

The meaning that inmates attribute to the concept of age also plays a central theme in the findings outlined in this chapter. With regard to their reflected appraisals, the women recognized that older women were more likely to be pathologized and condemned by society because of age norms that stipulate that older women should “know better.” Related to the gendered nature of punishment, the women also argued that older women who were mothers were further condemned because of their perceived failure in meeting care-giving responsibilities. The majority of women concluded, on the other hand, that society was more lenient with young women who came to prison simply because they were younger and more naïve. The women in this sample thus recognized that society (used to capture the “generalized other”) was more forgiving of young adults who were seen as going through a tumultuous period of experimentation and identity-searching during their transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Since many of the women in this sample had difficult childhood and early adult experiences (see Chapter 4), it is unsurprising that they were unable to conform to normative timetables for attaining adulthood (Osgood et al., 2005). The finding, however, that older women experience negative reflected appraisals both because of their gender and their age is one that must be taken seriously, since these women are doubly stigmatized. Moreover, as Samantha noted, older women may also face unique difficulties in setting their life course straight even after they are released, thus worsening their already-negative self- and reflected appraisals.
Age played an especially important role in the women’s self-appraisals. Specifically, almost every single woman expressed very positive self-appraisals when they compared themselves to their age-mates in Muncy, but they also acknowledged their own lack of adherence to age-graded timetables for making the transition to adulthood. The inmates’ failure to adhere to appropriate timelines for attaining adulthood strongly affected their assessments of themselves. When they compared themselves to their age-mates outside prison, therefore, most of the women acknowledged that they were “off-time” in making timely transitions to adult roles and responsibilities. Importantly, however, some younger inmates such as Hannah felt that they were more mature than their age-mates outside prison because of their incarceration. Although being incarcerated derailed their trajectories, the difficulties that came with being incarcerated and facing a significant period in prison led inmates such as Hannah to construct positive self-appraisals based on their belief that they had accumulated more life experiences that other women their age, even in the community.

This chapter has shown that women prisoners’ assessments of how others view them, as well as their own assessments of themselves, appear very much to be affected by the reference group the inmates employ in this assessment. The findings also indicate that inmates are able to—and do—draw on their own life experiences as they interpret and reflect on the relevance of age norms in their assessments of themselves, regardless of the reference group they rely on in the appraisal process. Specifically, the inmates in this sample appear to reconcile their status as inmates with a positive self-image not only by comparing themselves to other inmates (many of whom have themselves failed to adhere
to age-graded timetables), but also by framing their lack of adherence to age norms in positive ways.

This latter strategy in particular likely reflects inmates’ use of “identity talk” that is geared towards protecting their status as adults while they are incarcerated. This is especially likely to be the case because, as I have described, the inmates did recognize the significance of age norms, and this recognition frequently contributed to negative self-appraisals. Noting the ways in which their lack of conformity to these norms makes them feel more adult may reflect the inmates’ attempts to “rewrite” their incarceration to live up to the “identity standard” (Dyer, 2005) that they have set for themselves. Some inmates did this by “bracketing” their incarceration and focusing on their pre-prison identities, while others framed these events as life experiences that bolstered their sense of adulthood and placed them above other women their age who had not been forced to confront and overcome the unique challenges prisoners face. Finally, the majority of inmates expressed the shame that prior research (Enos, 2001; Celinska and Siegel, 2010) has noted is a central element of inmates’ identities in prison. The women in this study, however, employed various strategies of “identity talk” that allowed them to sustain a positive self-conception even as they were exposed to the intense stigma that comes with being a woman prisoner (Krusttschnitt, 2010).

When interpreting the findings regarding the women’s self- and reflected appraisals, it is important to consider the limitations of the qualitative data employed in this study. Specifically, the methodology I employ here does not permit a comparison of the inmates’ appraisals before and after their incarceration. It is thus impossible to state conclusively whether these appraisals preceded their incarceration, or whether these
appraisals are the result of their incarceration. As mentioned in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, a statistical test of this importation versus deprivation argument is not the goal of this study. Instead, this chapter has sought to highlight how women prisoners interpret and negotiate to their prison lives and identities. Whether or not incarceration has caused a shift in the inmates’ appraisals, the findings described in this chapter provide strong support for the argument that who inmates compare themselves to, along with their beliefs regarding how society views them, shapes how the women describe their status as adults. This focus on the inmates’ identity negotiation processes is important if we are to understand inmates’ prison lives more fully, especially because how offenders construct and reconstruct their identities has implications for their criminal trajectories (Maruna, 2001; Massoglia and Uggen, 2010).

Future scholars, however, should endeavor to compare women’s pre- and post-incarceration identities. For example, the findings in this study suggest that the inmates assessed themselves negatively when they compared themselves to their peers in the community. Further research should examine whether this kind of negative assessment persists even when the inmates are released (or before they are incarcerated) and whether being in prison exacerbates the negative self-appraisal. Additionally, more in-depth research is needed to understand the unique identity-related issues that older women prisoners face as they confront stigma based on both age and gender while they are incarcerated. Finally, the literature would benefit from a deeper understanding of how inmates’ family members’ attitude towards the inmates change before, during, and after the inmates’ incarceration. This would be helpful because the findings in this study
suggest that the inmates receive support and positive appraisals from their family members, and their mothers especially, while they are incarcerated.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter is to revisit and highlight the major findings that I have described in this study. In doing so, I also outline the practical and theoretical implications of the major conclusions, along with suggestions for future research based on each conclusion.

**Conclusion 1: Age norms carry weight outside prison and for the inmates’ appraisals, but they carry little relevance in prison**

The findings in this study reveal a complicated picture of inmates’ responses to the social construction of age norms. I noted in Chapter 5 that the inmates repeatedly concluded that their experience in Muncy had called into question their long-held belief that age was directly linked to adulthood. Age, the inmates argued, was simply not relevant within the prison walls the way it was outside prison. In support of this claim, the inmates pointed to young women who behaved like adults and older women who behaved like they were teenagers, noting that the insignificance of age was far more pronounced in Muncy than it was in the communities the women lived in.

Despite their firm belief that age did not shape adulthood in prison, however, the inmates were acutely aware of age-graded timetables that structured transitions to adult roles. More significantly, the inmates recognized that they had deviated from these timetables (either by prematurely entering into adult roles or by failing to make the transition to marriage, motherhood, and financial independence successfully), and this recognition affected how they viewed themselves. When considering women in the community who were their age, therefore, many of the inmates concluded that they were
“off-time” in attaining adulthood markers, and that this fact had a negative impact on their self-conceptions.

Moreover, in spite of their view that their experience in Muncy had shaken their belief in the tie between age and adulthood, the majority of women in the sample were convinced that there were in fact appropriate and inappropriate ages to enter into adult roles. Neither their own deviation from conventional timetables nor their experience in prison thus resulted in a rejection of age norms, even though the inmates’ reliance on these norms resulted in negative self-appraisals rooted in their failure to undergo the transition to adulthood successfully. These findings point to the need for further research on the meaning of age and on how individuals interpret age norms. For example, some inmates noted that they had married early in life because they equated marriage with adulthood, but only retrospectively recognized that their transition to marriage had been premature. Despite the salience of conventional markers of adulthood, therefore, the lack of specificity in age norms resulted in many women reporting premature transitions that they were unaware were “off-time” until much later. Examining how offenders and/or inmates interpret age is important if we are to understand more fully why and how they come to be “off-time” in making transitions to adult roles.

**Conclusion 2: Inmates resemble women in the community in their partial adherence to conventional markers of adulthood**

Chapter 3 presented detailed findings related to inmates’ adherence to conventional markers of adulthood such as marriage, motherhood, and employment/independence. The findings in that chapter provide strong support for the conclusion that, like women in the community, women prisoners adhere to some
conventional markers of adulthood (motherhood in particular), while expressing ambivalence about others (marriage in particular). Of particular importance is the fact that the majority of inmates noted that a sense of independence was a major component of their subjective sense of adulthood. This finding is consistent with Aronson’s (2008) study of young women in the community who concluded that independence—be it emotional, social, or financial—was a key marker of adulthood.

The finding that women in prison are similar to women outside prison in their conformity to conventional markers of adulthood is a significant one. It suggests that, although the prison culture might be harmful in some ways (Goffman, 1968; Sutherland, 1939), there is little evidence to suggest that being in prison radically or negatively alters the way women define adulthood and adult roles. Specifically, there was no evidence in this study that living within the prison environment and interacting with other inmates results in adherence to anti-social norms that compete with conventional markers of adult status in shaping inmates’ definitions of adulthood. Instead, the narratives of the inmates I interviewed and corresponded with demonstrated that, like women outside prison, the inmates believe that—first and foremost—a woman should be independent if she is to feel like an adult.

Having experienced harmful relationships and marriages, the inmates also expressed an awareness of the pitfalls of considering marriage a marker of adulthood. As mentioned, some inmates entered into these marriages because they equated being married with being an adult. As Haney and March (2005) have argued, policy-makers should be aware that marriage is simply not an ideal that low-income women strive to attain. Similarly, this study indicates that, from a practical standpoint, marriage may be a
dangerous marker of adulthood simply because some women—like those in this sample—may enter into harmful relationships in a quest to be a “grown-up.” Despite some policy-makers’ calls for a return to “traditional” family values, therefore, the replacement—or at least the supplementing—of marriage as a marker of adulthood with healthier markers such as employment and independence may be positive developments for women offenders.

Since these findings are consistent with other qualitative research on women in the community (Aronson, 2008; Edin and Kefalas, 2005), future research should seek to explore further the ways in which women inmates resemble women in the community. As Massoglia, Remster, and King (2011) have noted, instead of considering the ways in which incarceration constitutes a unique event, more research is required on how incarceration is similar to other life-course events. I have argued in this dissertation that a similar shift is needed in our examinations of inmates: Instead of focusing on the ways in which inmates constitute a unique social group, we should highlight the similarities inmates and people in the community share. This, I believe, will go a long way in ameliorating the harmful stigma that stems from the “othering” of women prisoners especially.

**Conclusion 3: Women prisoners’ beliefs regarding the impact of confinement on their sense of adulthood are mixed**

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I outlined two possibilities regarding women’s beliefs on the impact of confinement on their subjective sense of adulthood: 1) The infantilization that comes with being an inmate could undermine the inmates’ sense of adulthood; or 2) the inmates may view their incarceration as a time for self-reflection and
feel more like adults due to a process of conscious self-improvement. The findings in this study provide support for both possibilities. On the one hand, the inmates repeatedly noted that the prison environment undermined their sense of adulthood because they lacked the independence that they believed was integral to their sense of adulthood. On the other hand, however, many inmates noted that being in prison had helped them in meaningful ways. For example, several women were grateful for therapy and rehabilitation programs that assisted them in confronting issues related to drug and alcohol use, physical and sexual abuse histories, and so on. These women believed that being in prison gave them the time and resources they needed to resolve deep-seated problems. The findings thus suggest that the prison environment is harmful to inmates’ sense of adulthood, but specific prison programs (and in some cases, the mere fact of being in prison) bolster this sense of adulthood. Future research should explore more systematically whether inmates are able to sustain the benefits of these prison programs when they are released.

Since it is plausible that inmates’ sense of adulthood in prison will affect their future offending patterns (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010; O’Brien, 2009), researchers and correctional officials should seek to evaluate further and strengthen prison programs that are helpful in reinforcing inmates’ sense of adulthood. These programs may include drug and alcohol counseling, therapy for battered women, and so on. Simultaneously, the findings in this study suggest that there may be specific, narrow changes in the prison environment that could counter the infantilizing elements of this environment. For example, I noted that carrying oneself with class and dignity was an alternative, intangible marker of adulthood that the inmates constructed to replace the independence
they lacked in prison. Related to this finding, some inmates noted that they felt like adults when the prison staff spoke to them respectfully, and that their reciprocation of this respect also made them feel more like adults. At the interactional level, therefore, encouraging a more formal, respectful relationship between correctional staff and inmates could thus bolster how adult women feel.

That the inmates feel like adults when they perceive that prison staff members respect them points to the significance of the inmates’ reflected appraisals in defining the inmates’ self-conceptions. Chapter 6 noted that the inmates’ reflected appraisals were positive when they used their family members as their reference group, and their self-appraisals benefited from comparisons to other inmates. I noted, however, that the use of inmates as a reference group could result in positive self-appraisals that are difficult to sustain when the inmates are released. Modifications to how prison staff members interact with inmates could thus also provide inmates with an alternative, more conventional reference group within prison (staff members) that can strengthen inmates’ self-images.

**Conclusion 4: Long-term inmates and lifers represent the “true” adults in prison**

In Chapter 5, I argued that contrary to literature on the harmful impact of long imprisonment sentences on inmates’ self-conceptions, women serving life-without-parole sentences undergo a process of “positive prisonization.” During this process, they absorb positive elements of the prison culture and distance themselves from antisocial elements over time. Eventually, by manifesting intangible markers of adulthood (such as carrying themselves with class and dignity), the lifers come to represent the “true” adults in prison. In addition to demonstrating these intangible markers of adulthood, I also found that
inmates believe that the women who have been incarcerated the longest—and women serving life-without-parole sentences in particular—are “mother figures” and role models for younger, newer inmates.

Sentence length was important not only for the purposes of categorizing the inmates; the narratives explicitly described how time spent in prison affected their response to their incarceration. Specifically, inmates who had been incarcerated for 5 years or more noted that they had “cycled” through different responses to their incarceration before finally “settling down” and coming to manifest the intangible traits that characterize adulthood in Muncy. Similarly, inmates in the other categories concluded that lifers and long-termers represented the “true” adults in prison because they had already cycled through the earlier, more tumultuous period of their incarceration.

These findings present a number of avenues that future researchers should pursue. First, given that lifers and long-termers cycle through different responses to incarceration, future research should examine these inmates’ views on how their roles as mother figures evolve over their sentence length. Second, although early research on women’s prisons focused extensively on the salience of “play-families” in these institutions (Giallombardo, 1966; Heffernan, 1972; Ward and Kassebaum, 1965), this topic deserves much more attention in the wake of a prison boom that disproportionately affected the women’s prison population. Given lifers’ and long-termers’ roles as “mother figures,” future research should consider how these inmates fit into these broader kinship networks within the prison environment. Tracing the connection between definitions of adulthood in prison and lifers’ roles as mother figures in “play-families” (family relations defined
through emotional and social ties with other inmates, rather than biological connections) would represent an important extension of the literature on both women prisoners’ lived experiences and family structures in prison.

The finding that inmates serving long sentences undergo a process of “positive prisonization” should also be taken seriously. Women inmates continue to bear the brunt of the stigma that comes with the inmate label (Kruttschnitt, 2010), and since women serving life sentences have generally been convicted of murder, they are among the most stigmatized prisoners in the U.S. prison population. The findings of this study, however, suggests that these inmates are in reality the most conventional, even prosocial, women in prison. In fact, the findings indicate that becoming role models for younger inmates is one of many ways that lifers strive to “give back” to the community. More attention should be paid to women serving life-without-parole sentences in particular in an attempt to shed light on these women’s prison identities to counter the stigma they face.

**Conclusion 5: Women prisoners’ early life-course experiences play an important role in shaping their views on, and subjective sense of, adulthood**

A key finding in this study is that women inmates’ childhood and early adulthood experiences have a reverberating impact on their constructions of adulthood as well as their conformity to conventional markers of adulthood. Some women’s disavowal of marriage, for example, was directly linked to their experiences in an abusive marriage. The life-course perspective on the inmates’ definitions of adulthood that was presented in Chapter 4 also focused on the **timing** of transitions into adult roles. The findings suggest that inmates’ deviation from normative timetables for the transition to adulthood is crucial to understanding their views on adulthood more broadly. Although all research on
adulthood would benefit from an understanding of the short-term events and transitions that shape individuals’ life-course trajectories, this knowledge is especially important when studying women inmates or offenders, most of whom have histories of serious sexual and physical abuse. While this study is focused specifically on adulthood, it thus joins the growing body of literature (Giordano, 2010; Hagan and Foster, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2005) that underscores the value in studying offenders’ lives through a life-course lens that emphasizes the timing and sequencing of short-term events and transitions that affect long-term trajectories.

**Summary**

In this study, I explored how women inmates construct definitions of adulthood while they are incarcerated, and whether their experience in prison appears to affect their conformity to conventional markers of adulthood and/or their subjective sense of adulthood. The central purpose of this study was to shed light on an element of women inmates’ prison experiences that has not been studied, but that could affect the inmates’ ability and/or desire to desist from crime upon their release (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010; O’Brien, 2009). Using a symbolic interactionist perspective to focus on inmates’ identities as adults, the findings indicate that the depersonalizing, restrictive prison environment undermines inmates’ sense of adulthood. This finding suggests an important line of inquiry regarding the role of inmates’ sense of adulthood in examinations of the negative effects of incarceration on future offending patterns.

However, the findings in this study also indicate that inmates pursue a range of strategies to reconcile their status as inmates with their status as adults. Regardless of the infantilizing nature of the prison environment, therefore, the inmates actively construct
ways to protect their identities as adults. This finding underscores the benefits of employing a theoretical perspective, such as symbolic interactionism, that focuses on the specific processes through which inmates construct and negotiate their identities while in prison. Studying inmates’ identities in this way permits a well-rounded understanding of how inmates interpret their prison lives, and it gives women prisoners voice and an opportunity to construct knowledge about themselves. This is especially valuable in a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to gain access to prison facilities to conduct research on inmate populations.

Many of the women I interviewed and corresponded with by mail were grateful for the opportunity to speak to an “outsider” about their lives. Since these opportunities are few and far-between for inmates, it is my hope that future scholars continue to expand the boundaries of prison sociology by studying inmates’ prison lives through fieldwork in prisons. As Marie (Marie, 31 years old, serving a life-without-parole sentence for first degree murder) described when my interview with her concluded, inmates firmly believe that speaking to researchers such as myself about their lives makes people outside prison recognize that women prisoners “are not monsters.” The in-depth, sometimes intimate, portrayal of the inmates in this study will, I hope, go some lengths in affirming Marie’s belief that scholarly research can contribute to the disruption of stigmatizing stereotypes of women prisoners.
APPENDIX A

PROFILES OF PARTICIPANTS

To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, I assigned a pseudonym for each woman I interviewed, and I provide limited information about the inmates’ social or criminal histories. An asterisk denotes participants who I also corresponded with in the mailing portion of the study.

Alysa: A 47-year-old African American woman, Alysa was serving 9 months-2 years for prostitution. Alysa reported taking on many care-giving responsibilities as a child. In talking about her life prior to her incarceration, Alysa described herself as a “street person,” and reported that only now was she tired of her life on the streets. Alysa had been in a common-law marriage for 9 years until her husband passed away, and she had 3 children.

Amy: Amy, a 40-year-old White woman, had been married for 18 years at the time of the interview, and her husband was also incarcerated. Although she had no biological children of her own, she considered her husband’s three children her own. Amy was serving 3-10 years for intimidation of a witness.

* Anita: Anita, a 51-year-old African-American woman, was serving 2-7 years for theft. Anita had been married twice and was in a relationship at the time of the interview. In a subsequent letter, however, she reported that that relationship had ended. Anita had 6 children, and she noted that although motherhood had always been important to her, it had not been important enough to her to stop her criminal behavior. At the time of the interview, however, Anita’s narrative suggested that she was acutely aware of her age, and was thus making amends with her children.

* Anne: Anne was a 43-year-old White woman serving a sentence of life without parole for first-degree murder. Anne was married for over a decade to a partner she described as abusive. They had 2 children together, one of whom was deceased. She had restarted communication with her living child a few years prior to the interview. At the time of the interview, she had served 24 years in Muncy.

* Barbara: Barbara, a 40-year-old Hispanic woman, was serving 10-20 years for kidnapping with intent to inflict injury. Barbara had been married once, and she had 2 children from a prior relationship. Both in the interview and in her letters, Barbara spoke extensively of her history of drug addiction and of her familial difficulties. While the study was being conducted, Barbara was trying to reconcile with her estranged daughter.
Bernice: Bernice was a 50-year-old African-American woman who was serving 3-10 years for a drug offense. At the time of the interview, she had been in a relationship with a man outside prison who she considered her spouse because their relationship constituted a common-law marriage. Later in the interview, she disclosed that she was also involved with a woman who she had met while in prison, who had since been released. Bernice had 1 child who had a criminal and drug abuse history, like Bernice herself.

Bianca: Bianca was a 53-year-old African-American woman serving 6.5-13 years for a drug offense. Bianca had 6 children and she had been married legally once; that marriage ended when her spouse passed away after 17 years. However, she considered herself to have been married 4 times; 3 of those times were marriages involving only religious (not legal) ceremonies. Bianca noted that she had a strong support network both among inmates in Muncy and in her family and friends outside prison.

* Camila: Camila was a 34-year-old Hispanic woman who had a long history of mental illness and who also reported a disability stemming from an accident. She had struggled with suicidal tendencies up until her incarceration, and she reported a very long history of sexual abuse. Camila was serving 3-10 years for robbery. She had 2 children and had never been married.

Christine: Christine, a 44-year-old White woman, was serving a sentence of 1 year and 2 months- 4 years for forgery. This was her first time in prison, and her first contact with the criminal justice system generally. She reported being in a mentally and physically abusive marriage, which she had ended when she was incarcerated. Christine was due to be released approximately a month following the interview, and repeatedly described how her prison experience had taught her to be grateful for the “small things” in life. Christine had 1 child.

Denise: Denise was a 29-year-old White woman who was serving 2 years, 11 months, and 29 days – 6 years for involuntary manslaughter. Denise had been married for 7 years at the time of the interview. She and her husband had 4 children together, 2 of whom were deceased in an event related to Denise’s crime.

Elicia: Elicia was a 22-year-old African-American woman serving a life-without-parole sentence for first-degree murder. Elicia had been engaged before she was incarcerated, and she had 4 children with her ex-partner. Her engagement dissolved when her ex-partner testified against her.

Elaine: Elaine was a 50-year-old White woman serving 2 years and 7 months- 8 years for robbery. She was divorced, and she had 5 living children. Elaine reported a history of violent spousal abuse that terminated 6 pregnancies, and at the time of the interview, she had a very negative view of men generally.
Emma: Emma, a 20-year-old homosexual White woman, was serving her first prison sentence of 2-5 years for robbery. Emma said that she was grateful for her incarceration because it had “saved” her from her drug addiction. She also noted that she was uncomfortable around some inmates because of her sexual orientation, which had been stable before her incarceration, and which she thus distinguished from that of other inmates who pursued same-sex relationships only while incarcerated. Emma had never been married and had no children.

Hannah: Hannah, a 20-year-old African-American woman, was the only inmate who volunteered to participate in this study without being recruited. She was serving 6-12 years for robbery, reduced from a life-without-parole sentence. At the time of the interview, she had already served several years of her sentence, and she identified most strongly with other inmates who were serving long sentences, and with lifers in particular, perhaps because of the sentence she had initially faced. Hannah had never been married, and she was relieved that she did not have children, even though she had wanted them before entering prison.

Jamie: Jamie was a 40-year-old, homosexual, White woman who was serving 5-10 years for aggravated assault with serious bodily injury. Jamie noted in her interview that she had been in and out of detention facilities since she was 12 years old, and she also reported being raised in an abusive household and then entering into an abusive relationship. At the time of the interview, Jamie was in a relationship with another woman in prison, but she had never been married, and she had no children.

Joanna: Joanna was a 25-year-old White woman who had no children and who had never been married. Joanna had lost her father when she was young, which had led to a host of problem behaviors ranging from high-risk sexual activity to drug use. She was serving 3 years, 1 months and 29 days- 10 years for theft.

Jordan: A 33-year-old African-American single mother of 3 children, Jordan was serving 10- 20 years for burglary. Jordan had once been engaged, but the relationship ended when her ex-partner became physically violent with her. Jordan’s narrative focused heavily on her relationship with her mother, which was very complicated, in part because her mother had failed to disclose her own criminal history with Jordan.

* Kayla: An 18-year-old White woman, Kayla was the youngest participant in this study. She was serving 2.5-5 years for aggravated assault. Raised in a dangerous neighborhood and without adequate parental supervision, Kayla’s early life had been tumultuous. At the time of the interview, Kayla was engaged to her boyfriend of 7 years. Although Kayla had no children of her own, her fiancé at the time had two children from another relationship, and Kayla considered those children her own. In one of the letters Kayla wrote to me months after the interview, however, Kayla communicated that she was no longer in a relationship with her ex-fiancé. Kayla also reported a history of rape and abuse when she was younger, and she had spent much of her youth in juvenile detention facilities.
Katie: Katie was a 30-year-old White woman serving 3-6 years for robbery. Katie was divorced, and she had no children, although she considered herself a primary caregiver for her younger sister. Katie had a history of selling drugs, and she described her drug selling as an addiction.

Keysha: A 23-year-old African-American woman, Keysha was a mother of 3 children, and she had never been married. Keysha spoke extensively about the emotional difficulties she was facing being separated from her children. She was serving 1-2 years for endangering the welfare of a child.

* Khloe: Khloe was a 21-year-old Hispanic woman serving 5.5-12 years for robbery. Khloe had never been married, and she had 1 child who was conceived during a gang rape when Khloe was 12 years old. Since she had been incarcerated since she was in her early teen years, Khloe’s interview was centered on undergoing the transition to adulthood while incarcerated.

Laura: A 36-year-old White woman, Laura had a mental disability that affected her relationship with her peers and family members. She described a complicated relationship with her mother, who used to call her “stupid,” but with whom Laura had been rebuilding ties. At the time of the interview, however, Laura had not heard from her family members in approximately half a year. Laura had never been married and she had no children. She was serving 5-10 years for rape of a child.

Latoya: A 29-year-old African-American woman, Latoya was a single mother of 5 children. She had never been married. Latoya reported a history of mental, physical, and emotional childhood abuse from her mother. At the time of the interview, she was not on speaking terms with her mother. She was serving a sentence of 1-5 years for a drug offense.

Leslie: Leslie was a 45-year-old White woman serving a second incarceration term of 2-6 years for aggravated assault. Leslie was divorced with 3 children. She reported that her marriage had been abusive, and following her first incarceration, her children had cut communication with her. She had rebuilt ties with her children following her release, however, and they were currently sources of support for her. Leslie was hoping to “max out” in early 2014 to join her son in a different state.

May: May, a 47-year-old White woman, was serving 10-20 years for attempted murder. May had been married for 14 years, and she had 3 children from that marriage. At the time of the interview, May’s children were not on talking terms with her because of May’s crime. May was suffering from depression when we spoke.

* Marie: Marie, a White woman, was 31 years old and serving a sentence of life without parole for first-degree murder. Marie’s parents featured prominently in her interviews and letters, and she repeatedly noted her gratitude for their support. Having served 12 years of her sentence at the time of her interview, Marie was focused on giving back to the community in whatever way possible. Marie was divorced from
her husband, who was also incarcerated, and whom she reported was abusive towards her. Marie had no children.

Nicole: Nicole was a 21-year-old, homosexual, African-American woman serving 3.5-7 years for robbery. Nicole had been pursuing a college education before being incarcerated, and she reported feeling detached from her family before her incarceration because of having to hide her sexual orientation. Nicole had never been married, and she had no children.

Penelope: Penelope was a 37-year-old Hispanic woman who was serving 1 year and 4 months – 5 years for a DUI offense. Penelope’s narrative focused heavily on her relationship with her 2 children, and the guilt she felt for abandoning them during the period of her incarceration. Penelope described herself as an alcoholic. She was divorced following an 8-year marriage.

Saila: A 29-year-old Hispanic woman, Saila was serving 2 years and 3 months – 6 years for a drug offense. Saila had been in a common-law marriage for the past 16 years, and she had 4 children with her partner. Saila’s children featured heavily in her interview, and she was fiercely protective of them. Saila’s partner was also incarcerated at the time of the interview, and her children were living with Saila’s mother.

*Samantha: A 39-year-old African-American woman, Samantha was serving 7.5- 15 years for aggravated assault. Samantha had been married once and was a mother of 2 children. Samantha had recently become more religious, which had changed her views on some adult roles and responsibilities. For example, although she had cohabited with a partner once, her current religious beliefs made her believe that this was no longer appropriate. Samantha was involved in church-related activities in prison.

* Sheila: Sheila was a 45-year-old Hispanic, homosexual woman serving 8 years and 4 months – 20 years for aggravated assault. Sheila repeatedly described her difficult childhood in her interview and ensuing letters: She had established residential independence when she was 11 years old, and had been in and out of detention facilities since she was 12 years old. Sheila had never been married and she did not have any children of her own, although she used to consider the children of her ex-partner her own.

Shirley: A 29-year-old Hispanic woman, Shirley was serving 3- 10 years for involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, a crime for which she felt other inmates judged her negatively. Shirley had never been married, and although she had no children at the time of the interview, she had suffered a miscarriage and lost another child during infancy.

*Tandy: Tandy was a 33-year-old White woman serving 3 years and 8 months- 7 years and 4 months for homicide by vehicle while DUI. Tandy had never been married, and she had 2 children. She had given birth to her second child while she
was incarcerated. At the time of the interview, Tandy was seeking joint custody of her daughter with her mother. Tandy later conveyed in a letter that she had successfully accomplished this goal.

Tricia: A 38-year-old Hispanic woman, Tricia was serving 3 years and 3 months-12 years for escape. She had been incarcerated before for drug offenses, and she reported drug use and heavy drinking in her early teen years. Tricia had never been married, and she had 2 children.

Zelda: A 34-year-old Hispanic woman, Zelda was serving 20-60 years for kidnapping. When talking about her childhood, Zelda described herself as a “bad kid.” Zelda reported being molested, and being verbally, mentally, and physically abused. Having served 14 years of her sentence, she spoke extensively of how her attitude towards herself, her incarceration, and adulthood generally had changed over her sentence length. Zelda had never been married, and she had 2 children.
APPENDIX B

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY IN THE STUDY

Validity

The interview schedule was designed to ensure content validity. Although terminology involving “variables” is more often used in quantitative research, it is useful here to apply such language to understand better the relevance of content validity. This study was designed to explore women’s beliefs regarding the effects of the prison environment (the independent variable) on their notions of adulthood and their own sense of adult status (the two dependent variables). As such, the interview schedule had to tap into the various dimensions of each of these variables in order to arrive upon a well-rounded and defined understanding of the question at hand.

Prior research on age norms in contemporary U.S. has highlighted a number of key markers of adulthood (marriage, financial and residential independence, parenthood, and employment) about which I asked participants. In addition to this, however, this study was aimed at specifically revealing how women believe the prison environment affects their understandings of adulthood. For this reason, relying entirely on prior literature could have been insufficient in capturing every aspect of the concept of adulthood as it relates to women’s experience in prison. The interview schedule thus also included more open-ended questions that granted the participants the opportunity to share opinions on markers of adulthood that I did not present to them. In particular, while there were specific questions pertaining to their beliefs about how the prison environment has impacted their sense of adulthood by affecting their marriage, financial independence, etc., I also asked the participants more broadly to explain what they thought made a
woman feel like an adult. Similarly, I asked the participants open-ended questions on their views on how their incarceration has affected their lives generally.

**Reliability**

Given the nature of qualitative research, many researchers argue that speaking of its “reliability” is problematic, since—unlike in quantitative research—there are no statistical tests that confirm or disconfirm the reliability of a particular scale. Indeed, the interview schedule (like most in qualitative research) contained mostly open-ended questions, rather than fixed Likert scales that can effectively be quantified and measured. This does not mean, however, that qualitative research is exempt from the high standard required of social science research in general. Qualitative researchers have sometimes used the term “rigor” instead of reliability to describe the requirement that the research is confirmable and dependable (Tracy, 2010). To attain a sufficient level of rigor, qualitative research must be theoretically grounded; the researcher must have spent a sufficient amount of time gathering data; the data must be rich in quality; and the sample and methodology must support significant conclusions. As described in Chapter 2, I sampled participants on theoretically meaningful variables. Additionally, I decided to implement the mailing portion of the study as a way to attain greater depth and richness of data. In this way, I was guided by the quality and depth of the data rather than by a concrete timeline or sample goal.

Obtaining thick data is perhaps the most meaningful alternative to the kind of reliability tests that are common in quantitative research. This is because such data allow the researcher to show the reader his/her findings, rather than ask that the reader trust his/her interpretation of those findings. Thick data are in narrative form; they have
detailed and descriptive responses; they are based on first-hand experience; they have emotional significance; and they should contain a message, feelings, and larger themes (Hsiung, 2010). The interview schedule was composed of largely open-ended questions that were intended to solicit thick narratives. Moreover, the questions were designed to tap into several theoretically important aspects of the prison experience and women’s sense of adulthood. Finally, the letters that inmates sent me were extremely detailed, personal, first-hand accounts of significant life-course transitions and experiences that served to enrich the data significantly. Thus, while there exist no tests that confirm the reliability of qualitative findings and measurements, there are steps that the researcher can and should take to attain a high level of rigor and strength in his/her findings. In this study in particular, I sampled strategically and solicited information through open-ended questions aimed at obtaining thick narratives, and I sought extra depth in the data by drawing on in-depth, personal, open-ended letters from the inmates.

Finally, transparency in qualitative research is crucial in attaining the equivalent of the conventional kind of quantitative reliability. Here, it is perhaps more useful to speak of the “replicability” of this research, rather than the reliability. Replicability refers to the extent to which an independent researcher could use a sample similar to my own and arrive at the same conclusions. To this end, I used memos at each stage of the research process to provide a “self-critical account” of how the research was conducted. In addition to detailed field notes, these memos (which ranged from loose “free-writes” in the field to analytic notes during the coding stage) detailed my thought-process during each step of the research process. Documenting thoughts and decisions made at every stage of the research was important because it permits an independent researcher to
follow the data collection and analytic methods in his/her assessment of my research process.

Potential limitations of the methodology

Although qualitative interviews are the most appropriate research method for the research question that I investigated in this study, there are a number of potential limitations of this method that merit some attention. First, as with all qualitative research that uses interviews, the findings may be biased by the fact that only those women who were interested in participating in the study were included. The findings may thus not extend to women who, for example, are involved in the anti-social prison subculture. This is an especially salient possibility because of the difficulties in accessing recently admitted inmates who are most likely to be a part of this subculture. Although there is little that qualitative field researchers can do if potential participants do not agree to participate, future researchers may have more success in reaching this population if they focus their study on the prison culture in which the women may be involved. For the purposes of this study, the lack of findings regarding anti-social markers of adulthood should be interpreted especially carefully because of the possibility that recently admitted inmates involved in the “mix” did not participate in the study.

Further, the data obtained from the letters that inmates sent me may contain the narratives only of those women who a) were sufficiently comfortable in their literacy levels to write me the letters and/or b) who were most interested in the project based on their interviews. As described in Chapter 2, however, I used the data from the letters to deepen and enhance—rather than replace—the interview data, which are less affected by these considerations. Although this study does not employ a random sample, therefore, I
did not rely entirely on data obtained from the inmates’ letters. Instead, these data served the important purpose of saturating data from the interviews by adding further details and obtaining participant reflections on my findings.

As with most qualitative research, it may be difficult to generalize the findings of this study to populations in other locations. My sampling strategy, however, went some way in tempering this risk. Deliberately and explicitly sampling to gain the maximum possible sample diversity on meaningful metrics (race, age, and sentence length) was crucial in this study. While obtaining a sample size similar to those obtained in large-scale surveys is impossible, I made every possible effort to obtain a sample that was sufficiently heterogeneous in terms of variables that theoretically could play a large role in shaping the results of the research.

Even so, since this study was conducted in a women’s prison in Pennsylvania, there are geographic, political, and sociocultural limitations on how generalizable the findings of the study are to women prisoner generally or even to women offenders. Although the inmates’ narratives did not reveal any reason to presume that the findings of the study would not apply to women in other prisons, this research, again like other qualitative work, does not have generalizability as a goal. Instead, I believe the value of the data lie in their provision of in-depth narratives that demonstrate how women inmates interpret and give meaning to their prison experiences, specifically in the context of the impact of their confinement on their views on adulthood.

Finally, as with all qualitative interviews, the success of the research hinged in part on the willingness of participants to share their experiences and thoughts on the
subject matter. Some women were reluctant to speak about particularly sensitive issues such as, for example, the impact of their incarceration on their children. The flexible interview schedule, however, was designed to account for this possibility by including a range of questions that tapped into several aspects of the prison experience, sometimes indirectly. In this way, participants who were reluctant to discuss a certain aspect of their lives explicitly often were more comfortable discussing these sensitive topics when we returned to them later in the interview, or when the topic arose as a result of a more comfortable line of interviewing. As such, the interview schedule was intended to account for personality differences and variations across participants in their ability and/or willingness to divulge certain kinds of information. As mentioned in a previous chapter, moreover, corresponding with some inmates by mail resulted in them sharing information with me that they had not shared in the interview itself.
APPENDIX C

GATE-KEEPING AND THE POLITICS OF ACCESS TO PRISONS

Qualitative researchers have long discussed issues related to reflexivity in the research process as well as the political nature of qualitative field research (Christians, 2005; Punch, 1993). As Punch (1993) has noted, politics infuses every social science research project to a lesser or greater extent. Punch includes in his definition of “politics” “everything from the micropolitics of personal relations to the cultures and resources of research units and universities, the powers and policies of government research departments, and ultimately even that hand (heavy or otherwise) of the central state itself” (Punch, 1993: 84). In this section, I employ this definition of “politics” by focusing on the “powers and policies” of the state departments of corrections in their roles as gatekeepers in prison research. A discussion of reflexivity and the politics of gate-keeping in prison research is important because, as is well-known (Bosworth et al., 2005; Schlosser, 2008) there are difficulties inherent in such research that are absent in most other qualitative research studies. Due in part to these difficulties, qualitative fieldwork in prison settings has become increasingly rare (Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2003).

This section serves the dual purpose of 1) shedding light on the political considerations that prison researchers can expect to confront when proposing fieldwork in prisons; and 2) highlighting the epistemic implications of these considerations. Specifically, in addition to building on the existing literature on the challenges that researchers can expect to face when conducting a study on prisoners (Bosworth et al.,
I describe how the political nature of the research process affects what we know about women prisoners in the U.S. In so doing, I demonstrate that “fieldwork is definitely not a soft option, but, rather, represents a demanding craft that involves both coping with multiple negotiations and continually dealing with ethical dilemmas” (Punch, 1993: 85).

Institutional logistics such as the administrative processes and internal ethical requirements set by universities, state departments, and prisons are distinct from political dynamics such as efforts by gatekeepers to manage the research process. The tension between universities’ Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements and key principles of social scientific field research have been discussed in detail elsewhere (see Brainard, 2001; Gordon, 2003; Oakes, 2002) and need not be repeated here. As such, I focus instead on the political nature of the review process that led to rejection in one state and approval of access in another.

In addition to prisoners being “vulnerable” by IRB standards (Schlosser, 2008), prisons are designed to separate inmates from the rest of society, and “outsiders” in the prison environment are often met with mistrust by both staff and inmates themselves (Bosworth et al., 2005). As a result, studies on prison populations have become more infrequent than they were in the 50s and 60s, and much of the research that is being undertaken is being conducted from afar (Simon, 2000). Studies on women’s prisons have increased in number since the heyday of prisons sociology (Simon, 2000); but setting up prison research has become a particularly time-consuming task because of the sheer number of steps the researcher must undertake to satisfy institutional review boards (IRBs), state departments of corrections (DOCs), and prison officials. These steps should
be examined reflexively with an eye to understanding how the politics of gaining access to prison facilities affect who is studied, what questions may be asked, and how the study proceeds.

**Reflexivity in Qualitative Research**

Reflexivity in the social sciences emerged in the 1970s as a response to scholars’ criticisms of research that purported to be “objective” with little regard for researchers’ subjectivity or transparency in the research process. Prior to this, the researcher was invisible both during the research process and later as a writer (Goodwin and Horowitz 2002). While some scholars argued that it was impossible to understand a situation fully without being involved in it, others believed that involvement of the researcher compromised the objectivity of the research findings (Goodwin and Horowitz 2002). Reflexivity has now become a key methodological skill that qualitative researchers use to demonstrate the legitimacy and trustworthiness of their research (Pillow 2006).

In qualitative research, reflexivity is often understood in terms of an awareness of research subjectivity—“a focus on how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis” (Pillow 2006: 176). However, as Pillow (2006) has noted, defining and describing the requirements of reflexivity is a difficult task. One issue lies in the question of whom or what researchers should be reflexive about: Should researchers be reflexive about themselves? Their participants? The research process? Pillow (2006) further notes that reflexivity also encapsulates the questions that researchers must ask about the politics of representation insofar as who the researchers represent and what is represented is shaped in part by the research process.
itself. While some researchers have argued that the recent trend in increased self-reflexivity is overly self-indulgent and that it is unclear whether it does indeed produce better research, I—like Spivak (1984-1985: 184)—believe that it is important to “be vigilant about our practices.”

Although reflexivity has most often been understood as the process by which the researcher examines how his/her own position affects the research process, scholars have also noted that ‘how knowledge is acquired, organized and interpreted is relevant to what the claims are’ (Altheide and Johnson 1998). In fact, Wacquant (2011:441) has argued that there are three different forms of reflexivity: 1) Egological or narcissistic, where the focus is on the “person of the researcher” (as described above); 2) textual, where the researcher examines the rhetoric she deploys in her analyses; and 3) epistemic, where the focus is on “dissecting the social conditions and techniques of production of the scientific project.” Although many sociologists and criminologists have focused primarily on the first two forms of reflexivity, I build on a discussion of what Wacquant terms “the political economy of criminological knowledge.” I draw on this “epistemic” definition of reflexivity specifically to assess how the politics of gate-keeping affect what kind of prison research it is possible to do, where it is possible to conduct prison research, and with whom such research is possible.

As Wacquant (2011: 439, emphasis in original) points out, reflexivity in criminology is essential because it requires that researchers “think through criminological issues as they relate to politics and policy.” My employment of “epistemic reflexivity” is thus intended to shift the focus away from my role (as the researcher) in the research process, emphasizing instead how gate-keeping issues affect what
knowledge is produced about women prisoners. This is particularly important because
texts about women prisoners (like other criminological and penological texts) are
“conceived, written, diffused (or not) and deployed” (Wacquant, 2011: 439) in specific
structural conditions that merit more attention than they have thus received from
penologists. Wacquant recognizes that one element that constitutes the structural
conditions in which criminological knowledge is produced is the “overt and covert
intrusion of the concerns of politicians” (Wacquant, 2011: 441). Although an institutional
analysis of the numerous other elements that shape how, why, and for whom
criminological knowledge is produced is beyond the scope of this section, I critically
reflect on the “overt and covert intrusion” not of politicians specifically, but of state
actors authorized to grant or block access to inmate populations.

**Access and Gate-Keeping**

In addition to issues related to reflexivity, qualitative researchers are concerned
with how access to research sites is obtained (Duke, 2002), and ethnographers in
particular have devoted considerable attention to this issue (Reeves, 2010). Gate-keepers
are people who “can help or hinder the research depending upon their personal thoughts
on the validity of the research and its value” (Reeves, 2010: 317). Gate-keepers can be
both formal (for example, members of the review committee at U.S. State Departments of
Corrections responsible for granting approval to conduct research in state prisons) and
informal (for example, correctional officers who cannot officially deny requests to
conduct research) (Reeves, 2010).
Although qualitative researchers have paid a great deal of attention to issues surrounding gatekeepers to research sites generally (Reeves, 2010; Smith, 1997; Venkatesh, 2008), this literature still needs development, particularly in the context of prison research (King and Liebling, 2007; Schlosser, 2008). The significance of the political landscape to researchers conducting prison research has been noted in prior research (Liebling, 2001). Liebling (2001), for example, has described at length the consequences of state actors’ requests that certain questions be asked by penologists; the precarious nature of conducting prison research that might be critical of state institutions; and the difficulty in compiling and disseminating politically charged findings about topics such as prison conditions.

In prisons, moreover, access to research participants often depends on establishing rapport with both formal and informal gatekeepers. This is a process that is frequently marked by awkward and tense power differentials, since the fate of the entire research project rests in the hands of formal gatekeepers. These gatekeepers, moreover, may have demands and requests that conflict with the researcher’s ethical commitments to, for example, participant confidentiality and anonymity (Reeves, 2010). Researchers must thus be prepared to confront the question of how much they are willing to accede to the requests of gatekeepers for the sake of gaining and maintaining access to participants. Ultimately, establishing a comfortable rapport with gatekeepers is crucial, even if it is a process that can be time-consuming and one that requires a high level of sensitivity towards the appearance of biases and partiality towards research participants (Reeves, 2010).

The review process
After two months of review, the first state Department of Corrections to which I submitted a research proposal informed me that the project would not be approved because it was unclear to the review committee what the benefit of the project would be to the Department of Corrections. After resubmitting the proposal following a revision that made clear the practical, “real world” benefits of the study, I was informed again after another several months that the project still could not be approved for the same reasons.

I had highlighted in my revised proposal how the findings of this study may reveal important factors that contribute to women’s reoffending/desistance motivations. While these revisions were helpful in clarifying my own sense of understanding of the contribution of the study, they were not done with myself or the study participants in mind. Instead, they were driven by a concern with the preferences of the Department of Corrections. I admittedly did not have the Department of Corrections as the primary beneficiary of the research when I initially drafted the research proposal. Rather, I hoped to explore a novel, intellectually interesting research question that could shed light on women prisoners’ lived experiences and add to the literature on offenders’ motives for desistance (Maruna, 2001; Massoglia and Uggen, 2010). At the most general level, I was driven by a strong interest in conducting field research on women prisoners at a time when interest in their lived experiences has not been the focus of sufficient recent attention (Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2003). Yet to accomplish any of this, I first needed the approval of the Department of Corrections. Since I was not comfortable changing the study’s goals and questions to align more naturally with the DOC’s interests, however, I accepted the rejection and sought another research site.
The reasons behind the rejection in this state are interesting for several reasons that highlight why, as Holland, Williams, and Forrester (2013) have argued, ethical decision-making must be viewed relationally. These scholars highlight the role of participants in ethical decision-making; but the reasons for my rejection emphasize why scholars conducting prison research are also forced to confront a slew of ethical questions that are triggered by the role of the organizational gate-keepers involved in a study. The primary question the rejection prompted was: Who is this research intended to benefit? To use Becker’s (1967) terms: Whose side are we on? Even for researchers striving to remain neutral when conducting prison research (however difficult it is to attain this goal), “the researcher must be prepared to make the case to prison management of the potential benefit of their research to correctional organizations” Hart (1995: 167).

Similarly, scholars in the U.K. have noted the need for prison researchers to be aware of the political benefits and drawbacks of proposed studies (King and Liebling, 2007; Liebling, 2001) and the extent to which Home Office funding can apply pressure to conduct a study a certain way (Liebling, 1999). The study is thus affected by political considerations that are far-reaching in their implications for what kind of penological knowledge is produced and how.

My rejection experience reinforces the political nature of prison research also by highlighting the extent to which such research is contingent on being well-connected in the field. For example, I was at one point told that having a contact “pushing” for me from inside one of the facilities would have been helpful in obtaining approval. The fact that researchers can benefit from having “insider” experiences/contacts at research sites is well-known (King and Liebling, 2007; Schlosser, 2008). This feature of conducting
prison research is, however, particularly vexing for novice researchers who have yet to establish themselves, both in their fields and among research review committees in state Departments of Corrections (Schlosser, 2008). As Liebling (2001: 481) has pointed out, conducting prison research requires “some thought given in advance to ethics (for example, fairness) and politics.” Fledgling prison researchers with limited contacts in the field should, to the extent possible, consider well in advance whether they are willing to change the goals of their research to meet the demands of state actors who have the authority to grant or deny them access to their target population. The age-old question of “whose side am I on?” becomes all the more important when the fate of the entire project hinges on the researcher’s response.

The question of how far researchers should permit gatekeepers to manage the research process—and the research questions especially—reinforces how organization approval dictates what penologists know about women prisoners. Hart’s (1995) advice that researchers be prepared to outline the benefits of their research to the correctional organizations is no doubt valuable and on-point. However, it is imperative that we also confront the implications of such advice for what we know about inmate populations. Qualitative research on inmates and prison culture has already been stunted by the daunting administrative difficulties involved in negotiating approval (Bosworth et al., 2005). Even those projects that have been approved, however, may reflect the interests of state agencies and institutions, since commencement of any prison study is contingent on cooperation from these organizational bodies. Among penologists, therefore, only a handful are conducting qualitative prison research; and in such research, there may be little opportunity to pursue questions that do not fit within the boundaries of what state
institutional actors can justify approving based on an assessment of the project’s contribution to organizational agendas. As Cook and Fonow (1986: 11) have argued, feminist investigations of women should critically analyze “the influence of gate-keeping on topic selection and research funding.” Since topic selection in particular is likely to be affected a great deal by the administrative and politics difficulties involved in conducting prison research, the voices we give to prisoners may be partial and fragmented as a result of which questions we are permitted to pursue. This is a possibility that qualitative penologists must both acknowledge and seek to address in examining the political nature of prison research in the U.S., even if there is no clear-cut way to resolve the issue.

After my initial rejection, approval from Pennsylvania came easily. The director of research at the Pennsylvania DOC, as well as the head of the research and review committee, and the Superintendent’s Assistant at State Correctional Institution (SCI) Muncy were all supportive and encouraging of the project in its original form. It is worth noting here that I was fortunate in this instance to have the opportunity to discuss my project with the head of the research committee in the Department of Corrections (and was able to state as much when I submitted the proposal). Although I later encountered the same difficulties that Schlosser (2008) outlined in her description of the administrative obstacles involved in conducting prison research, since the gate-keepers in the second state were supportive of the project, approval came fairly quickly.

The state-to-state differences in the cooperation of formal gate-keepers further highlights how our knowledge of inmate populations may be far more reflective of political considerations involved in the onset of the project than we have thus far acknowledged. In particular, qualitative researchers should seek to determine whether
state-to-state differences in officials’ openness to external research reflect differences in prison conditions, security considerations, or political motivations. Doing so will, at the very least, permit us to recognize the extent to which our knowledge about prisoners is limited by our inability to access certain inmate populations. This is especially important if the lived experiences of these inmates differ radically from those of the inmates we do have access to because of differences in the prison environments they reside in.

In conclusion, although qualitative researchers are generally circumspect in discussing how their findings may have been affected by dynamics in the field, the methodological and political implications of being denied access to whole prison populations (while being granted access to others) have not been tackled in either the penological or the qualitative methodology literatures. In addition to the administrative difficulties that have been well-documented in the prison research (Schlosser, 2008), qualitative criminologists should recognize that issues of gate-keeping raise interesting and important epistemological questions about the state of prison research more generally.

Placing criminological and penological knowledge within the political, social, and structural context that it is created in is particularly important for researchers approaching prison research from, for example, a feminist standpoint aimed at giving women prisoners voice. Since certain inmates may be silenced because of gate-keepers’ reluctance to grant researchers access to prisons, such researchers should make strong efforts to reach inmate populations that are difficult to study. Well-established researchers may be in the best position to do this, since their status and experience in building contacts in the field would be beneficial in legitimizing research projects in the
eyes of state actors. Novice qualitative researchers may also benefit from becoming involved in prison programs that grant them legitimacy and permit them to establish a comfortable rapport with inmates and staff.

Even if the issues of access are surmounted, however, researchers who approach their work with a social justice perspective geared towards empowering women inmates may find it problematic that gate-keepers require a clear vision of how the study will benefit the state. Prison researchers should be prepared to explain, as I was asked, how the study will “benefit the taxpayer.” For scholars who wish for their work to benefit the prisoners rather than the state or the abstract taxpayer, such a request can lead to intellectual and ethical dilemmas. As Liebling (2001) has noted, prison researchers’ sympathies often lie with their participants, and indeed, a researcher’s ability to empathize, relate to, and become “involved” with participants is a key part of the research process. Researchers’ sympathetic feelings towards inmates could thus conflict strongly with state actors’ questions about how proposed research findings could benefit the state instead of the inmates. This issue is particularly difficult to resolve, since the researcher may be confronted with the choice of either responding to state actors’ questions about the benefits of the research to the state or not being permitted to conduct any research whatsoever. How far prison researchers are willing to accede to the demands of state institutions is a personal choice, but it is one that should be duly addressed in an open manner in research reports.
APPENDIX D

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

“Women Prisoners’ Perceptions of Adulthood”

Janani Umamaheswar

Department of Sociology and Crime, Law and Justice

Pennsylvania State University

Dear Madam,

I am a PhD student in Sociology at the Pennsylvania State University. I am writing to tell you about a study I am doing on women prisoners. This research is supervised by Dr. John Kramer. To learn more about women prisoners’ experiences, I would like to conduct 35 interviews with women in prison. The study is focused on women prisoners’ sense of adulthood. I will ask women about their thoughts on adulthood and on being wives, mothers, and workers. I will also ask them about how being in prison affects these opinions.

If you wish to participate in this study or to hear more about the study, please write your name at the bottom part of this letter. Then please tear that part off and return it to Mr. Troy Edwards, the Superintendent’s Assistant. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time. I would be grateful for your cooperation with this research.

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Janani Umamaheswar

I, ________________________, am interested in participating in this study. I would like to meet with Janani Umamaheswar to hear more about the study.
APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Women Prisoners’ Perceptions of Adulthood

Principal Investigator: Janani Umamaheswar

904 Oswald Tower
Department of Sociology Crime, Law and Justice,
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
Phone: 646-770-5962
Email address: jwu5010@psu.edu

Advisor: John Kramer

1011 Oswald Tower
Department of Sociology and Crime, Law & Justice,
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
Phone: (814) 865-3394
Email address: jhk@psu.edu.

You are invited to be in a PhD project in the Department of Sociology, Pennsylvania State University. This study is being carried out by Janani Umamaheswar and is supervised by Dr. John Kramer.

Purpose of the study: The study explores women prisoners’ sense of adulthood. It also explores how being in prison affects women’s sense of adulthood. I will be interviewing approximately 35 women.

Procedures to be followed: You will be asked about your thoughts on adulthood and adult responsibilities (being a mother, wife or partner, worker, etc.). You will also be asked about your prison experience. The interview will be audio taped with your consent.
**Discomforts and risks:** There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those that you would experience in everyday life. Some of the questions are personal and might cause discomfort.

**Benefits:** You may not benefit directly from this study, but you will have a chance to discuss your prison experience. You may learn more about yourself. Society may benefit from more knowledge about women prisoners.

**Duration/Time:** Interviews will be carried out over 4 to 6 months. You will be interviewed for approximately 1 hour.

**Statement of confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. All study materials will be locked in an office in Pennsylvania State University. All information will be kept in a password-protected file. Only the research team can access this file. This study will be completed in 2014. All interview notes and audio recordings will be destroyed 5 years later.

The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study. You will be asked to choose a different name to identify you in all study materials. Your identity will be known only to myself and my supervisor. Your identity will not be revealed in any study publications or presentations. Researchers are required to break confidentiality if you state: (a) harm to self, (b) harm to others, or (c) threaten to escape.

**Right to ask questions:** Please contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections (ORP) by writing to The 330 Building, Suite 205, University Park, PA 16802 with questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Please contact me (Janani Umamaheswar) or my advisor (Dr. John Kramer) by writing with questions, complaints, or concerns about research procedures. Our full contact information appears at the beginning of this form.
Voluntary participation: Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. If you choose to withdraw, all information about you will be destroyed. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will suffer no penalty or loss of benefits if you do not take part in this study or if you withdraw from it. Participation or non-participation in this study will not be taken into account by the parole board.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study, please sign your name and write the date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

_____________________________________________  ____________________
Participant Signature                               Date

_____________________________________________
Person Obtaining Consent                           Date
APPENDIX F
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Part 1: Demographic Characteristics:

1. Are you in a relationship or married?
   a. If yes, since when?
   b. Do you think you were prepared for marriage? What about your spouse?
   c. Is this your first marriage? If not, how many times have you been married?
   d. Where is your husband/partner?
   e. How often do you get to see him/her?
   f. If not in a relationship/marriage: have you ever been married? If yes to this question, how old were you when you got married? How long were you married for? Do you think you and your spouse were prepared for marriage?

2. Do you have children?
   a. If yes, how many children?
   b. How old are your children?
   c. Do you think you had children at the right age?
   d. Where are your children now?
   e. How often do you see your children?

3. Did you have a full-time job 6 months before you were arrested for your current offense?
   a. If yes, what was your job?
   b. How long did you work at that job?
   c. When did you get your first full-time job?
   d. If no, did you have a part-time job?
   e. What is the longest time you’ve worked in the same job?

4. Who did you live with before you came here?
   a. How long were you living with him/her/Them?

5. Have you ever lived by yourself?
a. If yes, when and for how long?
b. If no, can you tell me why?

Part 2: Notions of adulthood:

6. What do you think makes a woman feel like an adult?
7. Based on that, do you feel like an adult now?
8. How does this compare to 10 years ago? (Time will vary depending on participants’ age and how long ago she was incarcerated)
9. What do you think is/are the most important part(s) of a woman’s life? What do you think is/are the most important part(s) of a man’s life?
   a. How has your opinion on this changed over time, if at all?
10. How important was being a mother to you before you came here? (Whether the participant is a mother or not)
   a. Can you explain why you thought being a mother was important (or not)?
   b. Has your opinion on this changed over time? If so, how?
11. Can you describe what you think it takes to be a good mother?
   a. Have your opinions on this changed over time? If so, how?
12. What about being married? How important was it for you before you came here?
   a. Can you explain why you thought having a husband was important (or not)?
   b. Have your views on marriage changed over the years?
13. What are your thoughts on living with a partner before getting married?
14. Have you lived with a partner before getting married?
   a. If yes, how old were you when you were living with him or her?
   b. Do you think this was the right age to live with your partner?
   c. How long did you live with him/her?
15. How would you describe what it means to be a good wife or girlfriend?
16. Can you describe what your dream job would look like?
17. Can you describe the person in your life that you feel the closest to right now?
18. Very broadly, what advice would you give to a young girl growing up in the US today?
Part 3: Prison experiences:

19. Is this your first time in prison?
   a. If not, how many times have you been in prison?
   b. When were you last in prison and for how long?
   c. What were you in prison for?

20. How close do you feel to your family and friends on the outside?
   a. How has this changed over time?

21. What do you think of the other inmates here?

22. Do you see the other inmates here as adults? Why or why not?

23. How close would you say your relationships with other women are here? Has this changed over time?

24. Do you have special relationships with any inmates here?
   a. If inmates need clarification, rephrase: Do you have relationships here that are especially close or important to you?

25. What are some important issues for women here?

26. What do you think of the values of other inmates here?

27. What goals do you have for yourself now?
   a. How have these goals changed over time?

28. What kind of life would you want if you were not in prison?

29. What is the hardest part of being in prison?

30. What do you think of yourself when you compare yourself to other women your age?
   a. Who are these other women?

31. What do you feel your family outside prison would think of you if they compared you to these women?

32. What do you think people outside prison think of young girls in prison?

33. What do you think people outside prison think of men in prison?

34. How has your experience in prison affected what you think of yourself?

35. When do you think you will be released from here?

36. Can you describe how you see your life in 10 years? (time will change depending on when the participant thinks she will be released)
37. Overall, how do you feel about your life right now?
   a. If you could, what would you change about your life so far, if anything?
      Can you describe why you would change that?
38. Is there anything else you would like to add that you feel I haven’t covered?
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Figure 1: Sampling

Number of recruitment letters sent

Recently Admitted: 86   Short-Term: 43   Long-Term: 28

Number of inmates who agreed to participate*

Recently Admitted: 15
(17.4% of inmates who were sent letters)

Short-Term: 16**
(37.2% of inmates who were sent letters)

Long-Term: 13
(46.4% of inmates who were sent letters)

Number of inmates interviewed

Recently Admitted: 11
(73.3% of inmates who agreed to participate)

Short-Term: 13
(81.3% of inmates who agreed to participate)

Long-Term: 11
(84.6% of inmates who agreed to participate)

* These numbers include all the women who responded to the recruitment letter to indicate an interest in participating in the study. I did not conduct interviews with all the inmates who responded because some had been placed in the Restricted Housing Unit (RHU), some had been transferred to a different facility by the time I began scheduling interviews, and others responded to the letter only after I had finished collecting interviews. The Superintendent’s Assistant could not provide me with a full list of all the inmates who were barred from participation because they were housed in the RHU.

** This category contains the only inmate who agreed to participate and then refused to be interviewed. Because of the prison routine, there was a significant delay in setting up the interviews the day this inmate was scheduled to be interviewed, and after waiting for approximately an hour, she reported feeling unwell and left. She refused to participate thereafter.
Table 1: Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Length</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Parental Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Younger (&lt;35)</td>
<td>Older (35-55)</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recently Admitted (6 months or fewer) (n=11)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(54.5)</td>
<td>(18.2)</td>
<td>(9.1)</td>
<td>(45.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term (7 months - 2 years) (n=13)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(23.1)</td>
<td>(46.2)</td>
<td>(30.8)</td>
<td>(46.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term (5 years or more*) (n=11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(36.3)</td>
<td>(27.3)</td>
<td>(36.4)</td>
<td>(54.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N=35)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(42.9)</td>
<td>(31.4)</td>
<td>(25.7)</td>
<td>(51.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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-term, I placed her in the long-term category. She identified as a long-terms because she interacted primarily with other long-terms and lifers, she was serving a 6-12 year sentence length, and she had been facing a life-without-parole sentence.
Table 2: Profile of the Participants (N=35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Length</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Married? (Y/N)</th>
<th>Children? (Y/N)</th>
<th>First Incarceration? (Y/N)</th>
<th>Conviction</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
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<tr>
<td>Recently Admitted</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>3-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Involuntary Manslaughter</td>
<td>3-6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>2 yrs, 7 mths-8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elicia</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>First-degree murder</td>
<td>Life without parole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>2-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>3-6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Aggravated Assault</td>
<td>2.5-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Aggravated Assault</td>
<td>2-6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Attempted Murder</td>
<td>10-20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sheila</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Aggravated Assault</td>
<td>8 yrs, 4 mths-20 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tandy</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Homicide by Vehicle while DUI</td>
<td>3 yrs, 8 mths-7 yrs, 4 mths</td>
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<td>Short-term</td>
<td>Alysa</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Prostitution</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>Offense</td>
<td>Sentence</td>
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<td>Amy</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>2-7 years</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Camila</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>H</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>3-10 years</td>
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<td>Christine</td>
<td>44</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Forgery</td>
<td>1 yr, 2 mths- 4 yrs</td>
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<td>3 yrs, 2 mths- 10 years</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>1-5 years</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>3.5-7 years</td>
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<td>Penelope</td>
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<td>H</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>DUI</td>
<td>1 yr, 4 mths-5 years</td>
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<td>H</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Drugs</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>2.25-6 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Long-term</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>First-degree murder</td>
<td>Life without parole</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Kidnapping with intent to inflict injury</td>
<td>10-20 years</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Kids</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Charge</td>
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<td>Bianca</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Drugs</td>
<td>6.5-13 years</td>
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<td>H</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>6-12 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>40</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Aggravated assault with serious bodily injury</td>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Jordan</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>10-20 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Khloe</td>
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<td>H</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>5.5-12 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Rape of a child</td>
<td>5-10 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>First-degree murder</td>
<td>Life without parole</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zelda</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
<td>20-60 years</td>
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Table 3: Characteristics of Inmates Involved in the Mail Correspondence  \((n = 10)\)

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<tr>
<th>Sentence Length</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Younger (&lt; 35)</td>
<td>Older (35 – 55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recently Admitted (6 months or fewer)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term (7 months – 2 years)</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term (5 years or more)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Date: March 2014

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2009-2010 (transferred): PhD in Sociology, University of Toronto
2008-2009: M.A. in Sociology, University of Toronto
2004-2008: B.A. in Sociology with High Distinction, University of Toronto

SELECT PUBLICATIONS

SELECT CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

SELECT AWARDS AND ACADEMIC DISTINCTIONS
2012: RGSO Dissertation Support Grant, College of Liberal Arts & Department of Sociology and Crime, Law and Justice, The Pennsylvania State University ($1900)
2011: College of Liberal Arts Scholarship, The Pennsylvania State University ($2,500)
2010: Graduate Admissions Award, The Pennsylvania State University ($2000 for 2 years)
2009: C.B. Macpherson Award, University of Toronto ($3,500)
2009: Graduate Admissions Award, University of Toronto ($2,500)
2008: The Jacob and Jenny Rosenberg Scholarship, University of Toronto ($3,358)
2005-2008: Dean’s List Scholar, University of Toronto