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Publishing Rigorous Qualitative Research

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Social work or non social work journals?
  ◦ Don’t limit yourself to social work journals, seek combinations
  ◦ Seek a variety of venues, diversify
  ◦ Don’t be afraid to try, and then try again

Qualitative Specific Journals
  ◦ Qualitative Social Work
  ◦ Qualitative Health Research
  ◦ Qualitative Inquiry
Which journals are most likely to accept qualitative articles?

- Browse recent issues to see how often qualitative articles are printed.
- Check out the journal “instructions for authors” which will often say what they look for/accept.
- Check editorial board and list of reviewers.
- Write an editor in advance of submission, if you are unsure.
Ensuring Rigor: Boosting Chances of Acceptance
Rigor is... (from Gerry R. Ryan, RAND Corporation)

“We need to avoid confusing research rigor with concepts such as measurement precision, quantification, and generalizability. These latter concepts are choices that must be made by each investigator in determining how to best meet his or her research objectives and are not something that should be inherently desired in-and-of-itself.

Second, we need to be cautious about making claims that some data collection or analysis techniques are “more” rigorous than others. If techniques are tools in a researchers’ toolbox, then this is like saying that ‘a saw is better than a hammer because it is sharper.’”
Rigor continued

Rigorous research is research that applies the appropriate tools to meet the stated objectives of the investigation.

- Do the data collection tools produce information that is appropriate for the level of precision required in the analysis?
- Do the tools maximize the chance of identifying the full range of phenomenon of interest?
- To what degree are the collection techniques likely to generate the appropriate level of detail needed for addressing the research question(s)?
- To what degree do the tools maximize the chance of producing data with discernible patterns?
Common Problems with Rigor in Qualitative Articles

1. Research Questions
2. Use of Theory
3. Sampling
4. Data Collection/Method Section
5. Analysis
6. Limitations
7. Interpreting and Presenting Results
8. Discussion and Implications
Common Problems:
1. An overly ambitious or vague research question.

2. Overly simplistic uninteresting research question.

3. Failure to investigate the question that is stated.
Overarching study questions are broad; often drive the study
What factors affect service engagement and retention among formerly homeless adults with serious mental illness?

Research questions are explicit and situate YOUR specific study
1) What do consumers view as important in service engagement? Their case managers?
2) What role (if any) does housing type play in consumer engagement and retention?
3) How important are individual problems in engagement (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness)?
1) Typical Problems:
   ◦ Unclear use of theory (why, what purpose?)
   ◦ Failure to specify a theory or working theory
   ◦ Absence of theory altogether (without good reason)

2) Solutions
   ◦ Be very clear about how you are using theory
     ✓ To build theory
     ✓ As sensitizing concepts
     ✓ To extend or test an existing theory
   ◦ If your study is purely descriptive or doesn’t have theory...say so and justify
1. Common Problem: Trying to fit sampling techniques into a quantitative frame.

Example: Participants were randomly selected to represent the nursing home population as a whole. A total of 15 participated out of 90 residents, including 10 women and 5 men.

Solution: Intentionally weave your sampling procedure into the methodology of your study as a whole.
2. **Common Problem**: Failure to identify and accurately describe sampling method.

**Solution**: Detail the steps taken in sampling and label the type correctly
a) Why were participants selected?
b) How were they screened and recruited?
c) Were any criteria involved? State them!
d) Help the reader understand your sampling and don’t be afraid of limitations involved.
Sample size considerations: Depth over breadth

- Sample size varies with type of method (fewer in phenomenological, more in GT)
- Sample size should be balanced with depth (# of interviews per participant)
- Sample size cannot be predicted in advance when you are seeking saturation
- Sample size may change during the study (more or fewer)
1. Problem: Thin data; questionable data (invokes hint of researcher or participant bias).

- Solution: Draw on more than one source of data when possible: a) interview; b) observation; c) document review; d) multiple interview sources; or e) repeat interviews;
- Otherwise, acknowledge this as a limitation.
Method Section

2. Problem: lack of explicit attention to rigor in the article (does not always have to be inter-rater reliability).

Solution: Incorporate and report Strategies for Rigor, following text suggestions (Guba and Lincoln; Padgett)
   a. Triangulation of data
   b. Member checking
   c. Prolonged engagement
   d. Audit trail
   e. Negative case analysis
   f. Peer debriefing and support

Example: “Each participant took part in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were digitally recorded for later transcription. They were conducted in a private setting where confidentiality was assured.”
DATA COLLECTION: BE SURE TO INCLUDE LOTS OF DETAIL!!

- Which qualitative method(s) were used?
- How many participants?
- How many interviews per participant?
- How long (range) were the interviews?
- Who collected the data (their training)?
- Note IRB approval and considerations
- Be very explicit and descriptive: more is better as you can always cut.
4. Problem: Failure to stick with a methodology or improper use of methodological terms.

- Overuse of grounded theory as a “catch all” for qualitative research or thematic analysis.
- Suggestion of “mixed methods” when a very small component of quantitative work is added (such as demographics).
- Confusing content analysis with coding/theme development.
- Lack of citations of the proper authors for methods, or using secondary sources.
Choose A Method, Stick with it, explain it, and cite it!

Ethnography  Grounded Theory
Case Study   Phenomenology
Narrative/   Discourse Analysis
Life History Oral History
Historiography Ethnomethodology
Conversation Analysis
Mixed Methods Participatory Action Research

KNOW YOUR TERMINOLOGY
1. Common problem: **Presenting results in a purely descriptive way** (unless this is the pure aim of the study).

Solutions:

- Don’t assume relevance or depth just because the topic is deeply meaningful to you.
- Show a curious, **don’t-know-what-you-will-find**, quality in the findings **AND** your writing.
- Reflect not only on what you found but **what you did not find** (but would have been expected to find given extant knowledge).
2. Common problem: Over- or under-use of direct quotations

Solutions:

- Edit quotes to manageable size (use ….)
- Ask yourself: Is this meaningful? Necessary? What am I trying to say?
- Ensuring there is follow up: too often people use a quote to end a paragraph and then move onto the next
- Reviewers want to see quotes – use quotes from diverse participants—don’t rely on 1–2 people for quotes

- **Solution**: Explain upfront what your methods were for sampling (detail) and why your sample meets the aims and methodology of the study.

- *Don’t draw attention to sample size unless you want the reviewers to focus on that.*
2. Common pitfall: Apologizing for lack of generalizability

Solution: Don’t do it (or let reviewers make you unless you are absolutely forced to)!

Instead...Frame your limitations in the paradigm of qualitative research: Transferability, confirmability, trustworthiness, etc.
Discussion and Implications
Section–Common problems

1. Not including this information or “petering out.”

2. Proposing far reaching ideas for practice or policy that are rooted in the data, or feasible.

3. Proposing ideas that are based on opinion, not data.

4. Failure to reflect upon the literature review or initial research questions posed.
Solutions

1. Tie your implications back to the literature review— a practice, theory, research, or policy problem that was raised in the front end.

2. Think critically about what your study has actually added to the literature. Then take a step back and think again.

3. Be realistic about the knowledge building process, and where your study fits in.

4. Tie your implications clearly to your data—refer back to your main findings when you propose a practice or policy modification.
Responding to Reviewers
Suggestions

- Be polite, but assertive.
- Address what you can without compromising the integrity of your article.
- Do not go to great lengths to prove that your article can fit or meet quantitative standards.
- It never hurts to add detail or limitations in order to meet reviewers’ requests.
Real Quotes from Reviewers…

- More information about statistical tests for inter-rater reliability would strengthen the results from the thematic analysis or explain more why specific themes were used in the analysis; were other themes omitted?

- It is not clear what underlying assumptions or theoretical framework determines the categories and data privileged in the study; are there alternate frameworks that can serve as tests of validity?

- Some numbers, even if descriptive, would help to frame/support findings and conclusions made, and to give a sense of the magnitude/significance of the findings.
While it is informative to get data on the offenders’ perceptions about preparation for reentry, it would be valuable to have some data on what happened after they were released. Where did they live? How did they do? How many were rearrested or returned to a facility within 3 months, 6 months, or a year after release? If this type of information was added to the paper, the categorization and initial findings would have more meaning.
Because the data came from a purely qualitative/ethnographic study and I did not have outcome data on all of the youth, I chose not to take these steps. However, I did suggest more concretely that this study is about the “moment of exit” from a qualitative perspective and offered more theoretical backing for studying exits as a significant part of the desistance process (p. 7, bottom of middle paragraph). I suggested in the limitations/conclusion section that correlating these findings with outcomes would be the subject of a related study for further knowledge development (pp. 26–27, limitations).
The key strength of the paper rests in its insistence on exploring the meanings and lived realities of risk from the perspectives of the research participants. The study seems to me to be well-conceived and well-constructed, though I felt that it falls between two stools. On the one hand the sample size is too small to allow for much generalisation of the findings (as I think the author/s recognise); on the other it doesn't seem to go as 'deep' that focusing more ethnographically on fewer participants might have allowed. This problem is then reflected somewhat in the findings, where I was left wanting more and 'thicker' description and analysis of a couple of cases, rather than a somewhat generalised (but not generalisable) account across the whole sample.
Reviewer 2 suggested that we should perhaps focus on just a few cases in order to not feign generalizability. Our analysis as a whole created three typologies that best fit the whole of the data (i.e., all cases that we examined). Thus although we considered this suggestion of focusing on just a few cases, we decided instead to make our analysis strategy and transferability recommendations more clear to the reader. We discuss issues of generalizability more clearly at the end of the methods section on page 11, bottom of page and suggest that further research would need to be accomplished in order to test and further validate these typologies (page 29, bottom of first paragraph on page). We also added more detail to some of the cited cases in order to provide a richer description of the participants.
The difference between a so-so qualitative study and an excellent one...

- Research questions counter the ‘so what’ reply
- Methods clearly and explicitly described
- Not just descriptive (rich description is necessary but not sufficient)
- Surprises are found and taken note of
- Implicit; tacit, deeper interpretation
- Tell but also show (quotes, table of demographic characteristics, charts, figures, photos)
- Findings are well-situated and contrasted with existing literature
Questions/Discussion
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Mapping a Process of Negotiated Identity Among Incarcerated Male Juvenile Offenders

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Building on theories of youth identity transitions, this study maps a process of negotiated identity among incarcerated young men. Data are drawn from ethnographic study of three juvenile correctional institutions and longitudinal semistructured interviews with facility residents. Cross-case analysis of 10 cases that finds youth offenders adapted to the correctional world either with ease or difficulty depending on their professed criminal identifications and their ability to locate a sense of personal power within the institution. Youth also employed a set of strategies to contend with treatment discourses challenging them to reexamine their prior selves and envision alternative future identity possibilities. These strategies shape three identified patterns of identity transition: “self synthesis,” “situational self-transformation,” and “self-preservation.” The findings highlight youths’ efforts to retain a positive view of the self in response to challenges to professed identities and reveal various styles of identity transitions occurring in involuntary institutional contexts.

**Keywords:** incarcerated youth; identity negotiations; multiple worlds; transitions; residential treatment

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Mapping a Process of Negotiated Identity Among Incarcerated Male Juvenile Offenders

Since its inception, the U.S. juvenile justice system has sought to balance the competing goals of punishment and rehabilitation of youth offenders. Correctional institutions have operated as a last resort for youth deemed “non-reformable” in less restrictive community settings. Historical studies document attempts by these early institutions, known as reformatories or training schools, to rehabilitate delinquent youth through such mechanisms as schooling, vocational training, instruction in etiquette and hygiene, and significant periods of removal from home and community. Underlying these practices was a mission to mold working class, poor immigrant children into law-abiding citizens with dominant Anglo, middle-class values and aspirations (Platt, 1969).

Over a hundred years later and notwithstanding a number of significant changes in juvenile justice policies, practices, and focal populations, the U.S. juvenile justice system sentenced more than 140,000 young people to institutional placements in 2004, representing a 35% increase from 1985 (Stahl et al., 2007). Youth are typically removed from society for periods ranging from 3 to 12 months, depending on state and county policies, funding constraints, and judicial trends. In addition to their primary punitive function, correctional institutions typically provide varying levels of therapeutic and rehabilitative services, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), 12-step substance abuse recovery programs, and individual and group psychotherapies. The common thread of these interventions remains akin to the goals of the early reformatories and training schools: to steer delinquent youth away from criminality and toward law-abiding attitudes and behaviors. Identity work, meaning the reshaping of youths’ self-representations in regard to crime, is a key part of attaining these behavioral goals (Oyserman & Marcus, 1990). Meta-analyses show that rehabilitation efforts with incarcerated youth are just moderately effective in preventing recidivism (Greenwood, 2005; Lipsey, 1999). However, an understanding of the identity work that occurs in these treatment contexts is strikingly absent from academic or practitioner discussions of rehabilitation strategies with incarcerated youth offenders.

A body of research in educational anthropology has investigated how youth negotiate their identities within and across various social settings, such as schools, families, peers, and communities (Phelan & Davidson, 1998; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1993). Ethnographic inquiries find that these formative social contexts offer possibilities for youth to try on new identities,
thereby providing spaces where identity modifications and even transformations can transpire (Cooper, Cooper, Azmitia, Chavira, & Gullatt, 2002; Hemmings, 1999). However, little is known about how youth identity work takes place in the context of involuntary correctional institutions. In this article, the authors conduct cross-case qualitative analysis with data from an ethnographic study of three correctional institutions to locate a process of negotiated identity among incarcerated young men. The following specific aims are posed: (1) to investigate youths’ adaptations to the values and norms of the correctional world; (2) to identify the strategies that youth offenders use to contend with the identity discourses implicated in treatment practices; and (3) to locate processes and patterns associated with youths’ narrated identity transitions, particularly in regard to professed criminality. The investigation of these aims pushes the boundaries of existing theories to account for youth identity transitions in involuntary institutional contexts.

Youth Identity and Multiple Worlds

The topic of youth identity is ripe with theoretical complexity and warrants clarification as to the use of the term in this study. Between and within social science disciplines, scholars dispute the process, meaning and goals of youth identity formation. Erik Erikson’s (1959, 1968) linear, stage-driven theory of identity development shaped much of the discourse surrounding the normative adolescent “identity crisis” throughout the latter part of the 20th century. Subsequently, critical theorists have challenged this uniform approach to identity development and reconceptualized youth identity as a dynamic search for a sense of self and social position that is situated within and informed by contexts such as family, peers, and schools, and by structural power arrangements such as gender, race, and class hierarchies (Cerulo, 1997; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993). As an example of these shifting norms and contexts, several scholars currently argue that a new category of emerging adulthood now characterizes the space between adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Schwartz, Coté, & Arnett, 2005). This body of literature shows that social forces such as the economy, family arrangements, and demographic shifts can structure identity possibilities and the navigation of social roles in this transitional period.

In a constructivist view, youth actively participate in ongoing attempts to define the self in schools and in other settings where they encounter competing and often conflicting representations of the self along multiple identity axes (e.g., gender, race, class, age, and sexuality) (Phelan et al., 1993;
Ungar & Teram, 2000; Weis & Fine, 2000). Phelan et al. followed this logic in positing their theory of “multiple worlds.” They define a “world” as “cultural knowledge and behavior found within the boundaries of students’ particular families, peer groups, and school,” and write, “Each world contains values and beliefs, expectations, actions, and emotional responses familiar to insiders” (p. 7). Their model suggests that young people are constantly traversing the boundaries and borders of multiple worlds (such as sociocultural, linguistic, psychosocial, or value-driven borders) and that these border crossings carry important implications for the construction of identity. According to Phelan et al., the transition across these borders can be conceptualized along two axes: (1) the congruence or dissonance between the norms and values of youths’ multiple worlds, and (2) the way that youth manage these border crossings. Although congruence between worlds facilitates an ease of transition across borders, youth also employ various strategies to manage these crossings. For example, a young person may attempt to adapt completely to a new or unfamiliar world, thus hiding or devaluing aspects of their prior worlds (such as home or family), or they may adapt situationally, by switching on and off their conformity to fundamentally incongruent norms and values. Finally, some youth are able to adapt to different worlds through a synthesis of their values and identities, without hiding or devaluing aspects of their selves in the process.

Using the multiple worlds framework, educational anthropologists have examined how marginalized and ethnic minority youth navigate the borders of their family and community worlds in relation to schooling and after-school programs (Cooper et al., 2002; Hemmings, 1998). Annette Hemmings investigated how three African American high school students adopted a “high-achieving” identity in spite of competing self-representations embedded in their home and neighborhood worlds. Hemmings found that in these students’ transitions between worlds, they employed various identity negotiation strategies, including “self-negation,” “self-fragmentation,” and “self-synthesis.” Self-synthesis in this case study meant that the individual managed to integrate his or her various identities into a “harmonious whole” that did not negate or fragment her personal identity in the process. In this example and others (Cooper et al., 2002), identity transformations are located in the active negotiation of discourses and messages about the self between worlds with incongruent norms and values. It is in the backdrop of this framework that we investigated incarcerated youths’ identities as they move between their past worlds and the world of the correctional institution.
Youth Offenders’ Multiple Worlds

As youth offenders enter into correctional institutions, they bring with them identities that are shaped by the values and norms of their family, neighborhood, peer, and school worlds. Research shows that many delinquent youth come from disrupted or violent family environments (for a review see Farrington, 2005) and that up to two thirds of detained youth may be experiencing a diagnosable mental health disorder, often related to exposure to violence (Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002). On the neighborhood and community level, the majority of incarcerated young people come from disadvantaged urban neighborhoods with poor-quality schools; high rates of domestic, neighborhood, and school violence; and limited opportunities for success in the legitimate economy (Polokow, 2000).

Indeed for many urban and impoverished young men, ethnographic research illustrates how crime and violence, and particularly gang violence, constitute dominant threads connecting their worlds and the self-representations they forge within them (Anderson, 1999). Violent events, weapons, and crime often serve as defining moments to accomplish a sense of masculinity or achievement (Majors & Billson, 1992; Wilkinson, 2003). Much of this prior research describes the contexts in which young men construct their identities, yet does not suggest what happens to these identities upon incarceration. For this reason, we turn to studies of identity construction in institutional settings to inform the current inquiry.

A long tradition of sociological work on institutional settings such as prisons and mental hospitals focuses on the issue of stigma management (Edgerton, 1967; Goffman, 1961, 1963). This body of knowledge, which is mainly focused on adult populations documents the power of institutional structure in enforcing stigmatized identities that are often contested by residents’ personal identity narratives. More recent studies of institutionalized populations (i.e., homeless shelter residents, prisoners) locate processes of “talking back to” or “resisting” stigmatizing messages to preserve positive versions or images of self. For example, Deborah Paterniti’s (2000) ethnography of an elderly nursing home finds that residents forged personal identity claims that countered the institutional culture’s deviant labels. Other studies find that institutionalized individuals also negotiate identities in relation to other residents (Geiger & Fisher, 2003; Juhila, 2004). These examples suggest that a process of identity negotiation may be a critical facet of the experience of institutionalized individuals. However, these concepts have not been investigated among incarcerated youth, hence providing a greater rationale for the current study.
The Correctional World

A body of ethnographic work in the U.S. juvenile correctional institutions took place in the 1960s and 1970s (see Feld, 1977; Polsky, 1962) when in-depth studies of penal system culture and norms were in fashion. Contemporary field investigations of juvenile correctional facilities are limited, yet two recent projects offer insight into the modern juvenile correctional setting (Abrams, Anderson-Nathe, & Aguilar, 2008; Abrams, Kim, & Anderson-Nathe, 2005; Inderbitzin, 2007a, 2007b). These two studies describe the daily practices of the institution and discover some similar underlying norms and practices. First, both studies find that juvenile correctional institutions struggle to balance the inherent tension of juxtaposed punitive and rehabilitative functions. Abrams et al. (2005) described several paradoxes that emerge in the balancing of these roles and examine how youth interpret and make sense of the competing philosophies that exist in these settings. Inderbitzin (2007a) similarly find that juvenile correctional staff must juggle competing roles as both rule enforcers and counselors or “lay therapists” for the youth that they serve.

These two projects also examine the underlying or implicit set of values and norms of the contemporary correctional institution. Inderbitzin (2007a, 2007b) describes the institution’s underlying “American dream” discourse that attempts to enforce a middle-class, law-abiding citizenship and identity among incarcerated young men. Similarly, Abrams et al. (2008) study teases apart how juvenile correctional practices reify a hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) that privileges power relations, hierarchy, and even misogyny and homophobia among its residents. Abrams et al. (2008) find that the hegemonic masculine ideal, as it remains largely out of reach to young men in disadvantaged sociostructural positions, unintentionally reinforces criminality among residents as way to accomplish their masculinity. These studies thus reveal the juvenile correctional institution as covertly and overtly imposing a set of expectations for youth identity revolving around a middle-class and normative citizenship ideal.

The current study builds on this knowledge and assumes that the juvenile correctional institution operates as a salient site of identity work given its essential mission of reforming youth as well as its use of various therapeutic practices seeking to reshape youths’ attitudes, values, and behaviors. Yet in the confines of this involuntary institution that offers opportunities for therapeutic intervention, the construction and negotiation of youth identity is not adequately understood. Interrogating the correctional institution with the lens of multiple worlds leads to a greater conceptualization of how youth identity transformations occur in involuntary institutional contexts.
Data and Methods

From 2001 to 2005, the first author of this article was the principal investigator for an ethnographic study seeking to understand young men’s experiences within three different juvenile correctional facilities. As mentioned in the literature review, separate publications have described these settings and the underlying tension within them (Abrams et al., 2008; Abrams et al., 2005). Prior articles have also examined youths’ responses to rehabilitation efforts across program types (Abrams, 2006) and how youth negotiate their transition back into the community (Abrams, 2007). This article deepens these prior analyses by conducting a longitudinal cross-case and cross-institution study of youth’s identity negotiations. The study aims arise from gaps in the extant literature, as described, as well as from questions raised by in-depth consideration of the volumes of field notes and interview transcripts collected for this study. This article analyses a subset of the data collected to produce a rich longitudinal analysis required to address the proposed aims. Thus before we detail the procedures used to select, analyze, and interpret data for this article, we will first describe the settings observed and the types of data collected for the project as a whole.

Settings

Ethnographic data were collected at three different institutions in the upper Midwest region of the United States. The three settings consisted of a large public correctional institution for felony-level offenders (Wildwood House), a small, non-profit–run maximum security facility for repeat and violent youth offenders (Cottage Grove), and a large public correctional institution for felony-level offenders that included a 6-week transition and reentry preparation program (Seven Acres Camp). All three facilities implemented various therapeutic interventions in their daily routines, with CBTs constituting the common thread among the institutions. However, the facilities differed in regard to population served, length of stay, treatment focus, and level of security. As shown in Table 1, Cottage Grove was much smaller and more secure than the other two facilities. Wildwood House and Seven Acres Camp were more similar, yet the latter facility stipulated longer stays. Although the observed settings had diverse characteristics, structures, and populations, the cross-case design of this study allowed for tentative hypotheses about youths’ identity negotiation processes to be repeatedly refined, expanded, and modified by adding observations from these different contexts.
Data Collection

Following ethnographic methodology (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), participant observation and in-depth interviewing constituted the two primary data collection techniques for the study. The researchers gained access to all three institutional settings through court permission and agreements with facility staff. A team of four primary researchers, including the first author and three graduate student research assistants conducted all of the data collection activities.

Observational fieldwork occurred at the three facilities sequentially: first at Wildwood House (16 months), next at Cottage Grove (14 months), and finally at Seven Acres Camp (12 months). Pairs of researchers spent 4 to 6 hours weekly at the facilities observing treatment activities, routine practices, and how youth transitioned back into the community. Detailed field notes were analyzed and interpreted as the study progressed. Moreover, relying on available subjects and contingent on parental consent, the researchers recruited 12 youth at Wildwood House, 7 youth at Cottage Grove, and 10 youth at Seven Acres Camp to participate in series of semi-structured interviews over the 4- to 8-month period spanning their incarceration and release back into the community. This series of three to five audiotaped interviews per participant followed pre-determined clusters of topics but were loosely structured in their format. Interviews typically

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilities</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Length of Stay</th>
<th>Treatment Program Emphasis</th>
<th>Security Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wildwood House</td>
<td>Up to 75 young men</td>
<td>4-6 months</td>
<td>Family systems work, CBT, group work</td>
<td>Moderately secure, one large dormitory room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottage Grove</td>
<td>Up to 12 young men</td>
<td>12 months or longer, determined by the courts</td>
<td>CBT, group work, psychiatric monitoring (medication)</td>
<td>Locked and fully monitored, youth sleep in individual cells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven Acres Camp</td>
<td>Up to 100 young men and women</td>
<td>9-12 months and a 6-week transition program</td>
<td>CBT, peer culture, focus on preparation for release</td>
<td>Less secure, cottage-style dormitories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CBT = cognitive behavioral therapy.
lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted by the same lead interviewer or pairs of interviewers at each meeting. A male researcher was present at nearly all of the interview meetings. Logs of researchers’ interview notes recorded changes in perceptions and attitudes toward the facility and their rehabilitation process over time.

Focal Data Set

Of the total 29 youth who participated in a longitudinal interview series across the three facilities, we purposively selected a subsample of 10 cases for in-depth analysis. The selection criteria for this subsample were (a) a minimum of three interviews over a period of 4 to 9 months, and (b) at least one interview occurring after their release back to the community. These criteria limited the breadth of perspectives considered but permitted an in-depth, rich analysis of identity narratives over time. Table 2 contains a basic

Table 2
Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilities</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age (Years)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Committing Offense</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
<th>Time Covered (Month)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wildwood House</td>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Assault/probation violation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Felony escape</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brad</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>Auto theft/probation violation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottage Grove</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Felony theft</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>White/Native</td>
<td>Probability violation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven Acres Camp</td>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ace</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Possession of firearm</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sex offense/probation violation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jermaine</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Possession of firearm</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
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</table>
description of the subsample. As shown, the 10 participants consisted of 5 White, 3 African American, 1 Native American, and 1 Hmong youth with a mean age of 16.4 years. The subsample of youth meeting our purposive criteria was nearly identical to the full study sample in regard to age, but White youth were overrepresented. Committing offenses varied but mostly involved violent crimes. On average, each youth participated in 4.3 interviews over a period of 6.5 months.

Analysis Procedures

After reading all of the interview transcripts, observation notes, and facility records pertaining to the subsample, the authors developed an initial coding plan based on the research aims. The initial broad coding categories were as follows: (a) offenders’ multiple worlds (past and present), (b) professed identities and self-perceptions (past, present, and future), (c) strategies to negotiate treatment discourses (within corrections), and (d) future goals and aspirations. Using QSR NVIVO 2.0 software to manage a large volume of textual data, a number of subcategories falling under each primary category were developed and modified throughout the entire coding process. For example, under the heading of multiple worlds, codes were developed to categorize the norms and values associated with home, family, neighborhood, peer, school, and/or correctional worlds. After initial coding was completed for all 10 cases, 2 masters-level graduate students who were unfamiliar with the data coded two randomly selected cases. Coding decisions were then compared and reflected a high level of consistency with those of the authors (83.5% agreement).

When coding for each case was completed, the authors summarized the codes using several within-case data-display techniques as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). To begin, a unique table was constructed for each case that included in the left-hand column the three main organizing categories and subcodes and, in the right-hand column, a summary of what youth reported across interviews. For example, under the multiple worlds category, the authors summarized what youth discussed in the worlds subcategories noted above. This summary was then used to construct two different within-case (meaning separate summaries for each case) thematic data displays. First, themes that emerged in the coding and summary process were displayed in a time-ordered matrix. The column of the matrix indicated the time dimension ranging from past to present and then to future. The rows consisted of the major themes that emerged in the four primary
organizing categories: worlds, professed identity and self-perceptions, strategies to negotiate identities, and future goals. In addition, a flowchart summary of the time-ordered matrix was created for each case. The flowchart displayed how youths’ professed identities and self-perceptions were constructed in the context of their primary worlds (i.e., family, school, peer, correctional world, etc.) and reflected changes in these identities and self-perceptions throughout their movement in and out of the correctional world.

Cross-case displays were then constructed to locate patterns and processes across the whole sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using the four main organizing categories, we created a master chart of the 10 cases and further clustered cases that revealed similar patterns. The final data display shown in Figure 1 was developed to visualize pathways to identity negotiations by following each case in relation to (a) incoming professed criminality, (b) style of adaptation to the correctional world, (c) strategies to negotiate treatment discourses, and (d) identity transition styles. This display was also used to compare and contrast clustered cases. These cross-case displays uncovered several common stages of the identity negotiation process as well as diverse patterns of transition in and out of the correctional world.
Findings

This section explains our mapping of youths’ negotiated identities by working our way from the left side of Figure 1, labeled “Incoming Professed Identity,” to the right side of the diagram, labeled “Identity Transitions.” Referencing this figure throughout this section reveals the stages and patterns found as these 10 youths offenders actively constructed their identities amidst institutional attempts to reshape them.

Incoming Professed Identities

Throughout their incarceration process, the youth discussed their past and current identities in relation to the norms and values of their multiple worlds. Among the many identities that they described, we were particularly interested in youths’ professed criminality. As illustrated in the left side of Figure 1, most of the youth entered the correctional world with a strong professed criminal identity. “High Criminality” in our logic means that criminal activity was a norm woven throughout multiple worlds and that criminality comprised a significant piece of their prior professed identities. Youth categorized in the high-criminality group (Ace 1 and 2, Nate, Brad, Elijah, Jermaine, Jason, and Trevor) all boasted about their criminal aptitude and relied on criminality as an anchor of personal achievement. For example, Brad is a 16-year-old native American who was sentenced to Wildwood House for auto theft. Brad’s family history revolved around crime, violence, and incarceration, so his own involvement in crime at an early age was normalized for him. Posing a rationale for his ongoing illegal activities, he said, “I kept doing it and I got better at what I did and . . . just like popping locks or something, just doing that, I got better and I just kept doing it and just kept doing it . . .” (Interview, February 11, 2002). Brad’s sense of getting better at burglary later informed his decision to participate in organized, paid criminal activities in lieu of schooling or a legal work. Crime in essence became a major cornerstone of his sense of personal accomplishment.

Criminal identities were also reinforced in multiple worlds where status and power were conferred through illegal activity. Elijah, a 16-year-old crack-cocaine dealer, viewed himself as an older brother who was respected by his siblings, an important financial supporter for his family, a father of a son, and a leader who received respect from all his peers. As he describes in the following passage, the fast money he earned from drug dealing elevated his status in these multiple worlds:

Here Elijah’s sense of personal power and achievement exemplifies how criminal activities were positively reinforced across offenders’ multiple worlds.

Among the youth studied, 3 participants stood apart in their distancing of the self from criminal identities and associations. Seemingly not coincidentally, all three of these youth were White, which was the minority in these facilities. Noah from Cottage Grove, who we classified as medium in regard to criminality, identified much more as a person with a mental illness than as a criminal, although these two identities were somewhat intertwined in that he described himself as using terms such as scary, psychotic, and morbid. In a slightly different fashion, Nick (from Seven Acres Camp) and Eric (from Wildwood House) both entered their respective facilities with minimal criminal identifications. Three shared features of their self-representations were (a) an emphasis on coming from normative worlds (e.g., growing up in two-parent families), (b) experiencing prosocial identities from school (i.e., honor students; high achievers), and (c) a sense of being a unique or somewhat eccentric teenager. Eric, for example, described himself during his first interview as a “marching band nerd and computer geek” and viewed himself as very different from the other residents who “actually need to be here” (Interview, June 3, 2001). Both Nick and Eric expressed pride in being different from their peers, evaluating themselves as less criminal or offensive compared to the other facility residents. This relational appraisal as “better and different” may have served to elevate their personal self-image, yet at the same time, it contributed to very difficult adaptation processes and persistent feelings of alienation.

**Adaptation to the Correctional World**

Although participants in this study came from three different institutions, field note and interview data commonly described the correctional world as having (a) physical and psychological structures that youth had not routinely experienced in their past worlds; (b) control over youth’s lives through rules, consequences, and confinement; and (c) a power structure that confers authority among staff and select peers and renders most youth
powerless. Despite these similar perceptions of the correctional structure, styles of adaptation to the setting were quite varied. Figure 1 maps these polarized adaptation styles, from a very smooth adaptation process among Trevor, Elijah, Jason, and Nate, to a very difficult transition for Ace (at both junctures), Jermaine, Brad, Nick, Noah, and Eric.

A smooth transition to the correctional world meant that the youth found some enjoyment in working within the power structure, felt they fit in among their peers, and (mostly) forged positive connections with staff. For these youth, the correctional institution represented somewhat unfamiliar terrain, yet elements of the structure mirrored their past realities of hierarchy and power relations in street and gang worlds. Nate provided detailed accounts of the rank and hierarchy of his gang and claimed that he had adapted well to living at Cottage Grove based on his familiarity with following intricate rules systems. Working in the power structure also allowed youth to maintain elevated positions of power and leadership among their peers—another point of congruence between prior and present worlds. Elijah described the intricacies of how power is earned among peers at Wildwood House:

_Elijah_: The upper level’s got more power . . . , they got more power than all of us. . . .

_Interviewer_: Ok, so they have power because they have privileges?

_Elijah_: Yeah, that’s why, cuz their power is that if they tell you to do something and its good, you gotta do it. Like they tell you straight line, you get in a straight line. If they go to the staff and tell them that you’re doing something, the staff won’t believe you, they believe them, “not you.” (Interview, July 30, 2001)

Offenders who adapted well in all three settings found some synergy between the rules of their past worlds and those of the correctional environment and even described some enjoyment in mastering the institutional hierarchy.

In contrast to the adaptation process described above, other participants experienced more difficult transitions to the correctional world. Offenders who moved from the high-criminality group to the difficult adaptation group (Brad, Jermaine, and Ace 1 and 2) characterized their transition to the correctional world process as ripe with conflict, anger, and resentment. They expressed a disdain of the power structure and a strong dislike or even hatred of facility staff. At the juncture of his second incarceration, Ace described his ongoing negative feelings about the correctional staff: “They [staff] think you’re doing something, and then, you’re really not, and then
they won’t admit they’re sorry. They won’t admit they’re wrong. . . . Like, even if they’re wrong, they’re right” (Interview, November 23, 2004). Like Ace, youth with difficult adaptations strongly resented their diminished position in the institution. As such, experiences of congruence between the norms and values of the past and present worlds were overshadowed by feelings of powerlessness and loss of autonomy.

Participants who entered with medium or low professed criminality experienced a difficult adjustment to corrections in a qualitatively different way. For Noah, Eric, and Nick, their refusal to accept the label of “criminal” fed into their conviction that they did not belong in corrections. Noah, who spent much of his first few weeks in solitary confinement due to a difficult adjustment, continually professed that he was better suited for a mental health program:

*Interviewer:* Do you feel different from the rest of the guys?  
*Noah:* Yeah, I do. I feel that no one can relate to me. No one hears things. No one thinks morbid. Everybody thinks what I do is sick. And I kinda look at them say, yes it is sick, but that’s who I am. (Interview, October 2, 2003)

Here Noah’s overriding self-representation as mentally ill led him to feel alienated from his peers and the correctional world as a whole. Similarly, Eric and Nick experienced difficult adjustments to corrections based on a sense of not belonging to the criminal or urban street world.

Overall, youths’ correctional adaptation process was polarized into smooth or difficult transitions. Yet these adaptations were not wholly related to the experience of congruence between worlds, as Phelan et al. (1993) proposed. In the context of an authoritative structure that diminished their power, youths’ adaptations were linked to perceptions of belonging in the facility as well as their ability to locate a sense of personal power. As the next section describes, these observed styles of adaptation or “border crossings” positioned some of the youth to be positively or negatively inclined to engage in a treatment process. However, strategies used to negotiate treatment discourses were quite varied and not directly linked to styles of program adaptation.

**Strategies to Negotiate Treatment Discourses**

Although the type and frequency of therapeutic interventions offered at the three facilities varied, the discourses implicated in these practices were remarkably similar. Field note and interview data described a set of messages
suggesting that offenders need to rethink their criminality as part of a larger pattern of poor choices, family dysfunction, or negative peer influences, and to aspire to return home with goals of law-abiding citizenry, new friends, and normative, working- or middle-class aspirations and activities (such as trade school, the military, or college). The identity work involved in these therapeutic discourses requires youth to rethink the self as “bad” or “deviant” and to envision alternative, socially acceptable self-representations for the future. As shown in Figure 1, all of the participants responded to their involuntary participation in therapeutic interventions with various personal negotiation strategies, and these strategies emerged as the key factor in shaping their eventual patterns of identity transition.

One of the primary strategies that we located in offenders’ negotiations with treatment expectations and discourses was a particular type of struggle. This strategy, which was most pronounced among youth who eventually came to accept their need for treatment (Trevor, Nate, Ace 2, Jason, and Nick), meant that youth struggled with the programs’ high expectations for profound and rapid personal change. The type of self-examination implicated in these treatment programs was described as a painful process that began with some level of feeling low or uncomfortable. When first interviewed, Trevor described feeling numb and shut-off to his feelings. On exit, he looked back on this process as a natural course of self-exploration:

I guess, y’know, I had to get used to the program a little bit and know that this place isn’t the worst thing in the world and I was just goin’ through that depressed stage . . . . I’m locked up. I can’t have my freedom. My friends are havin’ fun. I have to do all this work . . . . That’s how I was doing. (Interview, October 10, 2001)

After a process of serious contemplation about engaging in this difficult self-examination, youth who had high regard for the treatment programs also struggled with high expectations to become role models for their peers. Nate from Cottage Grove described,

It’s like all the staff expect me to be this perfect leader and this perfect role model for everybody. And expect me not to ever, y’know, do anything wrong, you know what I’m saying, and the supervisors, like they expect me to do all this stuff, you know what I’m saying, like be this person that I really I’m really not . . . .” (Interview, November 8, 2003)

Here, Nate’s feeling of not being ready to be the person he is really not is a clear example of struggling with perceived pressures and expectations for accelerated identity shifts.
Another strategy used to negotiate treatment discourses and expectations was “selective acceptance.” This strategy meant holding onto the idea of past peer, gang, and family world identities as positive or valuable, even when treatment messages deemed these associations as bad or deviant. A common example of selective acceptance was that youth professed to internalize treatment goals, yet still planned to only slightly distance themselves from their peers, gangs, or criminally involved family members upon their release. For example, Trevor insisted that he would stay connected with his old friends once he left Wildwood House, but he wouldn’t engage in crimes with them. The first time Ace left the facility, he expressed the desire to reconnect with his “street-corner” friends, but to distance himself from their ways of earning power and respect (i.e., selling drugs). A selective disentangling of the self from past associations was commonplace and seemingly part of a normative identity negotiation process.

As Figure 1 indicates, five of the youth in our sample primarily used these two strategies of struggle and selective acceptance to arrive at a place of acceptance and internalization of treatment discourses. This high level of buy-in was most apparent in how these offenders expressed an understanding of their past criminality in program terms, such as “to please friends and gain power,” “to maintain a bad boy image,” “to be cool,” “as a reaction to low self-esteem” or, as Nate suggested, “I was in power: I didn’t think anything was wrong with stealing or fighting” (Interview, February 10, 2003). These associations of criminal activity with accomplishing a sense of power or mastery reflect the type of reexamination of self that the treatment programs promoted.

Acceptance of these treatment discourses also meant that the youth readily identified the specific aspects of treatment programs that were beneficial to them and used the program to acquire behavioral and psychological strategies to change their attitudes and behaviors. For example, although Nick resented his correctional confinement, he ultimately saw psychological treatment as a pathway to recovery and personal change. He stated:

*Interviewer:* Well, what are some of the things that you are going to take away from your experience here?

*Nick:* Using my interventions to stop myself from you know, acting out and doing bad things. And like, knowing when I’m starting going down the path, so I can pull myself out. And knowing more about myself and feeling better about myself. “Cause that was part of it. . . . [several tangential interview lines were omitted], . . . So, for all the mistakes that I’ve made and all of the regrets that I have, I’ve learned a lot from them and came out a better person.” (Interview, August 8, 2004)
Like Nick, youth who accepted these treatment discourses expressed a similar sense of valuing and planning to integrate treatment programs and strategies in their lives outside the institution.

In addition to struggle and selective acceptance, youth who expressed a more partial and ambivalent buy-in to treatment discourses (Ace 1, Noah, and Elijah) also consistently used the strategy of manipulation, meaning the avoidance of engagement with treatment or identity work by faking or pretending their change. Elijah, for example, reflected back on what his treatment contracts (meaning written therapeutic work) and the whole therapy program meant to him: “It was just a joke. I just did it to get outta here” (Interview, February 10, 2002). Similarly, looking back on his first stay in Seven Acres Camp, Ace explained that his good behavior earned him an early release because he just did what was expected without making real changes, or “impressed staff to get out” (Interview Note, October 14, 2004). As a way of taking back power in the institution, youth across all three facilities proudly described how they watched closely to figure out the inner workings of the treatment programs and complete their required therapeutic progress without really making any significant personal change. This manipulation strategy, which all of the youth used at various times (Abrams et al., 2005), was a highly pronounced theme among youth who had moderate or low acceptance of the treatment programs over the course of their incarceration.

Using then a combination of strategies to negotiate treatment discourses, the three moderately accepting youth (Ace 1, Elijah, and Noah) responded favorably to some aspects of these programs, yet they were quick to discount, at times, its potential benefits. Noah, for example, fully accepted his identity as a person with mental illness, yet refused to believe that treatment programs offered in corrections could help him overcome his violent impulses or thoughts. Moreover, this ambivalent type of acceptance was characterized with uncertainty about translating “treatment speak” to the world outside the institution. At the end of his first placement, Ace (1) expressed his concerns:

The treatment worked, and you know what I’m saying, it gets, makes you know things about yourself that you never knew, you know what I’m saying. Cognitive distortions, for example . . . helps you get ready for things on the outs. . . . Like, that you already was in and how to get away from those things, kind of. But it’s hard once you go back to them that same environment and try to use those same things. (Interview, June 24, 2004)
Although these three offenders all came to understand their past criminal associations as related to their quest for personal power, they remained ambivalently accepting of the treatment program’s ability to impart long-lasting or realistic change when placed in their worlds outside the institution. As the first author has argued in a separate paper (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005), the range of youths’ “possible selves” was often shaped by the strength of their past “worlds” influences and worlds as well as realistic accounts of the limitations they would likely experience in their home environments.

The final negotiation strategy which was predominantly observed among Jermaine, Brad, and Eric was the nearly complete negation of the treatment messages that asked them to rethink aspects of their prior selves. This negation strategy served to reject treatment ideologies and prevent an examination of the self. An observation note regarding Jermaine illustrates this strategy:

Jermaine unequivocally asserts that he does not intend to change. The staff at Seven Acres Camp attempt to talk with him about leaving the gang, but Jermaine does not listen. He says he “hears them talking” but doesn’t plan to respond. His main hope for the transition program is to get a legitimate job that pays well. Otherwise, he does not plan to do anything except mark time and get out. (Interview Note, December 10, 2004)

Using a combination of manipulation and negation throughout their incarceration, Brad, Jermaine, and Eric were able to maintain their prior self-representations, circumvent possibilities for identity change, and reject nearly all aspects of treatment discourse. Brad even suggested that solitary confinement without any treatment program would have been a more effective strategy for him. These youth believed that change or rehabilitation did not apply to their situation because nothing was “broken” that needed fixing. For example, in his e-mail to the research team months after his release, Eric continued to distance himself from a person who actually needed help. He wrote:

I can see where Wildwood House would be great help to somebody that has grown up in a broken home or somebody with a low IQ, or somebody with drug problems, etc. I’m not trying to be arrogant or anything when I say this, but Wildwood House just is NOT [emphasis Eric’s] designed to “treat” kids with an IQ above the “legally mentally challenged” level and little brain power. . . . They didn’t help me in anyway, they just set me back further.” (E-mail correspondence, February 14, 2002)
Eric’s statement may simply be explained by his extreme resentment about being incarcerated. At the same time, a rejection of treatment as beneficial in any form persisted throughout his interviews, and similar to Jermaine and Brad, Eric held fast to his view of treatment as a waste of time.

As described in this section, youth actively used a varied set of strategies to negotiate treatment discourses, including struggle, selective acceptance, manipulation, and negation. Combinations of these selected strategies resulted in a spectrum of buy-in to treatment discourses, from nearly full acceptance, to partial and ambivalent acceptance, and then to a rejection of all treatment discourses. This process of negotiating treatment discourses was intricately linked with the three patterns of identity transition that eventually emerged in this analysis.

### Identity Transitions: Three Patterns

As Figure 1 illustrates, youths’ patterns of identity transition eventually clustered into three primary categories. These categories included the following: (a) self-synthesis, meaning that offenders made significant shifts in their criminal identities in the direction of program expectations, and acknowledging their prior identities and the struggles involved in making change; (b) situational self-transformation, referring to offenders who ambivalently adapted to the correctional world and experienced great difficulty in translating identities between worlds; and (c) self-preservation, referring to offenders whose identities remained nearly entirely stable throughout their incarceration.

All of the youth in the self-synthesis category developed a critical lens concerning their past and expressed a seemingly authentic wish to replace their prior criminal selves with alternative possibilities. Although they all struggled with aspects of correctional confinement and treatment discourses, their longitudinal narratives revealed clear changes in their self-perceptions, goals, and thoughts about their involvement in crime or their prior selves. For example, in his first interview, Jason saw himself as a “violent, chronic offender” and a person who might spend a large part of his life incarcerated. His later interview reflected change in these self-perceptions: “I see myself as a kid that make mistakes. . . . He [referring to self] ain’t bad, but he just make dumb mistakes, and some, some mistakes I could fix and some I can’t” (Interview, September 9, 2001). Jason also initially described himself as the “worst son” in his family because of his crimes and poor academic achievement. By the time of his final interview, he saw
himself as someone who could be a “good son,” a “good brother,” and an academic achiever.

Youth who fell into the situational self-transformation category ambivalently expressed a desire for personal change, but over the course of their incarceration and release, did not feel equipped to achieve alternative identity possibilities in their worlds outside of corrections. For example in his first interview, Elijah recollected his past self as “a man that’s getting a lot of respect from older dudes; getting lots of money; with a lot of women, stay high; always buy his son stuff but doesn’t spend time with his son” (Interview, June 13, 2001). At the end of his placement, our interview notes documented the following shifts in his self-representations: “He talked about how he realized he had “an unmanageable life,” and that he’s changed because he used to think he was “Da Man,” but now he knows “I ain’t the man” (Interview Notes, November 18, 2001). After 3 months spent “on the outs,” Elijah returned to spend one night at Wildwood House for violating his probation orders. When the research team interviewed him at this juncture, Elijah acknowledged that he still “got the street in himself” and even described himself as “in between his past and his future” (Interview, February 10, 2002). This sense of being trapped by old identities and associations is also characteristic of the challenges that youth offenders typically experience as they translate their correctional selves back to their worlds outside the institution (Abrams, 2007).

The three youth who left with nearly complete self-preservation of identities were unwavering in their lack of intention to question or change any aspects of their selves during their incarceration. These youth consistently employed negation and manipulation strategies to circumvent correctional or treatment influences and still accomplishing their required program tasks. Eric, for example, consciously resisted any attempts to look at himself through the program’s perspective and looking back, he described his change process as follows:

I’ll take for granted that I have changed in the sense that I’ll never do an offense to the degree of the one that I did do, but as for other things, like my personality, how I view the world, etc, I haven’t changed a bit. (E-mail correspondence, February 14, 2002)

Unlike Eric, Brad and Jermaine entered the facility with a strong professed criminality. However, they too managed to preserve their identities and planned to return to criminal associations and activities upon their release.
Summary of Findings

This longitudinal cross-case analysis analyzed how 10 youth offenders entered the correctional world with varying degrees of professed criminality, how they adapted to the correctional world, and how they actively negotiated the identity discourses implicated in treatment discourses. We found that regardless of their level of incoming criminal identity, offenders showed three distinct identity transition patterns that were connected more to the strategies they used to manage treatment discourses than their style of adaptation to the institutional structure. These identity transition patterns of self-synthesis, situational self-transformation, and self-preservation illustrate various ways that young people work to preserve a positive sense of self in relation to treatment messages challenging their prior identities and an institutional structure that diminishes their sense of personal power.

Discussion

A rehabilitation perspective on juvenile incarceration holds that therapeutic and supportive interventions can help to change antisocial delinquents into more law-abiding and productive citizens. Decades of recidivism research reveals that juvenile interventions often fall short of meeting these expectations (Greenwood, 2005). What is less well understood is how identity work is implicated in the balance of rehabilitation and punishment that these programs offer and herein lies the unique contribution of this study.

Phelan et al. (1993) argued that congruence in the norms and values between worlds helps youth to manage border crossings without negating or fragmenting the self in the process. In this analysis, even when congruence between worlds was present, youth adapted quite differently to the structure of corrections. Participants who had strong professed criminality were quite familiar with power and hierarchy as operating norms in their neighborhood, peer, and gang worlds. Yet though some of these youth who experienced congruence between worlds found enjoyment and even comfort in operating within the power structure of corrections, others joined the low-criminality youth in fully resenting the structure and their low status in that system. The issue of retaining power remained central as youth navigated the borders of these institutions.

The critical question remains, how were these adaptation processes implicated in the offenders’ identity transitions? Among our participants, observed styles of adaptation or border crossings did seem to position a few offenders to be positively inclined to engage in a treatment process where identity
transitions could occur. Yet almost independent of these adaptation styles, patterns of identity shift were more directly linked with the strategies that offenders used in response to treatment program expectations and discourses. As such, youth were able to fully or ambivalently embrace a process of struggle with their past selves even if they adapted poorly to being incarcerated or did not initially consider themselves to be in need of help or reform.

Three types of identity transitions emerged from youths’ active negotiation with treatment discourses: self-synthesis, situational self-transformation, and self-preservation. These patterns differ from those discovered by Hemmings (1998), who located strategies of self-synthesis, self-fragmentation, and self-negation in her investigation of African American high achievers. It seems reasonable to infer that because we were investigating identity in an involuntary correctional context, as opposed to a more positive setting, the youth in this study were inclined to hold strong to their prior identities rather than to voluntarily negate their prior selves as in Hemmings’ work. This self-preservation tendency that we discovered is in keeping with studies of other institutionalized populations, wherein residents strive to maintain a positive image of self in the face of stigma (Geiger & Fisher, 2003; Juhila, 2004; Paterniti, 2000). Moreover, the situational self-transformation group’s lack of ability to translate the self between worlds speaks to uniqueness of identity work that occurs in a setting that is nearly entirely removed from youths’ real-world contexts. It is understandable that when isolated from outside identity influences, youth might adopt new identities that are not necessarily translatable to their outside worlds. However, as these data suggest, the task of integrating these new identities into incongruent worlds with significant realistic constraints remains a significant challenge.

As these institutions challenged personal identity claims, all of the youth in this study struggled with the negative light cast on their prior ways of gaining a sense of power and mastery in their identities. Negotiation strategies such as selective acceptance and manipulation of program rules helped youth to cling to the positive anchors of their past and thereby reject the negative thrust of an involuntary punitive setting. Yet taking a different turn from prior studies on institutions and stigma, our research shows offenders not just resisting these negative self-representations, but also reflecting a keen awareness of their place in between the selves formed in corrections and the selves of their prior worlds. Located in the liminal space between identity possibilities, youth collectively narrated an important process of personal struggle that speaks to the true challenges of any type of identity transition, even when motivation and opportunity are present.

Finally, in light of recent literature and theory on emerging adulthood, this study points to the importance of examining how vulnerable youth (such
as foster youth, homeless youth, and incarcerated youth) conceptualize and navigate their transition into emerging adulthood. Unlike their more middle-class or privileged counterparts, the youth in our study are likely to experience abrupt or accelerated transitions to the markers of adulthood, such as early childbearing and financial independence, without the time to ponder or consider their role transitions and increased responsibilities. Although our study is not focused in this specific area, it does indicate the need for further investigation of how these identity negotiations across worlds will intersect with youths’ pending transitions to adulthood.

This study has several limitations that warrant consideration and discussion. As explained in the Methods section, this cross-case and cross-institution analysis deepens previously published work from this same study that draws more heavily on the descriptive ethnographic data (Abrams, 2006; Abrams et al, 2008; Abrams et al., 2005). For this article, we purposively selected cases from this larger dataset that contained rich and longitudinal process information about offenders’ identity negotiations. This strategy yielded a depth of information within and across cases and contexts. Although the cases studied within each site were limited, the processes of identity negotiation that were extracted across the three institutions lends itself to transferability of the findings, which enhances, rather than limits, the rigor of a qualitative study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). It is also important to note that the researchers are unaware how long these narrated identity transitions lasted because follow-up through postrelease interviews lasted for a limited and varied amount of time. Our analysis also did not account for life events occurring outside the institution that might have contributed to identity shifts among the participants. Hence, our linking of these identity transitions to processes occurring within the institutions is based on our limited purview of observing and interviewing youth in that context.

**Conclusion**

This article mapped a process of identity negotiation by examining youths’ adaptation to the correctional world and the strategies used to contend with treatment discourses that challenged their professed identities. The findings can contribute to models of practice that might capitalize on youths’ processes of adaptation and negotiation in the correctional world. For example, cognitive behavioral strategies are known to work well with high-risk offenders in preventing recidivism (Greenwood, 2005). Yet if they are not reinforced in offenders’ lives outside the institution, youth will
struggle to translate or adapt their new ways of thinking to these other formative worlds. Stronger transition and aftercare programs may increase the likelihood that youth maintain identity transitions as they reenter their old surroundings; however, realistically, youth will need true opportunities to enact new identity, possibilities. Moreover, as juvenile correctional facilities strive to balance their punitive and rehabilitative functions, practitioners need to consider how these mechanisms interact with one another, as youth whose sense of power is diminished by the involuntary structure may be less inclined to engage with any kind of therapeutic work. Finally, this study reveals the correctional institution as a potential site of prosocial identity transformation. Providing insight into what works for this population, this process-oriented research finds that even with some struggle, some youth are amenable to rethink their pasts and construct new ideas about their future selves. Additional research, however, is needed to understand how youth make meaning of these identity negotiations as they move into emerging adulthood.

Notes

1. Data for this article are extracted from the same larger study as these citations, and the methodology for this comprehensive study is detailed in the Methods section. We chose to describe the study as well in the review of related literature as these publications help to describe and define the correctional world, which will not be covered in depth in this article due to space limitations.

2. Only males were selected for this study as there were few institutions in the area serving both males and females.

3. All names of institutions and participants are masked for confidentiality.

4. The reader should note that though all the youth have only one process depicted in Figure 1, Ace is divided into “Ace 1 and Ace 2.” This is because during our study, Ace went through the incarceration cycle two separate times. Because he responded to incarceration differently in the two cycles, we made the decision to diagram and analyze his two processes accordingly.

5. Much more could be said in relation to how identities were formed and maintained in relation to these worlds, but due to space limitations, we will reserve this detail of analysis for a separate article.

References


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