The purpose of this paper is to explore and understand ways of adapting to prison life from the perspectives of older incarcerated women. Adaptation is examined through four interrelated dimensions: day-to-day life, interpersonal relationships, the relevance of age in adaptation, and programming for an aging prison population. A qualitative research design was utilized in this project, as it was a goal of the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of an understudied population. One-time, in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 women over the age of 50 at a female multi-security correctional facility. Findings from this study suggest that adaptations made within each of the dimensions have important impacts on the overall adaptation to prison life.
AGING BEHIND BARS: 
ADAPTATION OF OLDER WOMEN

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Gerontological Studies
Department of Sociology and Gerontology

By
Leah M. Janssen
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2007

Advisor _______________________________________
Christopher Wellin, Ph.D

Reader _______________________________________
Glenn Muschert, Ph.D

Reader _______________________________________
Christine Caffrey, Ph.D
# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
Aging Prisoners ............................................................................................................................... 1
Aging Female Prisoners ..................................................................................................................... 2
Investigating The Lives Of Older Inmates ....................................................................................... 3
   Social Relationships In Prison ..................................................................................................... 4
   Adaptation In Prison .................................................................................................................. 6
   Programming for Older Inmates ............................................................................................... 7
Theoretical Perspectives .................................................................................................................. 10
   Life-Course Perspective .......................................................................................................... 10
   Socioemotional Selectivity Theory ............................................................................................ 11
   Socio-Environmental Theory of Aging .................................................................................... 12
Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 13

Chapter 2: Research Design & Methodology .................................................................................. 15
   Research Design ....................................................................................................................... 15
   Methods: Sample ..................................................................................................................... 16
   Gatekeepers ............................................................................................................................. 18
   Description of Prison and Informants ...................................................................................... 18
   Data Collection Methods ........................................................................................................ 19
   Data Analysis Procedures ........................................................................................................ 20
   Data ........................................................................................................................................... 20

Chapter 3: Findings ........................................................................................................................ 23
   Dimension One: Day-To-Day Life ............................................................................................ 23
      Total Institutions .................................................................................................................. 23
      Housing ............................................................................................................................... 24
      Schedules ............................................................................................................................ 24
      Looking Forward .................................................................................................................. 28
      Challenges ........................................................................................................................... 29
      Summary ............................................................................................................................... 31
   Dimension Two: Interpersonal Relationships .......................................................................... 33
      Inside Prison Social Contacts .............................................................................................. 33
      Generational Gap ................................................................................................................ 36
      Outside Social Contacts ....................................................................................................... 38
      Primary & Secondary Social Networks ............................................................................... 41
      Summary ............................................................................................................................... 43
   Dimension Three: The Relevance of Age in Adaptation ....................................................... 44
      Adaptation: Keeping a Positive Mindset .............................................................................. 44
      Difficulties in Adaptation ..................................................................................................... 48
      Awareness of Age ................................................................................................................ 50
      Karp’s Decade of Reminders ................................................................................................ 53
      Old Age In Prison: An Advantage or Disadvantage? .............................................................. 55
      Summary ............................................................................................................................... 56
List of Tables

Table 1. Ohio's Aging Prison Population.................................................................2
Table 2. Basic Demographic Information on Study Sample........................................19
Table 3. Ohio's Female Inmates Age 50 and Older.....................................................19
Table 4. Four Dimensions of Adaptation......................................................................21
Table 5. Emotional Intimacy and Proximity in Social Relationships..............................42
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee, Drs. Chris Wellin, Glenn Muschert, and Christine Caffrey, whom I have worked closely with over the past year in the development of this research project. These three people have wholeheartedly believed in my ideas and have supported me in every step of the research process. I appreciate their continuous guidance and encouragement in this project. A special thanks to my committee chair Chris Wellin; words cannot express my gratitude for the time and commitment you have dedicated to helping me sharpen my skills as a first-time qualitative researcher and your enduring efforts in making this research happen.

I would especially like to thank the 11 women I interviewed, who gave me a glimpse into the life on the inside. I am truly grateful for the stories and insights that they were wiling to share with me, thank you so very much. I would also like to thank the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction for allowing me access to conduct this research.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family for their lasting love, support and patience in my life’s endeavors thus far. To my parents Kathleen and Gary, I thank you for your encouragement and enthusiasm throughout my academic career, I truly could not have accomplished all that I have without you. To my brother, Ezra, thank you for always making me laugh.
Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter begins with a general account of information published on the aging prison population, with an emphasis on state level data. In this description I have included some of the systemic demands and challenges that this “special population” presents. I continue with a focus on aging female inmates, acknowledging that they are an understudied population of which there is little published information. A literature review draws on adaptations of imprisoned populations and provides some basic information on what is known about aging women in prison. Three theoretical frameworks, the life-course perspective, socioemotional selectivity theory, and socio-environmental theory of aging were used in this analysis, which are described in this chapter and further examined in the Chapter 4 Discussion. Lastly, this chapter concludes with the overarching research questions and goals.

Aging Prisoners

It is evident that the population of older adults in the United States is growing rapidly. According to the United States Census Bureau (2004), there were over 30 million people aged 65 and older in 2000, which is projected to be over 70 million by the year 2030. As such, this demographic pattern also emerges in the “graying” of the prison populations (Auerhahn 2002; Lemieux, Dyeson & Castiglione 2002; Moore & Unwin 2002; Ritter 2006; Smith 2004). Focusing on state level data, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) oversees 32 total institutions that house prisoners convicted of crimes with a total inmate population of 47,206 (ODRC Monthly Report, Sept., 2006). According to the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction Annual Census Report (2001), the total Ohio inmate population was 41,104, and 4,303 of whom were inmates age 50 and older, which has more than doubled over the past ten years (Moore & Unwin 2002). It has been noted that tougher and longer prison sentences, such as three strikes mandatory sentencing laws, and the aging of the “baby boomers” is expected to bring about a dramatic increase in the growing numbers of increased older prisoners (Auerhahn 2002; King & Mauer 2001; Kratcoski & Babb 1990; Moore & Unwin 2002). To further illustrate the aging of the prison population, Table 1. Ohio’s Aging Prison Population reflects information published from the Institutional Census Reports provided by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction from 1997, 2001, and 2006.
Table 1. Ohio's Aging Prison Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ohio Prison Population Total</strong></td>
<td>47,166</td>
<td>44,952</td>
<td>46,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Males</strong></td>
<td>44,297</td>
<td>42,202</td>
<td>43,277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Males (50+)</strong></td>
<td>3,259</td>
<td>4,219</td>
<td>5,081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Females</strong></td>
<td>2,869</td>
<td>2,750</td>
<td>3,444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Females (50+)</strong></td>
<td>167</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total 50+</strong></td>
<td>3,246</td>
<td>4,420</td>
<td>5,346</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As prisoners age, there are many challenges that develop in response to the growth of this population—both for individual prisoners and prison staff and administrators. Older prisoners are often referred to as a “special population” because they present such different systemic demands, when compared to the rest of the population of inmates (Aday 1994; Moore & Unwin 2002). For example, some of the documented challenges associated with the stresses of this special population deal with the management of medical and mental health resources (Aday 1994; Chaiklin 1998; Lemieux et al. 2002; Moore & Unwin 2002; Morton 1991 & 2004; Ross & Richards 2003), communication between staff and older prisoners (Moore & Unwin 2002; Ross & Richards 2003), programs and services (Aday 1994; Lemieux et al. 2002; Moore & Unwin 2002; Morton 1991; Ross & Richards 2003), housing (Lemieux et al. 2002; Moore & Unwin 2002) and adjustment to life within, and after release from, prison (Aday 1994; Leahy 1998; Lemieux et al. 2002; Morton 1991 & 2004).

**Aging Female Prisoners**

Within this growing population of older prisoners, a sub-group of the inmate population that has received little research attention is that of older female prisoners (Aday 1994; Kratcoski & Babb 1990; Wahidin 2002 & 2004). Considering the longer life expectancies and the high incidence of chronic health conditions in the general population of older females, the population of incarcerated older females demonstrates similar systemic and programmatic demands that will likely increase over time (Codd 1996; Lemieux et al. 2002; Morton 1991 & 2004). Furthermore, there is evidence that the needs of older imprisoned women are notably different then those of
their younger counterparts and those of older male prisoners (Codd 1996; Morton 2004; Ross & Richards 2003; Wahidin 2002).

Research on health care utilization is important in understanding the quality of life for older prisoners, and their likelihood of imposing greater financial demands on the health care system, when compared to younger inmates (Enders, Paterniti & Meyers 2005; Fearn & Parker 2005; Lemieux et al. 2002; Lindquist & Lindquist 1999; Moore & Unwin 2002). A “geriatric” prisoner is considered to develop disability and comorbid conditions earlier than persons in the general U.S. population, and costs on average of $70,000 per year, which is nearly two-to-three times the cost of a younger prisoner (Williams et al. 2006). Regarding the present and future management of healthcare in correctional facilities, it should be recognized that gender and age have been shown to be the most consistent demographic predictors of health status and medical care utilization (Enders et al. 2005; Lemieux et. al 2002; Lindquist & Lindquist 1999; Moore & Unwin 2002).

Although most prison research conducted on older offenders is on men, older women currently constitute a small but increasing percentage of the prison population, with 7.7% in Ohio. Table 1 Ohio’s Aging Prison Population illustrates that these numbers are growing, therefore it is important to expand what little research has been conducted on this minority population (ODRC, Institution Census Reports 2006). Additional research would contribute to the cumulative knowledge and understanding of this neglected population. Older incarcerated women might benefit from such research as well, in terms of identifying and fulfilling their unique needs, both currently and for future successful reintegration in the community. Recognizing the importance of research and furthering our knowledge of older women would also prove useful for prison staff and policymakers, who create programs for and work directly with this population, which would also enable them to better respond to the unique needs of older female prisoners.

Investigating The Lives Of Older Inmates

There has been little qualitative research addressing the lives, social relationships, and modes of adaptation that are specific to older imprisoned women. Most research conducted on older prisoners tends to focus on the utilization of medical and mental health resources, particularly of older male inmates. This is due in part by the larger number of incarcerated males, and as you can see in Table 1 Ohio’s Aging Prison Population, the population of incarcerated
men over the age 50 far outnumber that of older incarcerated women. Demographically speaking, some empirical studies suggest that the majority of older inmates tend to be unmarried Caucasian men, who were employed prior to incarceration but who never graduated from high school (Lemieux et. al 2002).

In the next subsections, I examine some of the relevant literature available on life in prison on topics such as social relationships, modes of adaptation, and programming in prison. While the research is introduced in this chapter, later in Chapter 4 Discussion, I discuss how the findings from the current research project reflect and contradict some of the subsequent depictions of older inmates’ social lives, adaptations, and available programming.  

Social Relationships In Prison

Research concerning mechanisms of adaptation and coping in general prison populations has been somewhat prevalent in the literature examining the culture and social structure of the prison environment. For example, two classic informative studies of women’s prisons (Giallombardo 1966; Heffernan 1972) examine inmate social systems from the perspective of the organization of social relationships based on the expression of traditional roles of males and females in American society, both of which project the prison as a microcosm of the larger society. Giallombardo’s, Society of Women: A Study of a Women’s Prison, focuses more on the significance of the larger macro social culture in the prison environment, particularly on how male and female roles are defined and how prisoners influence and give meaning to the creation of these roles. Heffernan’s, Making It in Prison: The Square, the Cool and the Life, explores the significance of prisoner interaction and the establishment of relationships, particularly in the construction of organized pseudo families by female prisoners.

These findings are consistent with Ross & Richards’ (2003) research on the development of women’s friendships and relationships with other prisoners in the formation of “prison families” or “play-families,” which are a significant part of social organization. Ross & Richards find that personal relationships with other prisoners, connections to family and loved ones in the free community, and the commitment to pre-prison identities continue to shape the core of the female prison culture. Furthermore, it is indicated that women organize their time and create a social world that is markedly different from the world of the contemporary male prisoner.

Although not focusing on older female prisoners, June P. Leahy’s article, “Coping Strategies of Prisoners in a Maximum Security Prison: Minimals, Optimals and Utilitarians”
investigates areas of activities, contacts with the outside, and interpersonal relations of 40 inmates in a maximum security prison. Findings revealed that inmates falling into the category of *minimals* were social outcasts with few family and friend connections to the outside. The category of *optimals* had a higher inner-motivation to pursue friendships, and had strong and consistent family support. Lastly, the category of *utilitarian* inmates appeared to be reclusive, self-serving, were less likely to seek out friendship, and had relatively weak family ties. Generally, Leahy concluded that there was very little solidarity among inmates, which was illustrated through minimal contact with other inmates.

The empirical literature on the social status of older inmates within the prison hierarchy provides a somewhat contradictory picture. Goetting (1983) and Rubenstein (1984) suggest that younger inmates respect older inmates for their knowledge of prison life. This enables older inmates to establish behavioral norms and occupy leadership roles, thus creating a sense of prestige and respect. Conversely, Kratcoski & Babb (1990) found that older inmates are vulnerable to and fearful of predatory younger inmates. Kratcoski & Babb measured older inmate’s institutional adjustment through a set of questions pertaining to visitors, institutional activities, health problems, relations with other inmates and staff, feelings of fear, and victimization by other inmates. The findings relevant to the purposes of the current research deal mostly with the social interactions and environments of older male and female inmates.

Kratcoski & Babb (1990) found that older women were less likely then older men to be involved in various forms of recreational activities within the institution. Investigating the social worlds of older inmates, the study reveals that 74% of males and only 53% of females indicated positive or neutral attitudes toward other inmates. Furthermore, older females were more likely to have little or no interaction with other inmates. Older female inmates were much more likely to see other inmates as being aggressive and violent than were the older male inmates. Older male and female inmates perceived young inmates as troublesome, and both groups expressed a preference for living with other inmates around their same age. Due to the ostensibly anti-social characteristics of older female inmates, the authors note that older women experience a greater degree of isolation then men, which is exacerbated by the lack of social support systems inside and outside the prison.

Ronald Aday’s article, “Aging in Prison: A Case Study of New Elderly Offenders” (1994), focuses on the male experience of aging in prison among those classified as new older
offenders. This research reports that a majority of the informants were married and maintained regular outside contact with family members through visits, writing, and phone calls. Aday notes that one’s contact with family members may be a function of health, education, and crime history. Moreover, new older offenders’ express inside social engagement as a main coping mechanism, thereby relying on meaningful relationships with other older inmates for everyday support. Therefore, peer relationships established within the prison, and visiting and sharing with other older inmates plays an important role in their ability to adjust to prison life.

Adaptation In Prison

Lemieux et al. (2002) suggests that there are numerous interacting individual and institutional variables that contribute to an older inmate’s adjustment to incarceration. Rubenstein (1984) and Goetting (1983) both conclude that inmate adjustment is related to various individual (e.g., educational level, health status, etc.) and institutional characteristics (e.g., security level, degree of mainstreaming). Therefore it is important to consider adaptation as a multi-faceted concept, which can be described in a number of social, emotional, and physical contexts.

Leahy (1997) also investigated the psychological adjustment to prison life, and discovered that emergent coping strategies converged around three distinct aggregates referred to as *minimals*, *optimals*, and *utilitarians*. Each group is defined and characterized by the varying perceptions of inmate’s self-concepts and participation within the prison culture. *Minimals* cope with prison life by maintaining a fatalistic view on life and have a low motivation to work or participate in the prison environment. *Optimals* adapt by striving to be the best in terms of participating in prison life as preparation for release into society, they follow the rules, are highly motivated, and have high self-esteem. *Utilitarians* are characterized as being concerned only with their own happiness, blame is placed on society for criminal acts, and is primarily interested in opportunities for personal gain and benefit. Each of these groups expressed a different approach to coping with the challenges of prison life, which reveal strategies to improve coping by avoiding contact with other inmates and corrections officers, maintaining employment, and preserving close ties with outside family members.

Azrini Wahidin’s research draws older women’s psychological adaptation to prison in the article, “Reconfiguring Older Bodies in the Prison Time Machine” (2002), which serves to “map moments in prison demonstrating how ‘old’ female bodies perform under the prison gaze.” (p.
Informants describe their identities as being “caught” within the movement and motion of time and space, both in terms of real time referring to time on the outside and within prison time. Wahidin refers to this as carceral time, an in-between space within which women live and negotiate. Further findings reveal that older incarcerated women adapt to prison life by protecting their sense of self-worth through the creation of prison performances, which involve mentally withdrawing oneself from a physically uncontrollable institution. This adaptive performance is relayed as a “process of negotiation,” which demonstrates how elders can regain control, as they move to the periphery of the prison environment.

Aday’s (1994) research also investigated new older offenders’ mental and physical health in adapting to the prison environment, which gave way to strategies for coping with prison life. Aday found that the new older inmate’s initial reaction to incarceration later in life was often characterized by family conflict, depression, thoughts of suicide, and a fear of dying in prison. Informants expressed being away from their family as the most difficult problem to deal with when trying to adapt to the prison environment. Furthermore, Aday found clear indicators of depression, guilt, and psychological stress evident in older first time offenders. Aday (1994) concludes that his findings present evidence that programming within prisons should be expanded to accommodate the needs of new older offenders, which will help correction officials to distinctly recognize the needs of older offenders incarcerated for the first time later in life.

Adaptation to institutional life in terms of complications in one’s physical health, Aday (1994) found that older offender’s health problems and limited access to medical care served as barriers to adaptation, as many informants suffered from multiple chronic health problems and a general deterioration of health. Kratcoski & Babb (1990) found that twice as many older women then men reported heart, respiratory, and degenerative illnesses. Further, a significantly larger proportion of older female inmates than older male inmates claimed their health was poor or terrible. Lemieux et al. (2002) suggests that older inmates are more likely to demand health care services than are their younger counterparts, and that the prison environment, housing, and availability of specialized programs influence the extent to which older inmates consume services.

Programming for Older Inmates

There appears to be tremendous variability in the extent to which correctional systems supply older and other special needs inmates with formal provisions, such as housing
accommodations and specialized educational, vocational, medical, and recreational programming (Aday 1994; Lemieux et al. 2002; Moore & Unwin 2002; Morton 1991; Ross & Richards 2003). In a report published for the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction produced by the Bureau of Research, researchers Moore & Unwin (2002) describe two distinct goals of programming in prison. First, that it helps inmates cope with the prison environment and work towards self-rehabilitation. A sited example of this includes the pressuring and exploitation of older inmates by younger inmates (Moore & Unwin 2002). Secondly, that programming enables the individual, regardless of age, to prepare for life after release. Older inmates in Ohio are able to participate in a multitude of programs, some of which are offered to the general inmate population, while others focus more on the needs of older adults. Since the programming at each institution varies, as do the needs of this special population, not all prisons are able to provide the same aging-related programs and services.

Moore & Unwin provide an extensive list of examples of programming for older inmates, and some of which I have adapted from their report in the following brief descriptions:

*Fifty Plus and Aging* is a program that provides information on aging for inmates. Attendance to lectures helps the inmate relate to and understand their own experiences in the aging process. Current events are discussed and journal reflections are kept on their insights on aging. Discussion topics include death and dying, financial planning, family reintegration, and grief.

*Grandparenting* is a program designed with open discussions, lectures and handouts, in which older inmates learn to deal with changing family dynamics, such as extended and blended families. Inmates learn how to become supportive family members and successful grandparents.

*Aerobic Exercise Program* is geared toward the older and/or disabled inmate, with three ability levels, chair, intermediate, and advanced. The Medical Department examines inmates to determine ability and progression.

*Medication Education* offers a series of informative lectures and discussions that teaches older inmates who take psychotropic medications about the effects of medications, dosages, and the importance of taking them regularly.

*Expressive Arts with the Aged* and *Third Age Arts and Crafts Programs* are offered to all inmates, which utilize art as a creative medium to encourage mobility and self-expression. Senses are stimulated through color and texture and coordination is improved. Presentation of one’s art to fellow students helps inmates develop a higher sense of self-confidence.

Through the development and implementation of these programs, it is clear that prisons recognize the graying of the prison population and the special needs and demands that older inmates present. Even in the few listed examples, there are programs that tap into important physical, emotional, psychological, and religious/spiritual elements of the aging process. These programs create opportunities that allow older inmates to openly discuss and understand their own aging experience.

In addition to these aging-related programs and in reaction of the large number of older inmates classified as sex offenders, the Phoenix Program was established at the Hocking Correctional Facility to treat older inmates whose crime of conviction was a sex offense. Hocking Correctional Facility is the only facility in Ohio that houses older inmates in one specific location; it was built in 1983 and is home to almost 500 older male inmates (http://www.drc.state.oh.us/Public/hcf.htm):

Hocking Correctional Facility is dedicated to providing a safe and secure environment for both staff and offenders. We provide quality programming for an aging offender population, so they may become productive and respectful citizens upon their return to society.

There are three female penal institutions housing 265 older women in Ohio (ODRC, Institutional Census Reports 2006), two of which are pre-release centers, and a third that serves as the main hub for all female offenders. These institutions offer programs designed for older women, of which I would like to include, and will return to in Chapter 3 Findings, Dimension Four on programming for older inmates:

**Older Resourceful Women** is a program at a women’s institution that allows the older inmate to contribute to the community by quilting, knitting, and sewing articles of clothing and toys that are donated to needy families and disabled children at the Heinzerling Foundation.

The **Assisted Living/Helping Others Together (H.O.T.) Program** is unique to only one female institution, that allows women to live on a one-floor dormitory with it’s own commissary, food service and recreational programming. Women who demonstrate having severe physical limitations are provided a H.O.T. partner for assistance.
Recreational-Related Programming:
• “Over 50” Bingo
• Trivia
• “Thursday Night” Games
• Senior Aerobics
• Community Service
• Drama Group
• Expression (a writing & speaking group)
• Arts & Crafts
• Large Print Books
• Access to TV/VCR
• Music Therapy

• Crocheting, Knitting, Dream Catchers
• Walking/Meditation

Medical-Related Programming:
• Annual physical exams for female offenders over 50 years of age
• Physical exams every 2 years for female offenders 40-49 years of age
• HIV and STD seminars every 1-2 months for inmates prior to their release
• Annual health fair

Although further information on these specific programs is limited, they are designed to meet the recreational, educational, spiritual, and medical needs of older inmates, some of which use chronological age as a criterion for participation.

Lastly, I would like to make a special note of a rather recent development, The Older Offender Committee, which arose in response to the steady increase of older inmates (see Table 1 Ohio’s Aging Prison Population in Chapter 1 for population figures). This committee consists of Older Offender Coordinators, who are present at each of the 32 correctional institutions in Ohio. The committee is in the process of creating a website for staff working with older offenders to share information, resources, recommendations, and to help each other meet the program challenges of an aging prison population.

Theoretical Perspectives

This research draws on three theories that will be explained here in Chapter 1, and will otherwise be applied to my findings in Chapter 4 Discussion. The current research utilizes a qualitative research design, which seeks to explore, recognize, and expand our knowledge of the multiple realities that exist on the topic of adaptation for older women in prison. I use the three following theories as tools to guide, interpret, and explain such a phenomenon. These are instrumental in discerning the role of social relationships, human-and-environment interactions, and the development of adaptive resources over time, all of which contribute to a further understanding of adaptation of older women in prison.

Life-Course Perspective

“The life course refers to age-graded life patterns embedded in social structures and cultures that are subject to historical change” (Elder 1996, p. 31). The life course perspective is
used to explain and understand the transitions between life stages, beginning with birth and extending past retirement into late life. Transitions are embedded in trajectories that have distinct meaning, illustrating that each person moves and experiences these life stages at different times and with varying levels of meaning. It is believed that meaning is constructed *through or across* the life course, demonstrating an intrinsic progression of experience over time (Holstein & Gubrium 2007). Each trajectory consists of a series of linked states, so that a change in one life stage initiates a transition to another.

Elder claims that there are four overarching themes of the life-course theory (1996). The first theme recognizes the *interplay of human lives in the changing of a historical time and place*, which notes that with varying years of birth, individuals are exposed to different historical worlds, with distinctive priorities, constraints and options. The second theme relays the level of *human agency in choice making and social constraints*, illustrating that the choices we make are influenced by particular situations, our own interpretations, and also by our life experiences and dispositions. The third theme, *timing of lives*, refers to social timing, which is the initiation, departure, duration, and sequencing of social roles that are relevant to age expectations and beliefs, such as age norms and age-graded social timetables. The last theme *linked interdependent lives* describes the social regulation, support, and patterning of social relationships across the lifespan.

A deeper understanding of a person comes from a holistic view of the full life-course, including the continuities, changes, and impacts from earlier years. Thus it is said that an older adult’s quality of life cannot be fully understood without knowledge of their prior life course (Elder 1996). This research project examines inmates’ current lives in prison, as they are shaped by earlier roles, relationships, and aspirations. In the Discussion Chapter, the *life course perspective* will be used to recognize older inmate’s current self-concepts and social lives within the prison walls, which are shaped by a constructive reflection on past experiences and adaptive resources.

**Socioemotional Selectivity Theory**

Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles (1999) claim that socioemotional selectivity theory describes the role of time in predicting the goals that people pursue and the social partners they seek in an effort to fulfill these aspirations. This life-span theory of social motivation is based on three primary assumptions: first, that social interaction is core to human survival; second, we
engage in behaviors guided by the anticipated realization of goals; and third, since people maintain multiple goals, the selection of goals is a precursor to action (Carstensen et al. 1999). Here, time is determined by the individual as limited or expansive, which ultimately influences the evaluation and selection of one’s goals. The assessment of time is essential regarding the order and implementation of behaviors geared toward specific goals. “Cognitive appraisal of time assists people in balancing long- and short-term goals in order to adapt effectively to their particular circumstances” (Carstensen et al. 1999).

According to the theory, there are two broad categories of social goals that exist within one’s social network that are related to one’s perception of time. The first of which deals with the “acquisition of knowledge” through interaction with others, and the second refers to interactions based on “regulation of emotion” (Carstensen et al. 1999). The former category describes behavior that takes place in order to pursue specific information; such knowledge-related goals are geared toward learning about his or her social and physical environment. Socioemotional selectivity theory posits that when time is perceived as open-ended, long-term and knowledge-related goals are prioritized in an effort to optimize future possibilities. The latter category suggests that relationships are built on seeking the emotional contact and intimacy of another person, which is motivated through the desire to discover meaning and a sense of social embeddedness in one’s life. When time is perceived as being limited, the emotional and more short-term goals assume the primary rank of importance. Here the focus is maintained in the present, as individuals rely on the support of close, complex social ties.

In connecting this theory to the social goals, behavior, and interaction of older adults, the research of Carstensen et al. (1999) relays a strong association between time left in life and chronological age, thereby showing age-related differences in social goals. Furthermore, socioemotional selectivity theory posits that with the approach to “endings,” there is a simultaneous investment in maintaining emotionally close social partners and an increased focus on emotion regulation in everyday life. As you will read in the Discussion Chapter, I will be exploring how this theory plays out in the social lives and interactions of older incarcerated women.

Socio-Environmental Theory of Aging

Jaber F. Gubrium’s socio-environmental theory of aging, “assumes that the environment of action for the aged is two-sided and consequently is built on the interrelationship of two
contextual dimensions” (Gubrium 1972). The first dimension refers to one’s social environmental effects, such as social homogeneity, residential proximity and local protectiveness, in which activity norms of the setting are established. The second dimension lies within the context and resources of the individual, which indicate activity resources such as health, financial stability, and on-going social support all of which influence behavior. The socio-environmental theory of aging posits that these dimensions range from high to low, enabling older adults to achieve life satisfaction if their activity resources match the activity norms of their environment. Furthermore, the development of this perspective is grounded in understanding the relationship between activity and morale by combining environmental and personal concepts (Gubrium 1972). In the Discussion Chapter, this theory is examined in light of program suggestions for an age-segregated housing unit for older inmates.

Research Questions

In the following critical inquiry, the central research question is to investigate what it means to be an older female in prison, with a broad emphasis on areas of adaptation within prison. More specifically, it is my goal to investigate the topic of adaptation in late life through four major dimensions: (1) daily life within prison, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) the relevance of age in adaptation, and (4) programming for older women in prison. A rich description and interpretation of older women’s daily lives in prison is important to gaining an understanding of their regimented lives, how they choose to spend their time, and their subjective burdens and compensations. I have examined the complexity and value of social relationships and how they are created and maintained, both inside and outside of prison. Further, I have explored important adaptation and coping strategies that older female prisoners utilize in their daily lives, as they reveal their unique experiences in adjusting to the prison environment. Lastly, I have taken inventory of available programs for older women inmates in the state in Ohio. It is my hope that this research project will contribute to basic knowledge, as well as inform policies and programs designed for this understudied population.

The overarching goal of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of adaptation for older women in prison, which is accomplished through the use of in-depth interviews and a qualitative research design. Incorporating the previously mentioned interactionist theories helps to organize and explain my thoughts and findings on informant’s micro-level interactions, which
will be discussed in Chapter 4 Discussion. In the current study, I have explored adaptation of older female inmates as they socially interact to create and interpret meaning, which presumably affects their self-concept, quality of life, and ability to adapt in an institutionalized environment. This research will contribute to the broader understanding of the daily lives, interpersonal relationships, adaptations in aging, and programming opportunities for older incarcerated women.
Chapter 2: Research Design & Methodology

This chapter describes the research design and methodology used in the current research project, which warrants the use of a qualitative research approach in expanding our understanding of the relatively unexplored topic of adaptation for older women in prison.

Research Design

The fundamental postulates of the alternate paradigm recognize that multiple realities simultaneously exist, and that theses realities are socio-psychological constructions forming an interconnected whole. The phenomenological approach views the interaction between the researcher and informant as interdependent in nature, and that the values of either party shape what is understood. It also acknowledges the multidirectional relationships between people and events, such that a variety of meanings and explanations can be discovered. Here it is important to realize that the patterns and themes that are discovered are not understood as generalizations to the specific population being studied; rather, they are seen as tentative explanations. Also, it is critical to factor in specific times, places and people, since these characteristics affect what is explained and understood in a particular moment.

The general focus of this research project is to discover what life is like for an older female prisoner. The goal is to discover a deeper understanding of adaptation to prison life, from the perspectives and experiences of older female prisoners. Furthermore, this qualitative approach seeks to explore, describe, and understand the meanings derived from the patterns and themes related to the daily activities, interpersonal relationships, and adaptation strategies that are expressed by the informants. Although there are questions that tap into each of these topic areas, the overall research design is emergent, in such a way that it is up to the inmate to guide the direction of the interview, revealing what is individually important in each dimension. The utilization of a flexible research design ensures that the themes and meanings recognized by one woman is not expected or assumed to be the same for another.

As another key characteristic of qualitative research, the sample population used in this study was purposive in that I inquired about a population of individuals who fit specific criteria. For instance, I interviewed females over the age of fifty who are currently incarcerated in the state of Ohio. As I will later describe in greater detail, the sample population and setting have been systematically selected so that the likelihood of diversity will be represented in the data (with variance in age, race and prison tenure). Related to this, data collection in qualitative
research is best approached in the population’s natural setting as a way of understanding a person’s experience in context (Maykut & Morehouse 1994). Moreover, an important philosophic underpinning of the constructionist paradigm is that one’s personal meaning is undeniably derived from and tied to its context. Despite the obvious barriers that prisons present, data collection was conducted via interviews, so as to recognize and appreciate the restricted environmental context and perspectives these women speak from.

An essential part of the qualitative research design is utilizing a type of methodology that recognizes the importance of not only understanding people’s spoken thoughts and feelings, but also the observed actions and emotional tone of language. Qualitative in-depth interviews, administered one-on-one, offers a method of data collection that allows one to capture informants’ language and perspectives. This form of data collection is well suited for the purposes of this research project since informants live under extreme conditions, and some questions have the potential to evoke emotional responses. Thus, a private interaction between the informant and researcher was best suited for this study, which enables the focus to be on the informant’s personal experience. In a general sense, in-depth interviews allow the researcher to take on the human-as-instrument role and accept the responsibility of not only collecting data, but also drawing meaning from the data.

Provisions for trustworthiness is a term used by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to refer to the believability of a researcher’s findings (cited in Maykut & Morehouse 1994). Since there is only one researcher in this research project, there are two important steps of data collection and analysis that will be administered to ensure that what is derived from the data is not just taken from the thoughts perceived by the researcher alone. In an attempt to avoid potential researcher bias, Dr. Chris Wellin served as a peer debriefer, which calls for a regular review of the data analysis (Maykut & Morehouse 1994). Throughout the process of data analysis, Dr. Wellin and I worked together to understand and capture the reality that was expressed through my in-depth interviews.

Methods: Sample

In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 female prisoners over the age of 50, who reside at a multi-security correctional facility in Ohio. The original goal of ten to twelve women appeared to be an ideal number due to time and financial limitations, and the fact that there are just 221 older females incarcerated in the state of Ohio (see Table 3). This institution functions
as part of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, and was chosen for its large number of older female inmates. Sampling female prisoners over a certain age was chosen because correctional agencies nationwide typically use the age 50 as a chronological starting point to define “older prisoners,” which is based on a number of factors including socio-economic status, access to medical care, and the lifestyle of prisoners (Morton 1991). Several initial adjustments were made in sampling and recruitment portions of this research project, and suggestions from the institution prompted the final procedure. To achieve a diverse sample, the prison administration identified a list of female inmates over the age 50 with a range in age, prison tenure/sentence length, and race in an effort ensure equal access to minority populations. This sampling strategy is purposive in that it seeks to maximize variation. The prison then compiled a list of women who met these criteria, who were approached by administrative staff for interest in participating in the research project. If interest was present, women signed up for appointment times on scheduled days in which they would meet with me to find out more about the project. It wasn’t until this time, that a woman decided whether she would or would not participate. Unfortunately, I am not able to claim full control over the sampling and recruitment processes. However, I believe that the prison knew what procedure worked best through previous experience in related research projects. Moreover, I relied on the breadth of information I supplied the prison with about the project, to ensure the accuracy of information.

I met with each potential informant alone in a room that was located near the office of the warden. The room was small and allowed for a private interaction, without the constant distraction by a supervising staff. Rather, several staff ensured my safety through various checks throughout the interviewing process. Inmates were introduced via administrative staff, and were instructed to provide paper documentation on whether or not they chose to participate in my research project. These forms were separate from my project, and appeared to be used to show accountability for the inmates’ whereabouts during the time of interview.

I supplied the inmate with a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix A), and shared a written statement regarding the background, purposes of the research project, procedures of the interview, and emphasized that participation was purely voluntary. Eleven women consented to participate in the project, upon which they signed an informed consent form for my records and were given a second form for their own records. Interviews were conducted in March and April
of 2007 and were tape-recorded with an average length of two hours. Additionally, informants were asked to fill out background information sheets (Appendix B), which surveyed basic demographic characteristics such as race, date and place of birth, level of formal education, age of those they currently live around, age at first incarceration, current sentence length, and general health status. Inquiries about the reasons and background of inmate offenses were avoided, so as to not detract from rapport, or from the focal interest in adaptation and aging.

Gatekeepers

Gaining access to complete this project was secured through the approval of two research review boards, each with their own set of requirements. An Application for Review of Research Proposal was submitted to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) in December 2006. Another Application for Approval of Research Involving Human Subjects was submitted to Miami University’s Institutional Review Board in December 2006. After three months of negotiating between these two agencies, I was granted final approval in March 2007. Miami University’s Institutional Review Board classifies prison populations to fall under “vulnerable subjects,” which are provided special safeguards against undue influence or coercion to participate in research. Therefore, this meant ensuring and emphasizing confidentiality and voluntary participation as essential components in the design of the research project.

Description of Prison and Informants

The identity of the prison in which the research was completed is protected, but it is noted that this is a multi-security correctional facility located in Ohio. This facility has over 2300 incarcerated women in varying levels of security, including minimum, medium, close, maximum and administrative maximum. The racial breakdown of this prison is about two-thirds Caucasian and one-third African American. Further information about typical functions of this facility can be found in Chapter 3 Findings, Dimension One: Day-to-Day Life.

The identities of my informants are also protected, in part, through the use of pseudonyms. Ages and prison tenures are not paired with pseudonyms when referencing direct quotes, as a means to further safeguard informants’ identities. In the informed consent process, I stressed voluntary participation, and that declining to participate would not bring any penalty or loss of benefits. I also highlighted that identifying information from notes, tapes, and transcripts would be removed to protect the confidentiality of all informants. I assured each informant that all information would be kept confidential, allowing access only to my advisor and myself, and
that all interviewing materials are kept in a locked cabinet. Without giving away too much identifiable information, I have created Table 2 below, which displays basic demographic information on my study sample.

Table 2. Basic Demographic Information on Study Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Prison Tenure</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Housing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50-59:</td>
<td>7 African American: 5</td>
<td>5-10 years: 3</td>
<td>8th-11th grade: 2</td>
<td>Large Dorm: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69:</td>
<td>2 Caucasian: 6</td>
<td>11-15 years: 4</td>
<td>Graduate High School/GED: 4</td>
<td>Medical Dorm: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79:</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16-20 years: 4</td>
<td>Some College: 2</td>
<td>2-Person Cell: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80+:</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>4-year college degree: 3</td>
<td>4-Person Cell: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 11</td>
<td>N = 11</td>
<td>N = 11</td>
<td>N = 11</td>
<td>N = 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows a basic comparison of my study sample in terms of age and race to the larger population of older female inmates in the state of Ohio.

Table 3. Ohio's Female Inmates Age 50 and Older

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age &amp; Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>*Female Inmates (50+): Ohio</th>
<th>Female Inmates (50+): Study Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Data Collection Methods

The methodological approach that will be used in this study is qualitative in nature, designed to discover and document the meanings, routines, adaptations, and relationships that are key to adaptation for older female inmates. In this research project I used semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person with 11 female older female prisoners, and these and one-time interviews lasted on average of about two hours. With consent of informants, interviews were audio-taped to capture language in the most accurate and unobtrusive manner, which were
then transcribed. The data collection process of interviewing, transcribing, and analysis, I completed on my own so as to take on the human-as-instrument role, which is central to qualitative research.

An interview schedule (Appendix C) was used, which is true to the emergent qualitative design in that it allows for a structured list of questions, and enables informants the freedom to expand on research questions. As indicated on the schedule, there are a host of questions that deal with four interrelated subject areas or dimensions: day-to-day life, interpersonal relationships, relevance of age in adaptation, and programming for an aging prison population. The questions are open-ended and are designed to reveal what is important to understand about each individual’s experience. These interviews should be seen as a joint product of what the interviewees and interviewer talk about together (Maykut & Morehouse 1994).

Data Analysis Procedures

A qualitative approach to data collection is especially relevant when: there is limited prior knowledge of the topic, the research focus is on meaning and behavior in context and when sensitive subjects are at issue, which require good rapport between researcher and informant. In this inductive approach, the researcher seeks to minimize prior assumptions, and is guided instead by more broad, orienting questions. Once collected, the data was analyzed through a process of multiple readings, thematic coding of responses, and attempts to document and relate central explanatory themes. It was my goal to stay as close as possible to the research participants’ feelings, thoughts and actions as they broadly relate to the focus of inquiry. Thus it will be appropriate to utilize the constant comparative method in the data analysis procedures (Maykut & Morehouse 1994). This method of analyzing qualitative data combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all units of meaning obtained, thereby allowing salient themes or patterns to emerge from the interviews.

Data

Interview questions were constructed around four major dimensions, which were created in an attempt to explore main aspects of adaptation for older women in prison. I will refer to dimensions in the text because they fit together to form a holistic view of adaptation: one’s day-to-day life, interpersonal relationships, the relevance of age in adaptation, and finally, programming available for older inmates. Although these four areas may not be extensive or exhaustive, they can be justified as offering a comprehensive understanding of adaptation in any
situation of life. Likewise, the large amount of rich data that transpired throughout the interview process supports the notion that these are well chosen topics of inquiry for seeking a deeper understanding of adaptation to prison life. Please refer to the Interview Schedule located in Appendix C for a complete list of questions within each dimension. Also, the following table lists each dimension with examples of accompanying questions.

Table 4. Four Dimensions of Adaptation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of Adaptation</th>
<th>Examples of Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dimension One: Day-to-Day Life</td>
<td>What are the most difficult parts of the day?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are your favorite parts of the day?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are some meaningful activities that you participate in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What makes for a good day?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What makes for a bad day?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension Two: Interpersonal Relationships</td>
<td>How have relationships changed as you’ve grown older (inside &amp; outside) the prison?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who do you consider to be your closest friends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What types of contact do you have on the outside?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who do you turn to for support?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension Three: The Relevance of Age in Adaptation</td>
<td>In what ways do you/do you not feel old?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adaptation via life experience, tenure, or both?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are the hardest parts to adapt to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are some of your modes of adaptation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension Four: Programming for an Aging Prison Population</td>
<td>Are there programs available for older women here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If so, do you find them beneficial and meaningful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does this prison deal with the needs and problems of older women?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What changes would you suggest?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first of these dimensions, day-to-day life, sought to understand what a typical day and daily routine are like for older inmates. This included a rich description of what women looked forward to in a day, as well as reflecting on the more challenging or difficult aspects of their daily regimen. I wanted to know how they filled up their time, what activities were they involved in, what made for a good day and, conversely, what made for a bad day. While any outsider might assume that an inmate’s day is filled with restriction and regimentation, I was quite surprised to discover domains of autonomy these women maintained throughout their day. This finding, as well as others within this dimension will be further explored in Chapter 3.
The second dimension, one’s interpersonal relationships, investigated the many social relationships that were either created or maintained by older women. These connections and relationships were considered within the prison walls with other inmates, as well as outside of prison with friends, family, and even ex-convicts. Moreover, I wanted to know how their relationships have changed, if at all, as they’ve grown older. The relationships that we establish with significant others are important in shaping our life experiences, thus it is important to consider informant’s close friends and, to whom do they turn to when they are in need of support? What kinds of contact do they have with their outside social networks (visits, phone calls, and letters), and why are these relationships important?

The third dimension explored the relevance of age in adaptation to prison life for an older woman. In this dimension, I wanted to know when women expressed a conscious awareness of their age, whether it was in particular places or situations, and if it was experienced in a positive or negative light. I also wondered if there were certain advantages to being older in prison, and conversely, were there any disadvantages? I also inquired about more specific modes of adaptation, what was the hardest part to adapt to, and whether these adaptations were a result of life experience and age or if they were learned throughout their tenure or time spent in prison?

The fourth dimension, programming for older women in prison, examines the utilization and opinions of programs that were specific to older inmates at the particular institution. This included a vast exploration of the programs that many of the inmates had participated in over the years, and what they found as helpful or meaningful about these programs. Moreover, I pursued a detailed account of how informants define the needs and problems of older inmates, and how well they thought the prison was handling these issues.
Chapter 3: Findings

Dimension One: Day-To-Day Life

Most people assume that the daily life of prison inmates is regimented, filled with restrictions and authoritative figures. In the book *Asylums*, Erving Goffman refers to this type of environment as a *total institution*, which is a social establishment or institution where all the aspects of life are controlled and regulated by the authorities of the organization (1961). Each institution creates a specific world by which its inmates reside, thereby imposing its own rules, regularities, and barriers to the outside world. In a broad sense, the current research refers to Goffman’s definitions, characteristics, and adaptation strategies found in total institutions. This dimension begins with a description of total institutions, which is used as a concept to explore aspects of adaptation for older women in prison. The daily lives of informants are explored in terms of housing, schedules, and various activities. Included in this dimension, is what older women in prison look forward to throughout the day, as well as some common challenges that they cope with while living in a total institution.

Total Institutions

Goffman proposes five types of total institutions, each of which drastically varies in the level of control and voluntary participation one may have with their environment. The first type includes homes for the blind, aged, orphaned and indigent, which care for people that are perceived as incapable and harmless to the community. A second type encompasses sanitariums and mental hospitals for people thought to be incapable of caring for themselves, and who are considered to be an unintended threat to the community. A third type is composed of jails, penitentiaries, prisoner of war camps, and concentration camps, which are used to protect the community against intentional dangers. The fourth type is comprised of army barracks, ships, boarding schools, and work camps that are established to pursue a work-like task. The final type consists of abbeys, monasteries, and convents, which are designed as retreats from the world, while also serving as a training station. For the purposes of this research project, I will be referring to Goffman’s third type, in which admittance into this type of total institution is forced, negatively sanctioned, and residence is potentially permanent. This is met in contrast with other total institutions, such as the military or a monastery, where admission is relatively voluntary, honorable, and residence is temporary.
Generally speaking, Goffman refers to the regular functions of total institutions as being highly controlled, such as occurring within the same place and time, which is supervised by one overarching formal authority, the prison staff. All activities within this environment are strictly regimented and occur in the company of a large group of inmates. Submerged in a world of expected compliance and fear of sanction, inmates rely on individualistic ways of adaptation to cope with a controlled, yet uncontrollable, environment. In his research on inmate behavior, Goffman posits five general strategies of adaptation, all of which deal with the realities of losing personal control and self-determination in the harsh milieu of the prison environment. Goffman suggests that inmates employ these “personal lines of adaptation at different phases in his moral career” so as to manage the tension between the home and institutional worlds (p. 65).

**Housing**

The living situation for each interviewee varied in terms of location and number of cellmates or “bunkies”. For instance, some women have between one and four cellmates, others live in larger dorm-style cottages, while a smaller group live in a medical dorm of up to eight women. There does not appear to be a formalized segregated unit specifically for older inmates, although some informants described living amongst other older inmates. Please refer to Table 2 Basic Demographic Information on Study Sample in Chapter 2 Research Design & Methods for a breakdown of informant’s housing situations. The location of the inmate’s cottage is important in understanding their access to other facilities and programs on the compound, which will later be explored in the section Challenges, which addresses issues of mobility. These women did not express having any control over whom they lived with, so ages and numbers of cellmates vary for each individual. The variation in housing is important to consider since one’s primary source of social interaction takes place within the confines of one’s living arrangement, as well as the workplace, if applicable. This facet of daily life is linked to the second dimension of this study, in which I explore the interpersonal relationships of my informants, which are widely influenced by whom they surround themselves.

**Schedules**

In this section, I outline what a typical schedule is for the activities of many inmates, which of course varies depending on one’s job and the security status of the individual. Since all of my informants are considered to be of medium security status, they are permitted to travel to work and other scheduled appointments on their own with the approval of a signed and documented
paper pass. I mention this in contrast to inmates with higher levels of security, who are required to be individually escorted by a correctional officer at all times. Each level of security is kept separate from other levels, which is carried out through specific security-level housing as well as different socializing times. For instance medium security inmates can only be out in the “yard” with other inmates of similar status, while maximum-security inmates are restricted to a small, fenced-in portion of the penitentiary and have different recreational times.

On a daily basis doors are unlocked when Central Food Services (CFS) serves breakfast at 6:30am; attendance to this meal, as well as others during the day (lunch served at 12:30pm and dinner at 5:30pm), is not required. According to my informants, many do not attend these formal meals, and instead choose to purchase their food through commissary, which is small store located within the prison.

Throughout the day there are several security “counts” (11am, 4pm, 9pm, 12am, and 4am), in which inmates are required to be in their cells in order to be accounted. Each count can last between 30 and 45 minutes, and much of this time is simply spent waiting for the steam whistle to blow, signaling that count has cleared and activity resume. Regardless of age, if an inmate is medically able, they are required to maintain a job within the institution. Inmates are called at 8am to report to their job stations and work for much of the day, with the exception of counts and meals. Some job duties may last an entire working day, such as working the Ohio Penal Industries (OPI) building, while others such as those of a porter (janitorial work) may only last 30 minutes, two-to-three times a day. In the evening hours following dinner, women have a window of personal or free time until their cell doors are locked for the night at 11pm. My informants acknowledged that they look forward to these evening hours, in which they are allowed to wear their own personal clothing, and many spend their time socializing, knitting, reading, watching television or working on community service projects. Later in this section, I give more specific examples of how women spend their time.

As one might assume in many total institutions, such control measures may have a strong and often negative impact on inmates’ lives. Experiencing this loss of power within their environment is particularly important in considering adaptation to prison life. As previously stated, Goffman argues that total institutions control the time and location of activity and impose formal guidelines, such as rigid rules and regulations. The above description of a typical day illustrates significant, if not strict temporal regimentation, which is monitored through
surveillance techniques and restricting the movement of inmates throughout the day. Total institutions place a great emphasis on the management of time, in that there is an expectation of efficiency and predictability in the operations of the facility, as driven by the punitive gaze and expediency of staff and administration. This results in a limited amount of freedom and choice for inmates, who may experience what has been termed the miniaturization of satisfaction with their environment (Rubinstein, Killbride & Nagy 1992). This concept introduces the notion that perhaps decisions that inmates make about satisfaction in their daily lives aren’t based “in the realm of big choices or possibilities, but in the realm of small events” (Rubenstein et al. 1992). From the inmate perspective, time is an important—and unlike in the outside world—an abundant commodity in which they take pride, and over which they seek some level of control; therefore even the smallest of decisions made become ever so meaningful.

Although it is not my intention to downplay the powerful role and influence of authority that this institution enforces, I would like to draw the focus of this section to the maintenance of autonomy in everyday prison life. Outside of these more bureaucratic demands, informants demonstrated having an unexpected—at least to me—amount of autonomy as they mentally and physically negotiated their environment. The following examples relay how some women spend their time, particularly with an expressed sense of satisfaction in maintaining some level of control over their daily activities, no matter how minute they might seem to an outsider.

One, Ms. Doyle, explained:

I’m a born teacher, in my spare time I teach the women knitting, I teach them how to sew on a sewing machine, I teach them many other crafts. I’m a born teacher, and I’m always going to be teaching something. I can’t help it. Its just part of my nature to do it. When the opportunity arises, and it arises all the time to teach something. Around here, it’s beneficial, beneficial. Nearly all of my knitting students, for instance, have said how relaxing it is, and how at peace they feel while they’re doing it—hey cool, that is exactly what I want. I want them to learn a new skill that they follow all of their lives and have some peace of mind while they’re here.

Here, Ms. Doyle conveys a sense of pride in teaching women skills that they may later call upon, even in their lives outside of prison. This activity brings meaning to Ms. Doyle in that she is able to share a helpful resource of skills, knowledge, and experience to be passed on to other inmates, thus imparting a legacy. This interaction also creates meaning for younger inmates in that they are able to gain better insights into their own interests, and perhaps, ways of adapting to prison life that might otherwise take years to learn. This exchange shapes Ms. Doyle’s status and
reputation as an older inmate, which ultimately affects the respect and treatment she receives, and her adaptation to prison life. Also, in referring to herself as a “born teacher,” Ms. Doyle demonstrates the continuation of teaching roles throughout her life, even as opportunities arise in prison. Continuity emerges as an important facet of her life, thereby grounding adaptation in the linking of past and present worlds, which allows her to pursue her life-long aspirations to educate.

In the following example, Ms. Parker draws a comparison between her previous and present worlds by relaying how she currently spends her time is not met in stark contrast to her life prior to incarceration.

How I live here is not too much different then how I lived on the street. I work my job, come home, and basically, um I just like, to me its just like what I did on the street. I had a car, and did other little things, but it’s basically what I did at home. Work and went home, work and went home.

It seems likely that this parallel creates a technique of adaptation to strengthen the link between inside and outside lives, thus making acclimation to prison life exist more so in the familiar. This is an adaptive process described by Goffman as colonization, in which one reduces the tension of either world by integrating the two. This does not seem uncommon for an inmate in a total institution, as the differences between the two worlds are reduced, thereby helping the inmate to come to terms with adapting in her environment. It is clear that the concept of continuity is also relevant in Ms. Parker’s adaptation, in that she again establishes similar associations between her present and former worlds, which for her continue to be primarily shaped by maintaining employment.

Ms. Sanders, as well as many other informants, focuses on occupying her time with heavy involvement in community service activities, with full acknowledgement that she does not ever expect to be released from this institution.

This is not an easy place. You have to condition yourself to say I’m going to do my time, I’m going to try to be as resourceful as I can. Really, I guess I keep a pretty full day to pass the time. You know, you have to because you just couldn’t do the time if you didn’t keep a full day, and you know, either going to school or work a little job or something.

One might infer that finding such activities to pass the time serves as a mode of adaptation, which then helps in dealing with her lengthy life sentence. Furthermore, Ms. Sanders’ interview
conveys that it is not the passing of time in a mechanical or withdrawn sense, but rather in a productive and altruistic manner allowing her to reciprocate with the outside community.

**Looking Forward**

As part of the investigation of daily life, I asked informants for a positive moment to which they looked forward to during the day, and found nearly a unanimous answer: finding, having, making—alone time. One can only imagine how difficult it must be to arrange even the smallest degree of privacy in the confinement of a total institution, where all activities take place in the same area, under the same authoritative gaze, all of which are planned around the same times. It is no wonder that this reoccurring theme of trying to find quiet personal time emerges in an institution that is bulging at the seams with double their allotted inmate capacity. In the following excerpts, older women describe methods of which they found to be useful in experiencing some sense of privacy:

My favorite part of the day… I guess the evening, after evening chow, is the best part of the day. Typically whatever bunkies I had, even when I was in the huge dorm situation I had 250 women, three beds three feet apart. Everyone is out in the yard, and that leaves me alone in my bed and I can have some peace and quiet. (Ms. Doyle)

My favorite parts? Oh in the mornings in the rec room when it’s quiet, because hardly anyone’s out there, they’re all in bed. There are a lot of people that want to sleep in, like I said I’m a morning person. I like it because it’s quiet, I can write a letter real quick and drink my coffee, watch the news on the big TV, because my roommates are all sleeping. (Ms. Homme)

I get up every morning at 4:30am, I do not have to get up that early but I personally need some time when it’s quiet. I am not able to lie in bed any longer than that, and I’ve never been a bed-lounger. Once I wake up, I want to get up. I choose to get up early. They usually call breakfast between 6:30am and 7am, but I choose to get up at 4:30a because it gives me an hour, a good hour or longer, that I can have some quiet time, to meditate, to think about my day and what I’m going to do. (Ms. Norris)

I can never feel like I can be alone, ever. I put my headphones on or I close my eyes and go somewhere…we have a bathroom in our medical dorm and it’s three bathrooms and four sinks. If you can catch that bathroom by yourself for five minute—you are blessed. (Ms. Fry)

My favorite part of the day is the early mornings, because it’s quiet and I get up early just because it’s quiet, so I can have my personal time, my peace time I call it. I love summer and spring because I can hear the birds; they’re right out my window. (Ms. Thompson)
These selections clearly depict privacy as a scarce resource, thereby driving these women to anxiously find and create their own avenues to experience this much-needed alone time. Clearly, alone time is created in quite different ways. Many women expressed having been or become an early morning riser in an effort to avoid the drama that younger inmates often bring to their cottage scene. Still some women find time by working around others’ schedules, waiting for their cellmates or bunkie to leave so that they can indulge in some peaceful quiet time. It is also interesting here that a desire for quietness is emphasized almost as much as privacy, which comes as no surprise with such overcrowding.

It seems certain that having this personal time is an essential component to one’s individual adaptation to prison life, and coping with the chaos that over 2300 bodies and personalities generate. Having the ability to make time for self-reflection is something that most readers can appreciate in maintaining a positive mindset, and acknowledging that these women are able to do so even in the callousness of the prison environment, is quite astonishing. Surely being able to achieve the solitude that one wants most, plays an important role in keeping the self feeling motivated to continue to adapt. However, one must also acknowledge the negative, punitive aspects of surviving unwanted solitude, and the importance of sharing intimacy and social support with others, to which this will be explored in the next dimension of Interpersonal Relationships.

Challenges

In continuing my exploration of what daily life is like for older women in prison, and in contrast to the previous section, I asked informants about challenges that they face on a daily basis. Immediately, one might assume that the answer seems so apparent—the obvious challenges associated with the loss of control and living a life of confinement. However, the answer came as a surprise; overwhelmingly, responses centered on issues pertaining to personal physical mobility. Several of the informants used assistive devices, such as canes or wheelchairs, to maneuver the grounds of the institution. However, even women who did not use such devices expressed frustration about not being able to get around on a timely basis. The following detailed accounts relay some of the ways in which women described the difficulties of a typical day.

My mind is still sharp, and there’s so many things that I think of doing, but the body doesn’t want to move like that. And so you watch your step as you get older; I didn’t notice that until I got in my 60s. Sometimes I have to have someone hold my arm. I can’t walk on ice, I can’t. Even though I got a cane, no, not when there’s ice. And I can’t walk
in the grass, because there’s too many holes in it, it’s unsteady for me, so I have to stay on that sidewalk. Well see they expect us older ladies to keep up with the young ones, we got all these rules you know. Like 15 minutes, you’ve got 15 minutes to get to chow. Everybody else gets there in 5 minutes, a lot of people. There’s probably 200 wheelchairs on this farm, but there’s a lot of people with arthritis, they’ve had strokes, whatever, and they’re walking slow and you’ve got this 15 minute rule, there’s nothing you can do about it. You either go, or do without—they don’t care. (Ms. Homme)

Oh, there are situations when you can’t get up and walk like you could walk before, you know like you can’t go a good ways. See we used to have CFS [Central Food Services] right close to us, and then they put everything out by the road, the hospital and everything. Yea, there’s times you wonder, golly I wasn’t like this before, but you try not thinking about being old, you know. You try to think about, boy I wished I knew what I know now, when I was 20 years old. You know, there’s that, that’s what you try to think about. (Ms. Sanders)

One of the biggest fears just talking with other women my age and older, is you become debilitated and you can no longer care for yourself. Uh, what happens? They have what you call MCC here at the camp, it’s supposed to be a medical situation for people who can’t go a long way for the hospital or eating, they have them there. But if you have a certain crime you cannot be housed there because they have the babies program [Achieving Baby Care Success (ABC’s)]. (Ms. Boncquet)

The above quotes illustrate some of the concerns that these women have in maneuvering the institution, recognizing the fact that the interaction of their bodies with the environment has changed over the years. This change seems to be met with anxiety about being able to care for oneself while keeping up with the many younger inmates. For example, since the institution functions on such a structured schedule, women are only given 15 minutes to get to and from their work stations to report for counts. As these women have expressed, this is clearly not enough time for someone that may have a disability. This results in feelings of forced adjustment in that they push themselves physically harder at an uncomfortably high ability level in order to sustain themselves, all under the fear of sanctions imposed for being late. Here, it seems that the facility is less inclined to adapt to the changes in their aging population with the timely expectation for all inmates regardless of one’s ability level. In the fourth dimension of this paper, I discuss other broad program and policy issues related to adjusting to the challenges associated with an aging prison population.

In the next quote, Ms. Shelley describes a challenge rooted in personal mobility and inmate crowding that is so overpowering that it negatively impacts her decision to attend meals.
What I mostly don’t like about CFS [Central Food Services] right now is where I am here—I’m made to walk the length of 3 football fields to the dining area. To stand outside, while 2200 women eat inside, and once I get inside, there is so much disrespect going on, that inmates going and cutting in front of people, and being disrespectful in that way. So much chaos, there’s no discipline, no order, even though they try to make it like that. That is a chaotic situation for me, and it scares me. I don’t go there. I will eat cheese and peanut butter crackers before I go there. (Ms. Shelley)

Unfortunately, this appears to be a common experience for many of my informants. Women relayed that in an effort to avoid the chaos at the Central Food Services they would rather purchase their food through commissary then attend formal meals.

The challenges voiced in these characterizations of mobility draw, for the most part, on the individuals’ level of physical ability and environmental difficulty, which is compounded by the level of confinement and demand that a prison creates for any inmate. Informants identified population overcrowding and limitations in accessing certain facilities as obstacles to their overall involvement. This was exemplified in the lack of older inmates’ attendance at meals and participation in program areas. For example, it is important to point out that inmates are not permitted to utilize the one available elevator on the prison grounds, and only some of the buildings comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act design standards. As I witnessed in my interviews, women were expected to transfer from their wheelchair and climb the stairs by themselves, with hope that someone might be considerate enough help them carry the chair up the stairs. Therefore unfortunately, this means that an assistive device, such as a wheelchair, actually becomes more of a barrier in this environment, due to the lack of supportive infrastructure. Formal, organized assistance from other inmates is not available at this institution, and informal assistance with laundry and cleaning was rarely discussed. Consequently, one’s adaptation is greatly impacted by personal physical limitations, environmental barriers of the institution, and only a minimum of personal ambulatory assistance.

Summary

This section portrayed some key aspects of day-to-day life and events for older women in prison, as not all of them could possibly be described here. As one might have speculated, there are many parts of daily prison life that are indeed harshly regimented and generically produced. However, it was my intention to display more than just the obvious life of restriction and control that total institutions impose on individuals. I have demonstrated that regardless of the amount of authority that one may be consumed by, there are avenues of which choice and autonomy are
created and maintained, which has been illustrated to influence life satisfaction and adaptation to prison life. Furthermore, I have illustrated areas of privacy and autonomy that help to preserve and protect inmates preferred identities and roles.
Dimension Two: Interpersonal Relationships

Our lives are intimately linked to the lives of others in many different ways and on a number of levels. These interpersonal connections can be built on strong values of social support and companionship that provide a sense of security, safety, and comfort throughout life (Krause 2006). However, relationships can also waver through negative social encounters and weak social ties that lack intimacy and frequency of interaction (Granovetter 1973, as cited in Krause 2006). Important social relationships are established and maintained throughout our lives, which create interactions and realities that shape and influence each other and the larger society. As relationships continue into late life, their nature and significance often affect one’s health and overall well-being. For instance, when stressful life events arise, it is the members of one’s social network that are called upon to provide advice and guidance. Supportive others help people confront these difficulties by helping them identify and negotiate effective coping strategies, which thus facilitates adaptation (Krause 2006).

The purpose of this section is to explore interpersonal relationships and connections created and maintained by older women inside and outside the confines of the prison walls. I focus this section with a description of the varying degrees of contact that women have, first within the prison, and secondly on the outside. Contacts are identified and defined according to the sociological terms of primary and secondary groups. I conclude with an examination of where my informants found the most support, which helps in determining how important and meaningful their relationships are for adaptation to prison life.

Inside Prison Social Contacts

Contacts that inmates maintain within the prison are primarily based on social interactions in three main arenas: housing, work areas, and involvement in programs and/or groups. In none of these locales did informants claim much control over whom they are surrounded by; also, social ties seemed to vary widely across inmates’ age, race, and institutional tenure. It was apparent that the most consistent factor shaping social contacts was security status, since inmates are separated according to maximum, medium, minimum, juvenile and death row security levels. Since my research does not have any direct questions pertaining to inmate-to-staff relationships, I will focus this section on inmate-to-inmate interactions.

According to informant’s perspectives, social contact amongst inmates generally remains minimal, with a low level of emotional investment. The majority of my informants admits the
lack of close friends inside, and rather refers to social interactions with “acquaintances” or “associates” who appear to be distanced and detached from one another. The following are examples of how informants characterize their interactions with other inmates inside prison:

I don’t use the term friend very lightly. I would say I have associates of all ages. You will hear the term “associates” quite often. Associate, that means someone you have contact with, maybe some formal or informal knowledge of, their background…what a high school person would call a friend. I used to have close friends, but they’ve all moved on, either to other institutions or gone home. (Ms. Boncquet)

I made one friend when I was here, but she’s gone home now. She was perfectly rational and reasonable. We just became friends, and mostly I keep these people away from me, I don’t want anything to do with most of them. I’ll smile and be friendly and say hello to be polite, but I don’t want to be friends because you’ll walk up behind them and here them gossiping about you or something, and it’s just—I just gave up. It’s more peaceful to be alone; I have to deal with extreme loneliness, but at least it’s more peaceful that way. (Ms. Burt)

I have associates here, but no friends, none—I don’t want to attach myself to nobody. (Ms. Fry)

Well, friends, now that’s an interesting term, and one I don’t use, and really one that most staff that have been here a minute disagree from using. They will say you will not have friends in prison, you will not find friends in prison—what I like to say is acquaintances. (Ms. Norris)

Prison is full of people that are slick players, gamers, liars, and thieves. They just don’t have any friend ethics. They don’t know how to be a friend. It’s always me, me, me. Some of these people I can’t even carry on a conversation with. I don’t want to get into it. I don’t want that around me. I don’t want to pick that up, so I really don’t say too much. (Ms. Homme)

Informants are straightforward in relaying that most of their social interactions are warily approached and, perhaps superficial in meaning and depth. They express a preference and tendency to seek support through outside social networks, that is, if the inmate and the outsider actively participate in social exchanges. This will further be explored in the next section on Outside Social Contacts. Social disconnection seems further exacerbated by the heavy congestion and cycling of inmates in and out of the institution, as well as the constant transferring of inmates from one cottage to another. Here, informants attributed the difficulty in maintaining steady relationships within prison to the fluctuation of inmates at any given time.
Thus the formation of affiliations or bonds is partly dependent on social structural opportunities that are controlled by the institution and flow of the population.

It is interesting to point out that even though inmates have limited control over who they live and work with, they again demonstrate a sense of autonomy over their social lives through the ability to pick and choose with those whom they directly interact. These decisions are heavily influenced by the unfortunate fear of being taken advantage of financially, physically, or otherwise, especially by younger inmates. This concern understandably creates constant feelings of distance and caution when pursing any level of social interaction. These negative associations about inmate interactions become manifest in feelings of withdrawal and distrust, which appear to leave informants without immediate avenues for seeking social support.

However, this social phenomenon of distancing oneself from other inmates is not to be generalized to all of my informants, for a few women expressed having strong support within her social community of inmates. Often, this finding seems associated with the lack of outside support. For instance, when the social ties established prior to incarceration no longer exist, inmates often choose alternate routes of social support. Furthermore, when one social network becomes less accessible, or even fully denied, it makes sense to pursue other opportunities for social interaction—that is, if doing so is a social goal of the individual. The following quotes illustrate the establishment of a more optimistic perception of social connections inside prison walls.

It’s like I don’t have that family outside anymore, so I have family in here. You know how it is when one thing is taken away something else comes up and covers it. (Ms. Thompson)

I love some of the ladies that live down stairs with me, and some of them I don’t. I’ve been adopted quite a few times (laughs), because I move from different places, and I got to know some of these women, the young ladies especially that come here. The young ones, some of them have adopted me as a grandma, and some as a mom. (Ms. Shannon)

Well, I usually talk to my friends in here because my family’s never been in prison, so they really don’t know what I’m going through. Emotionally, just like when my parents passed away, they wasn’t my support because you know they’re out there and I’m in here, and the friends that I have in here was my support. Because they go through the same thing I do. I mean we have the same emotional ups and downs…and you can relate. (Ms. Parker)
As the quotes demonstrate, there are many trade-offs to friendship in prison, which potentially elicit feelings of cohesion and companionship that are critical to one’s social adaptation and understanding of the prison culture and environment. For some older inmates, this may mean fulfilling mentoring roles for some of the younger inmates, by whom they are looked up to as mothers and grandmothers. Through my interviews, it seems that this sense of collectiveness and commonality on a whole, is rare. However, knowing that it does in fact exist is an uplifting finding for those in search of reliable social supports. Even in this brief glimpse into what appears to be an emotionally detached, sterile world, informants display the importance of friendship and community and the slow, but present, exchange of emotional intimacy in their social worlds.

**Generational Gap**

Next, I introduce an issue I discovered regarding intergenerational social contacts within prison, and that is what informants referred to as a “generational gap” in inmate interactions. This gap is the source of great tension between younger and older inmates, which is only aggravated by the growing population of young offenders in prison. For instance in Ohio, incarcerated females in the age group 15-49 compose 92.3% of the female prison population, while only 7.7% are age 50 and older (ODRC, Institutional Census Report 2006). My informants expressed a very strong sense of stress and anxiety when referring to the chaos they associate with newer and younger populations of inmates. Primarily, the negativity associated with young inmates centers on the lack of respect and trust they exhibit to older inmates, and even to staff. Part of this problem stems from the inexperience of new inmates who are, for the most part, young and unfamiliar with the formal and informal rules of the prison environment and culture. The following quotes demonstrate my informants’ perceptions and experiences of younger inmates:

Some of them that come in here, some of these that are young you know 22, 23 years old; they look at it like it’s a party to come here. It’s not a party—you’re in prison! (Ms. Sanders)

Your age does not get you more respect, by and large that is not a factor that gets you more respect. And I’m not so sure if the younger inmates calling me Ms. ____ has to do with their respect for elders or the way they were brought up, or if they notice my demeanor, and feel like it’s respectful. I don’t know. A big saying around here is “you disrespected me”…I always thought you earned respect. (Ms. Doyle)
You know, you do things like try to get to the microwave, you know it’s gonna take us [older inmates] a while to get down there. They [young inmates] come cut in front of you when they know where you’re going. They don’t have no respect for no body. They don’t, well it’s very few that do. (Ms. Fry)

When I first got here, it was mostly people my age, and now they got a lot of young people here, disrespectful—just say anything they want to out of their mouth. And it’s like you question, is that what I’m going to face when I leave out of here? (Ms. Parker)

The last time I was in a dorm, the person next to me was 21 or 22, I mean most of the people in the dorm, a 10-person dorm are in their 20s. They told me after I’d been there one week and they said, “it’s like living with my mother, Ms. _____!” You know, and so I tried to joke around with them and fit in a little bit more, and so they know to relax around me. I would say most of the people that was in that big dorm I was in were in their 20s and here I am 57. So it was party central out there, and I got very little sleep, I was sleep deprived. There’s so many differences between me and most of these people, and there’s music on top of that, even their slang—I don’t understand their slang sometimes. So even the slang terms make me feel old. I am so out of it in every single way, I don’t know what they’re talking about; I don’t know what they’re singing about. (Ms. Burt)

As I continue to explore this hostile social environment, I will show that there are more than generational disparities at the root of this exchange; cultural differences should be included in this discussion of social contact inside prison. For instance, one of the key relational themes in prison culture seems to be that of respect—respect for others as well as for yourself. For my informants, respect was voiced as a mainstay that is earned over the course of one’s tenure, never perceived as simply expected without proving oneself worthy. A common complaint, as clearly portrayed in the above quotations, is the lack of respectful behavior attributed to younger inmates. With this blatant disregard for others, young inmates are often perceived and labeled as rule breakers, which informants say breeds violent behavior, and in turn, reduce autonomy and flexibility for inmates.

Recalling that inmates have no control over with whom they live, women are housed according to administrative controls over security level. These security measures impact who inmates are surrounded by and interact with, thereby influencing relationships with potential associates. With this in mind, I turn to an interesting finding of “guilt by association” in the eyes of prison staff and administration. There were many instances in which informants attributed their lack of social interaction with others as a way of avoiding the potential consequences of getting caught up in the “mix” and being known by “the company one keeps.” Unfortunately,
this does not always include one's friends, but is as simple as living or working with someone and being “in the wrong place at the wrong time,” and being considered equally as guilty as others present when a rule is broken.

I would lastly like to note that despite the overall negativity associated with young inmates, my informants were careful not to draw overgeneralizations purely based on age. In a few interviews, women even described feeling like mothers and grandmothers to younger inmates, thereby sharing life stories, wisdom, and advice on survival in prison. This optimistic exchange between generations also encompasses offers of assistance by younger inmates to older ones, such as helping push wheelchairs or cleaning difficult to access areas. Ms Shannon, for example, relays her opinion on younger generations of inmates by saying, “We need the young to enhance our ability to still be part of this world, part of what’s going on, and to keep us motivated” (Ms. Shannon, age 58, tenure 10 years). Although this may not be the general impression that young women have of their elders, my informants recognize the individuality of behavior, thus showing an optimistic potential for a more positive interaction between generations.

Outside Social Contacts

The kinds of personal contacts that informants revealed having with the outside were strongly connected with the depth of relationships maintained since being incarcerated. Social networks consisted of, but were not limited to, family, friends, ex-convicts, and members of prison ministries. Communication with one’s outside social network consisted of letter writing, phone calls, and monthly visits. Outside of the more personal form of contact, connections to the outside world are sought out through different forms of media, such as watching television, and reading newspapers and magazines, etc.

Sending and receiving letters is the most common form of personal interaction, most likely because it is the least expensive and obtrusive. Phone calls occur less often, simply due to the fact that only collect calls are permitted. Regarding visits, medium security status inmates are typically allowed to have two per month, but the procedures for scheduling and attending these visits seems to inhibit visitation. For example, informants expressed feelings of humiliation and degradation by being subjected to full body searches, which are conducted before and after visits to prevent any illegal exchange of contraband. Informants who have visitors look forward to their monthly visits, and put a lot of thought and preparation into these important events. For
instance, informants said that since visits are rather infrequent, they often do their hair and makeup for their visitors. One might speculate that this is a means of reducing the difference in lifestyle that may be represented in one’s appearance, so as to appear to the visitor just as they did prior to incarceration.

Establishing and managing these links to the outside world have a significant place in the lives of my informants and their adaptation to prison life, where there is an undeniable tension that comes with the forced separation of inside and outside worlds. The balancing act that occurs between these two spheres of social life can often be difficult to maintain. Informants expressed finding themselves living vicariously through their outside connections, such as the reminiscence of significant moments their friends and family speak of: births, weddings, traveling, cooking, etc. However, in times of crisis, informants relayed feelings of helplessness and distance from their outside social networks, such as not being able to attend funerals. These events or rituals are crucial for marking age and maturation, and perhaps the rites of passage throughout one’s life, which will be discussed in further detail in the next dimension, *The Relevance of Age in Adaptation*. However, these incarcerated women are denied participation in such rituals, which affects and confuses how they perceive their aging process.

The following quotes depict informants’ relationships with outside social contacts:

I am thankful, first, that in the 11 years I’ve been here that my family has maintained, they have continued in the way that I raised them...I am happy and pleased and proud and hopefully not conceited and arrogant about it, that the only thing I’ve lost is my freedom; I still have my home, I still have my family. If it’s possible for us to be any closer than we were before I came here—then certainly that has happened. I haven’t lost that closeness, that cohesiveness, that love and caring and support from my family, that I was getting before I came here. That’s why I consider myself very fortunate because I know there are hundreds of women here that have lost all of those things. (Ms. Norris)

I have the best family in the world. I couldn’t have done it without them. I get visits, letters, calls three times a week. You’d be surprised, Ms. Leah, what people will remember you by keeping in touch. So I spend a couple hours a day writing letters. Saturday I received 7 or 8 letters from brothers and sisters, and those contain money and pictures. They remember the holiday, and they remember me, and that—that is what makes me get through this. (Ms. Shelley)

The above quotes reflect the pride and appreciation many informants feel for their families and friends, many of whom have worked hard to continue these relationships over years, or even decades. Relying on the support of an external social structure helps inmates cope with the
instability of the internal environment. This also fosters the belief that they will have someone and somewhere to turn if and when they are released. It is clear then, that many of my informants seek emotional, and some even financial, support from members of their outside networks. This, however, is shaped by the availability and willingness of outside members to reciprocate these exchanges. Few women expressed being completely cut off from all outside social connections, such that contact occurred only on holidays. As discussed in the previous section, feelings of isolation from the outside results in the heavy reliance on close inside ties, or for some even complete withdrawal from either social scene.

Investing in these close relationships with the outside comes at a price: the frustration of balancing the demands of both inside and outside worlds:

You can’t live in two worlds. If you know you’re going to be in an institutional situation for a long period of time, just to keep your sanity, you have to adjust to the situation you’re living in that day. You can’t say, “well tomorrow I’m going home and I’m going to do this and this,” because you’re not guaranteed that. And someone in my situation that is pretty much going to finish my life here—I know this it, so I have to do the best with what I can. I can’t wait for tomorrow. (Ms. Boncquet)

It’s hard being separated from your family. I don’t care what anybody says, you know, but it’s the traveling between two worlds. You’re trying to live in this world, but you’re still trying to live out in the world on the street. You can’t live out in the world out in the street, you’ve got to learn to cope with this world. But yet you keep in contact, and know what’s happening out there, through newspapers, through TV, through your family. Once that you can do that, you’re going to sail through this stuff. (Ms. Thompson)

As we see, however, it is important to keep updated on both worlds, not only for oneself, but also for the ease of social contact with family and friends. Informants convey that this balancing act is difficult because they have to be careful not be swept away in the special attention and excitement paid to outside events. Getting too caught up in what happens “out there” deepens the gap between the two worlds, so instead they try to maintain a more present-tense orientation, which enables them to deal and adapt with the here and now, the harsh realities of prison life. For the most part, the inside and outside relationships and lives of informants are kept separate from one another. This has obvious affects on one’s mind-set, and the strain of being pulled in and out of these clashing and yet co-existing worlds that are remotely attached, but are built with different formal and informal rule systems that are not always easy to discern.

In the next quotes, informants illustrate their anxiety-laden feelings about their own aging and the aging of their families and friends on the outside:
I used to get visits a lot, but now since they’re [siblings] getting older like me, those have tapered off. And then I met, people that’s left here, I have contact with some of those people, that’s left here awhile. A lot of them go home and it’s like a new beginning for them, and they tell me how hard it is at first. The faith that they had while they were in here, they just hang on to that, and know that things will get better for them. (Ms. Parker)

I know my mom misses turning to me, and I miss helping her at her age. She was recently extremely sick with this bad flu that hangs on and on and on. She took care of my dad when he was sick, but no one took care of her. I’m an only child, and if I don’t care for them, who will? No one. Is my husband, who’s 80, in the position to do that? No, he’s beginning to fail too. All my life I thought one of these days I will be the caregiver for my mother, my father and my husband, because they’re fairly close in age. Now, the time has come to give them the care that they so sorely need, and I’m out of the picture. And they are giving me that extra effort to come and maintain this relationship with me, seeing me and having a 30 second hug in visiting hall. That’s sad, that’s really sad. (Ms. Doyle)

First, I want to briefly note that maintaining communication with released former convicts appears to be quite rare for inmates. This social contact demonstrates inmates’ ability to keep and appreciate the close connections established inside prison. This interaction integrates the two conflicting worlds, which helps the inmate to relate to and understand the outside world, from the familiar perspective of a former inmate.

Clearly, informants feel helpless in their inability to be of immediate assistance to people in their outside social networks. Isolation and confinement in prison results in the loss of many roles, one of which is significant to older women in general, that of caregiver. Here we see that informants are concerned about who will provide care for their children, spouses, aging parents, and friends, as they are unable to do so.

**Primary & Secondary Social Networks**

Defining and determining primary and secondary social networks are dependent upon the level of interaction we have with particular individuals, each having specific gradations of intimacy or distance. The Chicago School sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley, introduced concept of the *primary group*, which is defined as a group consisting intimate, face-to-face interaction and relatively long-lasting relationships, which typically includes one’s family and peer groups (Anderson & Taylor 2004). These primary groups have a powerful influence on an individual’s personality and self-identity, and provide companionship and emotional support. In contrast, there are *secondary groups*, which are larger in membership, less intimate, and less long-lasting (Anderson & Taylor 2004). These primary and secondary groups fulfill different
needs of the individual, and are differentiated by how strongly the participants depend and identify with one another.

In a general sense, a group is considered to be a collection of individuals who interact with one another, sharing similar goals and norms, and who have a subjective awareness as “we” (Anderson & Taylor 2004). Furthermore, reference groups are those to which you may or may not belong, but that you use as a standard for evaluating your values, attitudes, and behaviors (Merton & Rossi 1950, as cited in Anderson & Taylor 2004). Identifying with a particular reference group can affect one’s self-evaluation and self-esteem, which can be both positive and negative. At first glance, one might claim that an entire population of inmates fits this definition of a reference group, in as much as they are all in the same location, and have similar environmental and cultural norms. However, there are many ways in which the goals and degrees of awareness may not, in fact, be comparable, thus setting members of the group apart from one another. This reality manifests itself in the complexity of personalities, which is further aggravated by the pressures and limitations of incarceration.

In applying the above conceptual distinctions to the social lives of older female inmates, we are presented with interestingly inverted social groupings, which is illustrated in the following table.

### Table 5. Emotional Intimacy and Proximity in Social Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROXIMITY</th>
<th>EMOTIONAL INTIMACY</th>
<th>+</th>
<th>-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; Friends Outside Prison</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates &amp; Other Inmates Inside Prison</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of social interactions and relationships of primary groups are found in informants’ outside social networks. Here we see that the emphasis is on seeking emotional intimacy and support from family and friends, which occurs without the regular face-to-face contact that typically characterizes primary groups. Conversely, a common theme seems to show that while inmates have limited control over daily interactions, they invest relatively little
socially and emotionally in these contacts, thereby accentuating the detachment from one another.

Summary

This dimension explored the interpersonal relationships and the varying degrees of contact older female inmates have with their internal and external social worlds. Social interactions inside tend foster minimal meaning and emotional depth. Therefore, women express a preference and tendency to seek support through outside social networks, that is, if these networks exist. Finally, cultural and generational differences surfaced as barriers to interactions between younger and older populations of inmates.
Dimension Three: The Relevance of Age in Adaptation

In the third dimension I discuss the relevance of age in adapting to prison life for older women, this includes discerning the differences in adaptation due to life experience versus prison tenure, or sentence length. I explore what appears to be the most salient mode of adaptation as voiced by my informants, which generally centers on the many facets that construct the maintenance of a positive mindset. I also tie in the most difficult parts of adaptation for my informants, some of which may have been referenced in previous dimensions, such as the lack of privacy, noise, and the overcrowding by younger inmates. In this section I consider if and how informants have a conscious awareness of their age, and in what types of situations they feel their age is particularly salient. Age awareness is then explored and contrasted with David Karp’s article *A Decade of Reminders: Changing Age Consciousness between Fifty and Sixty Years Old* (2000). Lastly, in this dimension I explore age as an advantageous or disadvantageous attribute in adaptation to prison life.

This section focuses on the sources of adaptive techniques in my informants’ lives which, I originally surmised, develop out of one’s life experience or prison tenure. As I illustrate, it was a major finding to discover that these are two aspects of my informants’ lives that appear to be inseparable. My informants clearly conveyed that it is the integration of experiences from life prior to incarceration and their current lives in prison that have impacted how they deal and adjust to the environment. It should be noted that it was not my intention to differentiate one approach from another; instead I wanted my informants to reflect on where and how they acquired and used adaptive strategies. With the incorporation of life and prison experience, my informants display as an overarching mode of adaptation, which I will expand on below.

Adaptation: Keeping a Positive Mindset

In a broad sense, my informants relied on a common philosophy that was strategic to surviving prison life, and that was the importance of maintaining a positive mindset, which also influences their spirit of positive self-presentation. The belief in maintaining a positive self-concept manifested in different ways, and included many facets. For instance, very often my informants expressed keeping a positive attitude through the importance of maintaining a relatively high level of activity, which helps to pass the time in adjusting to the realization of serving a life sentence. I discussed this in *Dimension One: Day-to-Day Life*, when I introduced a general account of daily schedules and activities that many of my informants take part in, such as
working, participating in programs or groups, and other recreational activities. This section focuses more on the specific, individual-level modes of maintaining a positive outlook as a means of adapting, while the next dimension, Programming for an Aging Prison Population, describes in more detail some of the programs that are offered at this institution.

Some of the more individual level modes of adaptation include reading (books, magazines, newspapers, etc.), participating in religious or spiritual activities, listening to music, and staying physically active. Within these activities there is a clear emphasis on the ability to learn new things, to educate oneself, and to take advantage of what resources are available. I find this interesting because, again, this introduces avenues through which women maintain some sense of control, and thus perhaps appreciation, regarding how they invest their time. The following quotes exemplify some of the ways in which my informants utilize their time in pursuing activities that help them pass—and enjoy—the time, which then helps in keeping a positive attitude.

Yes, I love to read. I utilize the library in our cottage and also the main library. I read any where from 4-5 novels a week. I also get a newspaper everyday, and have since I’ve been here. I get at least six magazines through the mail, and I read them cover-to-cover. Most of my time is spent reading. I don’t crochet, knit, or embroider, none of that. My outlet is reading. And when I was able—walking. I would walk early in the mornings before it got crowded. I would walk when the young people are still sleeping, when I was allowed to. Now you have to wait until the whistle blows, or you have to go when the yard is open. That’s my outlet and I’ve never had a problem with that. I can sit at a table like so and with nothing, no books no music, no tapes, which I have access to my walkman and tapes. But I can actually sit here and just observe, and it’s very satisfying. I have a very vivid imagination, and if you have that imagination, you can take yourself wherever you want to go. I don’t live in here, as far as my mind is, my body is in here, but I’m interested in what’s going on out there. (Ms. Norris)

Ms. Norris is able to support her love of reading by utilizing her available resources, which do not solely include accessing the two on-site libraries, but also includes one’s financial capability to purchase newspaper and magazine subscriptions. Since families and friends cannot give material gifts, they are able to give money in the form of money orders that are deposited directly into the inmate’s account, for the inmate to use at her discretion. Not all inmates are able to buy whatever products they want, as many of my informants did not speak on receiving financial assistance, and earned money through their jobs. Although Ms. Norris is more recently struggling with mobility issues, she has developed an alternative mode of adaptation that does not present a physical demand, which involves calling upon one’s imagination. Even in her
Mind, Ms. Norris chooses to escape into the world outside, describing that it is only her physical body that is under the control of the prison authority, thereby allowing herself to mentally roam wherever she pleases.

A lot of people sit out there all day play cards, and I feel that’s kind of a waste of time to do all day, when you can further your knowledge with different things. You can get a book, and there’s a lot of different things in the book, we have a big library over here and then we have a library in the cottage. You can read about places you’ve never been and different things. I do the music, the books, and the community service, and write letters, read newspapers…That’s how you keep up with what’s going on out there. I probably wouldn’t do this if I was out in the free world, but in here you have a whole new way to adapt. Just like in the free world, you would have things to keep you busy, to keep your mind occupied, that’s what it’s all about—keeping your mind occupied. (Ms. Sanders)

Much like the previous informant, Ms. Sanders links her interest in reading to the importance in keeping up on what is going on in the world outside. Here, even inside the prison walls, she is able to explore the unknown by investigating various reading materials. Staying busy or occupied is inherently important, yet it is sought out carefully in an effort to avoid simply wasting one’s time—even if it feels as infinite as a life sentence. There is also a comparison drawn between the inside and outside worlds, which for this informant seems to be a common goal of keeping one’s mind and time occupied.

My adaptation is combination of growth, programs, and spirituality of being able to go to spiritual meetings and listening to what God has to say, because he plays a very important part in my life, and I only go to church 3 times a year. I don’t have to go, for real. I am very peaceful, and being at peace is very important. Most of all, my daughters are talking to me, and me having the contact with the outside world speaks volumes as to why I am this calm and this gentle today. Staying in a calm place as much as possible is important—walkmans with headphones are essential in here. (Ms. Shelley)

Religion and spirituality did not arise in all interviews, but for a few, it played a significant role in adaptation. Similar to the free world, informants relayed that it is not necessary to participate in formalized religious gatherings in order to identify with a particular faith. My informants’ connections with their beliefs were held on a deeply personal level, some of who chose not to elaborate or even discuss these experiences. Further, it should then be noted that just because the informant chose not to bring up this topic, does not mean that it is not salient in their lives.

Another aspect of keeping a positive outlook is maintaining a laid back, “go-with-the-flow” attitude. The source of this adaptive technique appeared to be more rooted in informants’
prison tenure, as they gain experience with the prison culture. Women who employed this type of approach described remaining calm during times of inmate conflict and being able to take a step back and remove themselves from the situation as best as possible. The ability to critically evaluate one’s participation in crisis events is perceived as important since inmates are often considered guilty by association, as I discussed in the second dimension, *Interpersonal Relationships*. In addition to composing oneself in a peaceful manner and avoiding potentially troublesome situations, there is a strong emphasis placed on abiding by the rules of the institution. The following quotes depict my informant’s experiences in maintaining a positive mindset through a go-with-the-flow attitude:

If I can’t think them out, I’ll just say, ‘ok there’s another day, just let it roll, just let it go.’ Just let it go and the news rules, you just try to follow them. I keep telling the girls, it’s not a lot of new rules, it’s the old rules that they’re just re-implementing or changing. Because I’ve been here since 1988, come on now, I started out an orange shirt, which is the badest of the bad. When the new kids start, I say yea I was an orange shirt, so what, you just don’t get it do you. Everything is the same, its just a different day, no matter what they say, what they do, it’s the same it’s just a different day. We just got a new sheriff in town that we’ve got to deal with it, so you might as well just kick back. That’s the whole key to everything, just kicking back and letting it roll, and not getting in the mix. You stay out of the mix—and you can cruise, you know. (Ms. Thompson)

You learn not to take things quite as seriously as you would maybe if you were younger, you don’t take things as personally. Because there’s nothing personal in here, it’s just part of the process. I can only speak for myself, but I find that when there’s a new rule imposed, a lot of people will get hyper and they’re doing this they’re doing that to us. For as long as I’m concerned, oh go with the flow, you know. This is what we have today, it’ll be something else tomorrow, it’ll be something else next week, and then it’ll change. And It’ll come back right to where it was, so I think you learn to go with the flow a little more. (Ms. Boncquet)

You have to keep adjusting…I think if you’re older and you’re in prison, you’re more mellowed out. You can tolerate and go with the changes better than you can say, if I was in my 20s, because you know when you’re in your 20s you don’t like all that. When you get older you’d be like ok, rules change everyday, that’s the only thing around here that is consistently different. (Ms. Shannon)

In each of the quotes, informants recognize a contrast in how younger and older inmates cope with constant change. The informal education of younger inmates, by older ones, demonstrates the salience of age and tenure, which is influenced by the evolution of their adaptation techniques over time, and is dependent upon life experience and prison tenure. My
informants relay that one cannot dwell on the changes of the environment simply because they are inevitable. Rather, the focus should be on accepting those changes in order to move on.

In maintaining a positive outlook on life comes the important reliance on hope, and an avoidance of negativity. Many informants conveyed hope for a better life beyond the prison walls, even despite their life sentence. As the following quotes depict, sources of hope stem from optimism about release, reflecting on the salience of relationships with family and friends, and an overall appreciation for life. Informants express the ability to look past the fact that they are incarcerated, and demonstrate a desire to recreate their lives.

I’m going to get out of here someday. A lot of people give up—and I say you can’t never give up. There’s always hope. It’s at the end of the rainbow—you got hope. As long as you have hope, you can conquer anything. When I first came here, I didn’t think I was every gonna be able to do it. I was locked in this new cottage, and it was hot, and it was up on the second floor and I said Lord, I don’t know if I’m going to be able to do this. I just started doing what I have to do. You know you just have to, you’ve got to, you just can’t never give up. I mean some people give up but, you know, giving up is not what its all about, it’s about adapting and go ahead and do what you have to do everyday. A lot of people do, and some don’t—some give up, but you can’t give up. You just go ahead and do what you got to do. Try to do what they expect of you. (Ms. Sanders)

So, you know just times when the attitudes of people when they’re real negative, or sometimes you know you get sucked into that, and then you just have to regroup and just go in a positive thought…Freedom to me is not just being outside those gates, freedom to me is being able to get up in the morning and appreciate life. Life doesn’t have to be full with a whole lot of stuff to be alright. You know as long as you have your inner peace, you can do it. I don’t know that’s just how I feel. (Ms. Parker)

Difficulties in Adaptation

There are many difficulties expressed by my informants, many of which surfaced throughout this account. Below I have listed each informant’s response to what they believe is the hardest part of adaptation to prison life. I have chosen to list these individually as a means of giving each informant her own distinctive voice, which have been placed into four thematic categories.

The following quotations point out that for these four informants, the overcrowding of the prison is definite difficulty in adaptation, which appears to filter through to several aspects of their lives. The current over population of inmates has further aggravated the lack of privacy, which creates a very intense environment filled with many different people, personalities, and loud noise.
The lack of privacy. There are correctional officers that have seen been between my crotch more then my husband has, and I’ve been married 45-46 years. It is humiliating; you will never get over the humiliation and degradation. (Ms. Doyle)

The number of people—for me, it’s the crowds. (Ms. Boncquet)

The people, the meanness, and the cruelty to each other. Dealing with all the different personalities, the abusive personalities, and no one wants to help you, the staff doesn’t want to help you. And the medical too, I worry about what’s wrong with me. (Ms. Burt)

The downside everyday is the noise. The noise is unbelievable, the noise and the bad language. It happens from the time the ladies put their feet on the floor in the mornings until they go to bed at night. It’s constant and I’ve never adjusted to it. The noise just absolutely bothers me. After awhile, this noise that’s here, for me personally—it always sounds threatening. (Ms. Norris)

Here, the three following informants discuss the hardships related to maintaining a connection with their family members outside. These are clearly described with a sense that the older inmate is helpless in that they are denied the ability to have contact with them in crisis situations, in which families call on each other for support. It is also evident that in these descriptions, there is tension between the inside and outside worlds, as I touched on in dimension two Interpersonal Relationships.

When I stopped my family from coming down here so much, because it was hard on my mom before she passed. They wanted to take me with them; they wanted me to go home with them. I wanted to go home, and everybody was crying. (Ms. Fry, age 59, tenure 16 years)

The hardest part is when you feel like your hands are tied when something happens at home, like if somebody dies, and you can’t help or do anything about it. You feel like you’ve got handcuffs on, because you can’t help them or be a comfort to them in anyway. (Ms. Sanders)

Being separated from your family. I don’t care what anybody says, but it’s the traveling between two worlds. (Ms. Thompson)

As discussed in the first dimension Day-to-Day Life, one’s physical status is recognized to heavily influence how informants pursue and adapt to their environment on a daily basis. As it is illustrated below, two informants relay that their mobility is what they consider to be their hardest adaptation to prison life. Although concerns with physical disabilities in informant’s lives were a fairly common finding, I find it interesting that only two informants claim it as their most difficult part of their overall adaptation. Perhaps this suggests that while their bodies may
waver on a daily basis, the true root of adaptation takes place in first overcoming the mental barriers of prison life only for the rest of the body to then follow.

Traveling—traveling to CFS [Central Food Services], going to the infirmary when I have an appointment. It’s traveling, because I feel so bad I can’t hardly get around. (Ms. Homme)

The hardest part for me is moving from one spot to another and I think if I was a little younger I could pick up my stuff and go, but my pride gets in the way. (Ms. Shannon)

The following two informants express an anxiety manifested in the loss of control over time, which is of course apparent in all interviews. I think what may be influential here is that out of all informants, these two hold the longest of prison tenures, having served almost 20 years of their sentence thus far. Perhaps it is over time that these women have become more accustomed to being separated from their families and friends on the outside and now focus on how time—how it is manipulated by administration and how much time they have left to serve.

Time, because you know sometimes it doesn’t seem like I’ve been here 19 years and other times its like—wow! It’s just the time. (Ms. Parker)

The hardest parts to adapt to is authority—being told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, on a 24-hour scale. That’s the hardest thing. The next hardest thing is being talked to as though you are the scum of the earth—I have a problem with that. (Ms. Shelley)

As illustrated in the above quotes, responses to the hardest parts of adaptation include a variety of topics, but all having a common denominator—not having the ability to control oneself or one’s environment fully. Each informant demonstrates personal struggles that affect the way they perceive their own adaptation, with some more bearable or more easily remedied then others. It is also apparent that the overcrowding of this prison is at the root of many of these complaints, and could be linked to the many changes in rules, thereby signifying adaptations in operations of the prison. The heavy congestion of inmates undoubtedly effects adaptation for my informants, as it clearly impacts the issues raised with noisiness, crowds of people, slow medical processes, and the ability to physically maneuver amongst so many people.

Awareness of Age

My interview schedule included a section of questions that in a broad tapped inmates’ level of awareness of one’s age. This awareness focused on whether inmates considered themselves to be old, whether they expressed a conscious awareness of their age, and in what
situations did their age proves to be a salient factor in their adaptation to the prison environment. Defining “old age” is of course described in many different ways, and when informants were asked to describe an “older inmate” the focus was quickly drawn to physical characteristics rather than referring to one’s chronological age. These include classifying inmates according to having obvious physical disabilities, using a wheelchair or walker, graying of their hair, and having wrinkles. When asked if they considered themselves to be old, the majority of my informants relayed that they did not feel old, despite their apparent physical disabilities that many informants associate with old age. Here again, informants reiterated the importance in being mentally alert and physically active as key components to healthy adaptation to prison life.

Age awareness emerged in what my informants describe as two main scenarios. In the first, my informants relay that they are more aware of their age when they are in physically demanding situations. I as I discussed in the first dimension Day-to-Day Life, many informants express challenges with mobility and maneuvering about the facility on time constraints that are imposed by staff of the entire inmate population. The following two quotes are examples of how many of my informants express an awareness of their age through issues of mobility, and how they associate old age with personal physical limitations.

I feel old on those days when I literally can’t move…I’m going to give you a perfect example. You know the ball field that has just come up in the last 6 months—I’m afraid to go to the field. It’s a small area that we are made to go through to smoke, all 2200 women. The most dangerous times are at 1:15p, and 6:15p when everybody comes through the yard at one time. And we have to stick us older people in back, for fear of being trampled. We have to stand off and wait for that crowd to get through because we’re afraid to go through. As a person who has a hip replacement—I am afraid of being trampled. (Ms. Shelley)

It’s moving around and trying to get somewhere. Going to the store, thank god it’s on the first floor now, because it used to be down in the basement. But it’s on the first floor now so I can take my chair. I can’t live anywhere else but on that first floor with a wheelchair because you can’t carry it. No body wants to be bothered with carrying it up and down. Makes my day easier. I try to walk, but sometimes it’s just too difficult. (Ms. Homme)

In the second scenario, informants convey consciousness of their age through social interactions with other inmates. While the first scenario creates a more negative affect for my informants, experiencing an awareness of age through social encounters with inmates can be both positive and negative. Positive in the sense that there is an informational and perhaps mentoring exchange between the generations, where older inmates pass on advice to other
inmates. Informants also expressed feelings of pride in their work duties as they gain confidence over time. For example Ms. Homme who has worked for a number of years sewing flags by hand on the flag line at Ohio Penal Industries, relays that there are times that she is aware of her age in reference to her work experience:

Like at work I can sew up a storm. My hands, my mind, my eyesight is good, I’m one of the top sewers there’s no body yet to beat me, to do as many as I do a day. Oh yea, they try it. I say, ‘come on girls,’ and it’s challenging but I stay up there.

Here too, Ms. Boncquet reflects on a situation in which she feels that her awareness of her age is not associated with negative sentiment. She describes the changes connected to her own aging as more superficial in nature, relaying that her inner self remains the same, particularly in familiar situations:

I am comfortable in my own skin, and I like who I am right now. Whether its old, young or indifferent or what…I don’t feel old when I’m walking in the sunshine and the day is nice and you feel alive and vibrant inside, that part of you never changes. I’m never any older on the inside then I was when I was 10—that part of you does not change. It doesn’t. This is the only thing that changes.

Social encounters with others have also created negative experiences, and as my informants relayed, they are typically found in communicating with younger inmates. In the following two instances, Ms. Doyle and Ms. Burt describe situations in which they find that they are most aware of their age. These portrayals illustrate the more negative perceptions that informants relay having regarding their social interactions with younger inmates.

When I see all the foolish activity, all the irresponsible ways the women in here conduct themselves. But, I feel more out of the loop then I feel old, we just have nothing in common. I mean I had an entirely normal lifestyle and now I’m set into an environment where 95% or more of the women were used and lived in a whole different way, more of a street way. What really brings my age to mind is I think it’s I’m of an era where values were different. (Ms. Doyle)

Now, I’m old now. I realize that…I feel old compared to them, but we have nothing in common anyway, so even if I was on the other side of the fence, I’d still feel old compared to them. I feel old when they start with all the foul language and all the sexual graphic sexual talk and reading sexual letters from other people, other guys in prison. Then I feel old, but I don’t know if that’s an age difference, or a culture difference, or what or both or…I just don’t get it. (Ms. Burt)

As one may interpret these quotes, it seems quite possible that it is not always the informant’s age that presents such vast differences in these interactions. Rather, as some
informants admit, their age awareness stems from more than just generational differences. I touched on this concept in dimension two Interpersonal Relationships, which suggests that there is a cultural or lifestyle difference between the younger and older inmates, which influences how they are conscious of and perceive their age in relation to others around them. As was portrayed, this creates positive and negative experiences that affect each informant differently, thereby impacting their overall adjustment to prison life.

Karp’s Decade of Reminders

In the article “A Decade of Reminders: Changing Age Consciousness between Fifty and Sixty Years Old,” Karp (2000) documents aging experiences during this specific decade of life, which are often benchmarked by particular age-related events and expectations. Karp (2000) investigated how people thought about themselves, their careers, and aging, which were explored through 72 in-depth interviews with men and women between the ages of 50 and 60 years old. Findings reveal what he terms to be a “decade of reminders” in that as we age, particularly within this decade, many people become increasingly aware of their age through an intense period of common life events and age-related messages that define and reinforce how one perceives his or her age. Karp categorizes these “aging messages” into four general classes of reminders: body, generational, contextual, and mortality reminders.

It is my aim here to briefly explore these types of reminders through my informants’ perspectives in an effort to better understand their awareness of aging. Although all of my informants’ ages do not fall directly in this 50 to 60 year decade, I will explore the consciousness of age as experienced through age-related events and expectations for older women incarcerated. Clearly this process will be different than for those in the free world, since an awareness of age through age messages is linked to one’s surroundings. For instance, an older woman in prison has limited access to important aging-related events in the life cycle that are apparent in the outside world. Some aging benchmarks include participation in grandparenthood, reunions, weddings, retirement, caring for aging parents, and funerals, all of which shape their sense of aging.

The first category body reminders, recognizes an awareness that the body is slowing down and that there are age-associated physiological changes that effect how one perceives his or her body to function and react to the environment (Karp 2000). The realization of aging through body reminders proved to be a salient topic for my informants since many of them
referenced noticeable changes in physical ability. It is through these body reminders that women recall becoming more aware of their aging self as they regularly encounter physically demanding situations within the prison environment.

The second category *generational reminders*, Karp describes as a decade full of “social-psychological in-betweens” (p. 72). This type of aging reminder refers to the tension one may simultaneously experience between younger and older generations, such as providing care and assistance to children and aging parents. For my informants, discussion of generational reminders were less prominent, simply due to the fact that they are removed from and unable to regularly participate in their outside kinship networks. Contact through writing letters, phone calls, and visits enables my informants to have some connection with their outside social networks. In comparing this level of contact to that of someone in the free world, for example, it is clear that there are less opportunities to experience a grandparenting role. Therefore, informants may have been less inclined to discuss their role as a grandparent as a signal to their awareness of their aging because they may feel too far removed from that identity.

The third category *contextual reminders*, refers to becoming the oldest and realizing one’s age status relative to those immediately around us (Karp 2000). Depending on the context and the people surrounding, the awareness of being the eldest may contribute to a quickened sense of aging. This reminder very often surfaces in informant’s descriptions of interactions between generations of inmates, in which the younger inmates far out number the older inmates. In this context, informants display a consciousness of their older age and refer to generational and cultural differences that they associate with an inmates’ age.

The fourth and final category is composed of *mortality reminders*, which refer to the “momentum of mortality occurrences” experienced this decade of life (p. 78). Karp relates these reminders to the deaths of those of similar ages, such as the death of friends from high school or college, which then calls attention to the likelihood of one’s own death (2000). For my informants, this reminder seems less salient in that the topics of death and dying were seldom brought up in conversations about their awareness of age. Rather than discussing the consciousness of one’s own death, informants did express concern in their inability to attend funerals of friends and family outside.

In reflecting on my informant’s experiences and the previously described four categories of aging-related reminders as provided by Karp (2000), it seems evident that my informant’s
Old Age In Prison: An Advantage or Disadvantage?

In this section, I address questions regarding whether or not informants perceived older inmates as having particular advantages or disadvantages in prison. As I expected, informants demonstrate having positive and negative experiences associated with their age. As will be explained in the following texts, there are several advantages and disadvantages mentioned for older inmates.

First, I would like to present the advantages and more positive experiences, as voiced by my informants:

The number one thing that has helped me is my age, because prison is not for older people. Prison is for young people. I think the number one advantage is, for me, nobody bothers me. I can go out in the rec room and sit at a table, and I can sit there all day and no body comes over. (Ms. Norris)

If you are an older lady and you act in that account, they give you that respect, as an elder. I think all elders need respect, because they’ve been through things that I haven’t yet, and they might be able to guide me…I think being older helps me realize what my needs are and what my wants are. (Ms. Shannon)

You will find that if you talk to most of us, especially if we’re 50 and over, life gets a little easier, you don’t take things quite the same way you do when you’re younger. As you get older there’s not the social pressures that you have when you’re younger, especially in a correctional institution. The younger people are more worried about the peer pressure things going on around them. Older inmates don’t get that. We’re either ignored or respected. Depending on how you hold yourself and how you react. If you have to be an inmate, it’s best to be an older inmate because you’re treated better. Not by staff so much, it’s how you’re treated by the younger inmates. They either stay away from you or they treat you as they would a family member that’s older. (Ms. Boncquet)

As depicted by the above quotes, some of my informants believe that with old age comes ease with which one navigates the prison system, which is supported by the knowledge and experience gained throughout one’s prison tenure. Knowing how and when to exhibit appropriate behavior for specific situations is important in establishing one’s status as an older inmate.
Therefore, attitude and reputation are clearly influential components in this process. Acting with dignity and having respect for oneself and others influences the likelihood of having a relatively positive prison experience. However, this finding is not necessarily unique to older inmates. As I discussed in the previous dimension, *Interpersonal Relationships*, respect is a key element in general adaptation to prison life, regardless of one’s age.

Next, I would like to present the disadvantages and more negative aspects of being an older inmate, as described by my informants:

> There are no advantages to being older there are more disadvantages—like when you get harassed by the younger ones. You know how many times I’ve been called an old bitch—all the time! (Ms. Burt)

> I have been called ugly names like, you old bitch, move your old ass…I don’t think there’s any advantage to being older here. You have to be able to take care of yourself. (Ms. Shelley)

> Oh my god, oh—their’s no advantages to being older here. No, because they don’t do anything for us. We have to keep our stuff in the lock box, everything is stowed away, bed no wrinkles, everything. (Ms. Homme)

It is unfortunate that my informants raise such issues of name-calling and disrespect, however it still seems apparent that these aspects of prison life have impacted their perceptions of age and adaptation. These informants speak of disadvantages to being older in a way that does not set them apart, in regards to age, from the rest of the inmate population. Perhaps this illustrates that one’s master status of inmate reigns over all other identity, which some could argue as leveling the playing field and not adhering to an unfair advantage in treatment to others judged solely on physical association with age. Also, in examining the disadvantages of my informants, it seems that the needs and problems that are specific to older inmates appear to be rarely addressed and taken into consideration by other inmates and administration. This will further be explored in the last dimension, *Programming for an Aging Prison Population*.

**Summary**

This dimension explored the salience of age in adaptation to prison life, which is clearly influenced by a combination of knowledge and experience gained from life prior to incarceration as well as one’s prison tenure. Informants illustrated the importance in maintaining a positive attitude and self-concept, which aides in the evolution of personal adaptive techniques. Here we see that living in a harsh and ever-changing environment, the demands can easily begin to
outweigh the abilities of the individual. However, my informants proved that there are ways of
negotiating such an intense atmosphere and emphasize the importance of not becoming too
overwhelmed by issues that are out of one’s direct control. Instead, my informants tended to
focus on maintaining some sense of control over activities they find joy and interest in, and
channel their energy toward a more positive outlook on life. Informants openly exposed their
personal experiences and associations regarding their awareness of old age in prison, thereby
revealing great insights into how their age is often perceived as an advantage and a disadvantage.
**Dimension Four: Programming for an Aging Prison Population**

A common aim in many penal institutions is to maintain a controlled and supervised rehabilitative environment, one which works with inmates in dealing with issues related to their crime. Often, this goal is founded in the provision of intensive programming that attempts to tap into the varying needs of inmates. For instance, some programs aim at preparing inmates for reentry into society by providing educational, vocational, and recreational programs. Other programming may be implemented to address behavioral and addiction issues, while some programs have more therapeutic goals. This is exemplified in the mission statement of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections (http://www.drc.state.oh.us):

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction protects and supports Ohioans by ensuring that adult felony offenders are effectively supervised in environments that are safe, humane, and appropriately secure. In partnership with communities, we will promote citizen safety and victim reparation. Through rehabilitative and restorative programming, we seek to instill in offenders an improved sense of responsibility and the capacity to become law-abiding members of society.

Certainly, the availability and utilization of programs impacts an inmates’ acclimation to the prison environment, as well as for possible re-entry into the community. Examining the awareness and use of these programs from an older female inmate’s perspective is therefore important to further understanding aspects of adaptation to prison life.

In this dimension, I will investigate several aspects of programming for older female inmates. Please refer to the inventory of specific programs available to the general population of older offenders in Ohio, as well as programs designed for older female offenders, located in Chapter 1 Introduction. I have included information regarding the degree to which my informants express utilization of these programs, and their reasons for enrolling. Related to this, I have asked informants to give their opinions on what they deem the needs of older inmates’ to be, and whether or not the available programs meet these needs. I conclude this dimension with informants’ suggestions about changes in programs that they foresee to be beneficial for older inmates and their adaptation to prison life, such as re-implementing past programs and creating new housing policies for older inmates.

**Utilization of Programs**

The utilization of programs is of course linked to inmates’ awareness and knowledge of what is offered within the institution, which is also connected to the communication with staff and
other inmates. For some programs, there are certain criteria that have to be met before the inmate is able to participate. Sorting through these requirements often becomes confusing and overwhelming, as my informants expressed, which expectedly impacts one’s participation. From the perspectives of my informant’s, programs specifically targeting older inmates are rarely heard of and thus, do not seem to be widely used. The most referenced program in interviews was an exercise program, and according to my informants, they understand that it is not intended solely for older inmates, but for those with limited mobility. Only one of my informants admitted a one-time participation in this program, and voiced that it was a “joke” for someone of her ability, and like others, prefers doing similar exercises on her own time.

Outside of this brief encounter, informants did not claim to currently participate in any age-related programs. Notably, this does not mean that older offenders in general don’t utilize programs or that they simply don’t exist. Rather, the reasons for participating vary, and include influential factors such as one’s access to the program area, personal interests, and requirements associated with particular programs.

In reference to my informants’ experiences, it seems that one’s health status, mobility, and distance to the program area has a lot to do with an inmate’s participation. Several informants said that they would be more likely to take part in programs that were located within their cottage because their concerns with mobility would not hinder their participation. So for example, considering the exercise program, the women who would benefit the most, might not be able to handle the physical demands of merely traveling to the program area—and on top of that challenge, they arrive to exert themselves even further. Moreover, the women who are physically able to get to the program location with no difficulty are less inclined to need or want to sign up for such a program. Several informants have similar views, as illustrated by Ms. Homme:

They have the wheelchair physical therapy program at the gym once a week, but you know I don’t go. I’ve got all I can do if I can make it to dinner that night. To get there and back is a lot of work. Oh yea, it’s a lot of work; it’s too much for me. (Ms. Homme)

Since there are a variety of programs offered to the general population of inmates, informants expressed enjoyment in discovering newfound personal interests that perhaps they were unable to explore prior to incarceration. Familiar activities that informants enjoy and have experience in, and learning new trades, are often referred to as a highlight of program participation. Here, Ms.
Shannon reflects on some of the educational programs she has completed over the years, and how this work experience will help her find a job when released back into the community:

It is how you apply these different programs and how they help you deal with yourself. I took the victim’s awareness, anger management, I took horticulture, I really want to take building maintenance so I can go home and learn to build houses—or teach others how to do it. That’s my plan, anything I learn I try to apply by teaching others what I know. (Ms. Shannon)

The rehabilitative elements of many programs offered create personal and psychological benefits that help inmates understand and cope with the stress and anxiety behind their crime. For example, Ms. Shelley describes her struggle with anger issues, and after completing the program for anger management she reflects on her experience:

I used to channel my anger at anything and everything that came close. I was in the hole 11 times before I got it, and don’t you think the parole board didn’t speak on it because they did. Once I found how to channel my anger and got the help that I needed and the truth that I needed, things started happening to me. I gained strength first of all. I gained a lot of strength through programs and learning how to channel my anger. I still have trouble with it, but I know how to channel it. (Ms. Shelley)

Also, all my informants relay a compassionate involvement in community service opportunities, and many describe the positive feelings they experience when they are able to give back to others. On a broad scale, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction reports that the total number of community service hours completed by all inmates in 2005 was 6,315,846 (Community Service Hours Report, ODRC 2005). A prime example of this dedication to helping the outside community is through the words of Ms. Parker, who like many other women, demonstrate taking great pride and satisfaction in sewing quilts, hats and scarves for foster children:

I can cross-stitch for hours and you do it yourself and get your project done. After you see your results and know that it’s going to make a gift for somebody that means a lot. You know, it makes you feel good that you’re doing something for somebody else. (Ms. Parker)

On a slightly different note, some informants convey reasons for participating in programs that are not linked to their personal interests. As aforementioned, inmates expressed the expectation of meeting specific criteria before being able to enroll in some programs. For instance, an inmate’s security status, their sentence length, and how far they are from their next parole board hearing can act as barriers to their participation. Furthermore, informants claim that there are institutional expectations in completing certain rehabilitative programs upon initial
admittance into the facility. According to my informants, the legally required programs are not always relevant to their supposed crime, but are nonetheless necessary. Related to this, informants admitted to taking programs solely for the purpose of “looking good” to their parole board, which can potentially take away seats from people who might have a personal interest and investment in the program. Since enrollment in any program is not guaranteed and capacity is limited, waiting lists build thereby further restricting membership.

Unfortunately, all of these factors taken together appear to act as barriers to an inmate’s willingness to get involved in programming, which are described in the following opinions and experiences:

I’ve taken domestic violence, current events, secretarial type training, computers, drafting, women in history, different types of stuff that I was interested in. I didn’t shoot for what the board would like. No—what would I like, that’s what I was shooting for. What would I like to do? (Ms. Thompson)

I make those hats, you know the floppy ones, and some tams, they’re real cute little hats, and scarves. I mean you don’t have to do this. You just do this because you want to. When I go home, the judge might say give me 300 hours, well I already got that here. (Ms. Fry)

When I first came I spoke to the case manager and said, ‘How I do advance through the system, you know what’s the procedure?’ He said, ‘You have to take a lot of programs, every time you get a program under your belt that’s good, looks good, looks like you’re trying to improve yourself.’ So I said, ‘What kind of programs are there that are available?’ There were drug programs, alcohol programs, anger management programs, and um programs that deal with molestation and abuse with family violence, all of these kinds of programs, and I said, ‘But none of these fit me. I’ve never had any encounter with any of this.’ He said, ‘That doesn’t matter, sign up for them anyway.’ I said, ‘But if I’m filling the chair won’t that keep someone that needs it from filling that chair?’ He said, ‘Don’t worry, the people who need it don’t sign up for them.’ I thought that was a pretty casual attitude. (Ms. Doyle)

So there are a lot of different things you can do. Ok they have cosmetology school here, that’s a 2-year thing. You have Columbus State here, you can go to horticulture, you can also go to culinary school here, there’s a lot of different little things you can do. They don’t let you do it [programs] for fun because there are 2400 women here, and they try to get the short time women, which is one of the advantages for the women here. They have a computer program. So, there’s little things here that you can take advantage of it, if you’ve got a short time to go. Long timers—that’s what we talked about at the meeting the other night, don’t have anything for the long time people, because you have to be 5 years from your board date to take the classes. (Ms. Sanders)

In taking a look at the last quotation, there is another topic that I wish to briefly address, which leads into the next section about the opinions and needs of older inmates. As many informants
touched on, programs appear to have a general focus on young, “short-timers” nearing their parole board hearing. Perhaps this has become a broader focus of other institutions since there are a larger number of young women being incarcerated for petty crimes. For instance, only 17% of serious crimes of violence in 2001 (murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) were committed by women (Chesney-Lind & Pasko 2004). Moreover, women constituted 21.4% of all arrests in 2001 (FBI 2002, as cited in Chesney-Lind & Pasko 2004), showing that adult women represent a small percentage of those arrested when compared to their younger counterparts.

**Needs of Older Inmates**

I will describe in this section, the overarching need of older inmates as it relates to programming. General needs of my informants include challenges with medical processes, diet, mobility, and limited resources. Please recall that many of these issues are heavily impacted by overcrowding and personal physical mobility, which surfaced in the *Difficulties in Adaptation* section in the previous dimension. Although informant’s needs vary, the focus remains on health-related issues of older inmates, which I will address in this section.

Among the most common needs of older female inmates, informants said that better attention must be given to the health needs of older women and that medical processes are much too slow. In considering the guaranteed prison health care and issues of overcrowding, informants detect a heavy flow of inmates in and out of the infirmary on a regular basis. This creates frustration in the inability to seek prompt medical care, especially when age may exacerbate what appear to be more common afflictions. The following quotes illustrate informant’s perspectives on the provided health care:

The medical care here is not good at all, no. So many of the ladies have some serious medical problems. I think, they think that they’re not getting what they should get for aging and that type of thing. (Ms. Norris)

We [older inmates] have medical problems that are not addressed fast enough. We have a chronic care doctor on the farm, we see him religiously, every 3 months. It’s the rest of the hospital, where the problems come in. Probably because there are so many inmates that are coming in who are sick. (Ms. Shelley)

Certainly it’s [old age] not an advantage medically. B/c we have extremely poor medical care. Medically—certainly things are in pretty bad shape. (Ms. Doyle)
What might be a casual complaint for them [younger inmates] a younger person has time to deal with it. A headache in someone that’s 50 and older may not be just a headache, it could be a sign of something much more serious, just because the body is aging. It just takes a long time to go through the medical process and get help. And there’s nothing anybody can do about that. That’s just the way it is, but that’s a concern. (Ms. Boncquet)

As far as medical, our needs are different than the younger ones, because say like if we have headaches or whatever, sometimes that could be like a stroke for older people. (Ms. Parker)

In 2003, Governor Taft contracted the services of an outside medical consultant to review and improve the health care delivery system within the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. This Health Care Review Team compiled a final report with their survey findings and recommendations related to the quality and effectiveness of health care provided. Based on a representative sample of all inmates in Ohio, the team found that 77.6% of respondents stated that they had used some form of the health care services offered within the past year, and 54.6% claimed that it was either “hard” or “impossible” to obtain such health services (Stickrath 2003). My findings are consistent with this report, reiterating the point that maneuvering the health care system is often difficult, particularly for older inmates.

As part of this health-related focus, the dietary needs of older inmates also proved to be a concern for my informants. They recognize that older inmates need a different diet then what is provided for the general population. Women expressed that they felt it was too difficult to eat in a healthy manner, relaying that they receive minimal fresh fruits and vegetables and an excess of starches through the Central Food Services. Furthermore, when food items are purchased through the institution’s commissary, informants claim that healthy foods are more expensive then other foods, which is an unfortunate irony also found in the free world.

As aforementioned, my informants relay that they do not have any knowledge—outside of the exercise program—of current programming geared specifically to older adults. Further, they believe that the available programming does not meet the needs of older inmates, and that it seems to be designed for the general inmate population, irrespective of age. According to the list of programming for older women, there appear to be opportunities for medical-related services, such as physical exams and health fairs. Although these are not discussed in interviews, they are assumed to be useful, despite the fact that they may not expedite the medical process that many inmates complain of.
Program Suggestions

This section explores the program suggestions as discussed by my informants, which primarily deal with the re-implementation of previously existing programs and housing for older inmates. As discussed in the section Programming for Ohio’s Older Inmates, I listed two programs that were specific to the women’s institutions: Older Resourceful Women and Assisted Living/Helping Others Together (H.O.T.) Program. These two programs, as well as two other programs commonly referred to by informants as “Aging” and “Silver Fox Bingo” were raised in the section of program suggestions in that my informants want to see that these programs be re-implemented. Perhaps due to funding or participation issues, these programs were used and at some point discontinued, and due to the lack of response from the institution, the real reasons behind the termination of these programs remains unknown.

The following quotes depict informant’s suggestions and reactions to these programs. Please note the reoccurring themes of tension between younger and older inmates, accessibility issues, population overcrowding, and personal mobility:

At one time, the people that was in wheel chairs or handicapped or had difficulties doing different things, they would have a H.O.T. partner. But then, it came to the point, where I guess the ladies weren’t exactly doing it out of the kindness of their hearts, so they had to stop it because people took advantage of the situation. But there are people that need assistance and some of them don’t get it. Ok, so we have this lady here that pushes herself—she back pedals her wheel chair, which if she would have the HOT partner, she’d have a certain girl that would help take care of her, but they don’t have that anymore. I think if you would take a young kid and let them be able to care for somebody, maybe it make a different outlook on their lives, I think. (Ms. Parker)

Assist us in cleaning because it’s difficult, assist us in trying to get around, trying to clean, getting the mop, and the bucket, you know—it’s hard. I’ve got a 5-minute no standing order, so after five minutes I’m about done. I have to get my chair out. There’s a lot of younger people that just walk right by us, ‘oh that’s good for you, just keep on going.’ You don’t know how my joints feel; if you’re not there you don’t know. You think you’re going to stay young forever, but you’re not because I was there once, and you’re not. (Ms. Homme)

They had a wonderful group here for the older inmates called Aging, and the ladies actually came from the Franklin County Aging Society, it was a wonderful group. We talked about osteoporosis, arthritis, diabetes, menopause—all the things that women have to deal with while going through the aging process. It was a wonderful group. Absolutely, I’d like to see it again. (Ms. Norris)
They used to have a group, Older Resourceful Women, but they cut that out. We were all in it, out at the camp, yea we used to pay $1 a month to buy materials. We made quilts and all kinds of stuff…and then they done away with it, anything productive its passed. Yea, I’d like to see that back that was really nice. (Ms. Fry)

Once a year, there use to be—and I’m not sure if there is anymore—a bingo game for women 55 and older. Last year I don’t remember that happening, it’s called Silver Fox Bingo, indicating that we’re probably all gray-haired little old ladies. That was nice, they had little sandwiches, potato chips, and candy you could help yourself. You were seated family style around to have your little meal and then they played bingo afterwards, and that was very nice, but that was a once a year deal. They do have a once a month bingo game for the whole farm, but quite often it’s so crowded that you get turned away. And you’re sitting on bleachers, and that’s just an uncomfortable thing for older people, unless your one of the older ones sitting in a wheelchair. I don’t see, I really don’t see any programs gearing themselves to older women. (Ms. Doyle)

It seems that judging by the perspectives of my informants, the programs that were available to older women did, at one point successfully exist, but years have since passed and these women want to see similar programming. It is apparent that through women’s reflections of current programming there is perceived to be, in a sense, an age-less component. Furthermore, women explain that the institution uses more universal program solutions to issues that deserve some recognition of age. Hence, the numerous suggestions to bring back former programs that had an aging focus.

As another suggestion, my informants were adamant about voicing their opinions and concerns about their housing arrangements, which have emerged at several points throughout this paper. The majority of informants expressed that they would like to have a housing unit just for older inmates, since living amongst people of younger ages has proved to be quite challenging. For example:

If you put the older offenders together, we’re not only going to be well behaved, but we are going to participate in programs and we are going to look out and take care of each other. That’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to do that. It needs to be done. And we wouldn’t be so afraid to walk this farm because sometimes I’m afraid. (Ms. Shelley)

There are a lot of older people. I asked the warden one time, why don’t they put the elderly people, let the older people have just one hall for people over 50—the quiet, the reserved, the conservative people, why can’t they have just one section of one hall for those people so we don’t have to deal with the loudness the vulgarity, the yelling, the physical fights. Anyway, the warden said that they didn’t have enough older people to fill up a whole hall, or a whole section of a building or something like that, they didn’t have enough older women, or something like that, which made no sense, I mean they just
opened C corridor, and there’s only 26 people up there, why couldn’t that be for the older and more quiet...do you know what I’m saying? So we could have some peace, I don’t want to deal with the strippers and the fighters and the sex. (Ms. Burt)

I would like to see housing with more older inmates, rather than the young peppy ones. But that’s just me, personally. I don’t know how everybody would feel about that. But I’ve heard that mentioned more than once, wishing there was housing that was a little quieter because the youngsters are rambunctious. And I’m not that old. (Ms. Boncquet)

I find the concept of initiating an age-segregated prison environment to be very interesting. As noted earlier, the Hocking Correctional Facility is an age-segregated institution for older male inmates in Ohio, however a comparable facility does not exist for older female inmates. Since not all of my informants agreed that this is a sensible suggestion, I would like to address the potential advantages and disadvantages of designing a unit for all older women. Recalling the large impact that one’s housing arrangement has on one’s social network, and without fully knowing what this type of setting would entail, I would like to draw the advantages and disadvantages of age-integrated and age-segregated environments.

Age-integrated environments promote social interaction and an exchange of resources between different ages and generations. For instance, a younger and older inmate might exchange valuable resources through conversation about advice and insight on adaptation to life in prison. This creates a positive experience for both contributing parties, by drawing upon established social networks and services that have accumulated during their time spent in the same setting.

Conversely, as demonstrated by many informants, the disadvantages of an age-integrated environment can weigh heavily upon the life satisfaction of some older women, who may have low activity resources. Such that she might struggle to co-exist in an age-integrated environment, due to generational and cultural differences, as well as the expectation of high activity norms that younger inmates exhibit. The higher demands of the environment via activity norms, and the lower the activity resources of the individual, the less likely the person is to experience a high level of life satisfaction and morale (Gubrium 1972).

A primary advantage for age-segregated settings involves the sense of support and protection that these secure communities provide, just as informants have illustrated in the above quotes. Collective reciprocity helps in lessening the fear that many older inmates associate with younger inmates. Inmates living in an age-segregated setting may have similar lifestyles and
utilize similar goods and services. These services can be delivered more effectively and efficiently, at a lower cost, for instance in considering architectural/environmental design features or in delivering medical care. Older adults in age-segregated environments persistently report “high levels of satisfaction with their residences” which allow for ease of adaptation to the prison environment (Golant 1985).

In contrast, it is believed that age-segregated environments physically and socially isolate elders from the rest of the population. When older adults are kept separate from the rest of society, they are prevented from sharing their wisdom and life experiences with younger generations. This is a phenomenon that my informants are not blind to, and the few that disagree with age-segregated housing, speak on the mentoring relationship that they have created with some of the younger inmates.

Summary

In this dimension, I have investigated many components of programming for older inmates. Included in this description is a brief list of aging programs state wide, as well as programming designed particularly for older female inmates. I have included information regarding the degree to which my informants express utilization of these programs, and their reasons for enrolling. Further, informants voiced their opinions on what they deem the needs of older inmates’ to be, which appear to be largely focused on health and medical concerns. I concluded this dimension with informants’ program suggestions, and what they foresee to be beneficial for older inmates and their adaptation to prison life, such as re-implementing previous aging-related programs. Lastly, I investigate the advantages and disadvantages of the top suggestion, the creation of an older inmate housing unit, and how this suggestion might affect one’s adaptation to prison life.
Chapter 4: Discussion

With the continued graying of the prison populations in the United States, research on understanding the lives older inmates is expanding (Aday 1994; Chaiklin 1998; Codd 1996; Kratcoski & Babb 1990; Lemieux et al. 2002; Moore & Unwin 2002; Morton 1991 & 2004; Ross & Richards 2003; Wahidin 2002 & 2004). However, older incarcerated women comprise a sub-population that is often ignored in prison research (Aday 1994, Kratcoski & Babb 1990; Wahidin 2002 & 2004). Perhaps this is related to the fact that older women constitute a small percentage of the prison population, for instance, women age 50 and older account for only 7.7% of the female prison population in Ohio (ODRC, Institution Census Reports 2006). Research shows that the population of incarcerated older females demonstrate systemic and programmatic demands that will likely increase over time (Codd 1996; Lemieux et al. 2002; Morton 1991 & 2004). Thus, it is imperative to support and conduct research that will contribute to our understanding of aging in prison, and expand knowledge useful for future planning. The current research contributes to this understanding, by exploring and describing adaptation for older women in prison.

This chapter begins with the purpose of the current research, and continues with an overview of findings within each dimension of adaptation. Next, implications for research, theory, and practice are considered. I conclude with methodological issues and final notes on recommendations for future research.

Overview of Findings

This research sought to explore the lives of older incarcerated women, with an emphasis on understanding areas of adaptation. This was described through four interrelated dimensions: day-to-day life, interpersonal relationships, the relevance of age in adaptation, and available programming for older inmates. Findings suggest that adaptations made within each of these dimensions have an important impact on the overall adaptation to prison life. In this section, I will address these findings through major emergent themes relevant in each dimension.

In the first dimension, the day-to-day lives are explored for older incarcerated women. This includes a rich description of informant’s schedules, activities, and daily routines, as well as what they consider to be the positive and negative aspects of a typical day. Findings relay that while schedules remain regimented, women are able to maintain some control over how they spend (or pass) their time. Informants demonstrate that even the smallest decisions made are
meaningful and are taken with great pride. This reveals the importance in creating and maintaining avenues of personal control. This finding is speculated to positively contribute to one’s perception of autonomy and satisfaction, which thus eases adaptation to prison life.

The second dimension investigates the interpersonal relationships of older incarcerated women, whose social networks inside and outside prison are explored in terms of breadth of contact and depth of meaning and support. Generally, most informants convey a sense of emotional detachment from other inmates. This results in feelings of withdrawal and distrust, which appears to leave informants without immediate avenues for seeking social support. This was especially evident in the cultural and generational gap of social exchanges with younger inmates, where particularly negative associations are formed. Furthermore, informants are most likely to rely on the support of their outside social networks, that is, if they are available. The majority of my informants claim that maintaining meaningful outside social ties plays an important role in their ability to adapt to the harsh realities of prison life. Lastly, informants voiced anxiety and stress in the tension of inside and outside social worlds, and the inability to fully relate or belong to either side.

In the third dimension I discuss the relevance of age in adapting to prison life for older women, which is clearly influenced by a combination of knowledge and experience gained from life prior to incarceration as well as one’s prison tenure. Informants illustrated the importance in maintaining a positive attitude and self-concept, which aides in the evolution of personal adaptive techniques. Here, informants reveal ways of negotiating the intense prison environment and emphasize the importance of not becoming too overwhelmed by issues that are out of one’s direct control. Instead, informants focus on maintaining some sense of control over activities they find joy and interest in, thereby channeling their energy toward a positive outlook on life. Informants openly exposed their personal experiences and associations regarding their awareness of old age in prison, thereby revealing great insights into how their age is often perceived as an advantage and a disadvantage.

In the fourth dimension, I investigated several aspects of programming for older inmates. Included in this description is a brief list of aging programs state wide, as well as programming designed specifically for older female inmates. Utilization of these programs and reasons for enrollment varies widely by individual. Informants did not express a general awareness or participation in current programs designed for older inmates, despite the Department of
Rehabilitation and Correction’s effort to provide such programming. Moreover, informants declare their opinions on what they deem the needs of older inmates’ to be, which are largely focused on health and medical concerns. Informants claim their needs are not being filled by the institution, and were asked to voice their suggestions as to what they foresee to be beneficial for older inmates and their adaptation to prison life. Suggestions centered on improving the health and medical care for older inmates, re-implementing previous successful aging-related programs, and most of all, the creation of an older inmate housing unit.

Implications for Research

In Chapter 1, I recognized older inmates as demonstrating the status of a “special population” in that the aging inmates present unique systemic demands, when compared to the general populations of inmates. My research has confirmed several of the previously mentioned challenges in the literature that are associated with the older inmate population. Such challenges include the institutional management of medical and mental health resources (Aday 1994; Chaiklin 1998; Lemieux et al. 2002; Moore & Unwin 2002; Morton 1991 & 2004; Ross & Richards 2003), availability of programs and services (Aday 1994; Lemieux et al. 2002; Moore & Unwin 2002; Morton 1991; Ross & Richards 2003), older inmate housing (Lemieux et al. 2002; Moore & Unwin 2002) and adjustment to life within prison (Aday 1994; Leahy 1998; Lemieux et al. 2002; Morton 1991 & 2004). I have also illustrated that the needs of older imprisoned women are unique, and are thereby different than those of their younger counterparts and those of older male prisoners (Codd 1996; Morton 2004; Ross & Richards 2003; Wahidin 2002).

In further relating my research to that of the broader literature discussed in Chapter 1 Introduction, the following subsections draw comparisons and contradictions from findings in the current research on the topics of social relationships and modes of adaptation. General information regarding the availability of programming for older inmates can be found in the section below, entitled Implications for Practice.

Social Relationships in Prison

Findings from the research of Giallombardo (1966), Heffernan (1972), and Ross & Richards (2003) report on the rather intimate formation of inmate social systems. These studies find that women tend to develop close relationships with other inmates in the form of “prison families,” which is significant part of social organization. My findings do not support the notion
of forming pseudo family units within the prison environment, and instead reveal that my informants demonstrated quite opposite ideals for social interactions. Informants tend to exhibit emotionally detached behavior with other inmates, and instead rely on the support of outside social networks.

Leahy’s (1997) research uncovers approaches to improving coping within one’s social context, which lists staying away from other inmates as a top priority. This is also noted in my findings, in that informants avoid similar interactions. This further demonstrates Leahy’s notion that there is little social solidarity amongst inmates in general. The social coping strategies of the category of Optimals, exemplify a high inner-motivation to pursue friendships, and to maintain strong and consistent family support. This finding is also reflected in the social relationships of almost all of my informants. For instance, they generally appear to be highly motivated to keep contact with outside friends and family, but also emphasize the distance kept between other inmates.

In referring to Kratcoski & Babb’s research (1990), I find that my research findings bear a strong resemblance to their descriptions of social interactions of older female inmates. Particularly, my research supports the findings that older females are less likely to participate in social interactions with other inmates, and that there exists a void between older and younger generations of inmates. Kratcoski & Babb discern that the root of the tension between the young and old as a manifestation of aggressive and violent behavior of the younger inmates. Similarly, my informants share this viewpoint, which creates what I speculate to be a cultural and generational gap between the older and younger inmates. It is clear then, that in more than one instance this observable gap is negatively impacting the social aspects of adaptation for older inmates. Unfortunately then, findings revealed about the social interactions of younger and older inmates somewhat contradict the research of Goetting (1983) and Rubenstein (1984), who describe older inmates as receiving prestige and respect from younger inmates, and the ability to establish behavioral norms and occupy leadership roles.

Aday’s (1994) research focuses on the male experience of aging in prison among those classified as new older offenders, which reveals contrasting findings in comparison to the experiences of my informants. It is clear that the new older offender has quite a different experience and perception of prison life, then that of my informants who have prison tenures measurable in decades. A striking difference between the two groups is that many of Aday’s new
older offenders’ express inside social engagement as a main coping mechanism, thereby relying on meaningful relationships with other older inmates for everyday support. This is not to say that the same phenomenon does not occur for longer-tenured older inmates; rather my findings suggest that my informants are less likely to interact with other inmates in general, and instead look for support in their outside social networks.

Furthermore, my informants relayed an overwhelming sense of tension between inside and outside social worlds, in which the most difficult aspect of adaptation to prison life was being separated from one’s family. Aday’s findings reveal a similar conclusion, in which his informants reported feeling tension and estrangement from family ties, which surfaced as the highest ranked problem in adjustment to life in prison. While this is just one similarity between either of the two studies, it is important to note the relevance of one’s prison tenure and it’s potential effects on social relationships and the development of adaptation strategies.

Adaptation in Prison

The findings in this research project support those of Lemieux et al. (2002), Rubenstein (1984), and Goetting (1983) who report that there are a number of individual and institutional variables that affect an older inmate’s adaptation to incarceration. Such variables were discussed throughout each of the four dimensions, and were represented in social, emotional, and physical contexts of adaptation. An example demonstrated in my findings, an individual level variable, such as health status, and an institutional variable, such as the physical layout of the facility, greatly impact one’s ability to physically maneuver and adapt to the prison environment. Additionally, without the ability to physically access certain areas of the prison, inmates may feel unable to participate in certain programs, which potentially creates further barriers to pursuing social interactions.

In reflection of Leahy’s (1997) research on strategies of adaptation of inmates, I noticed that there are several commonalities in our findings. For instance, Leahy reveals three distinct coping strategies of inmates, one group she calls *optimals*, who demonstrate distinct modes of adaptation that are similar to the majority of my informants. The utilization of the optimal perspective is perceived to be instrumental in adapting to prison life, in which inmates strive to be the best in terms of participating in prison life as preparation for release into society, follow the rules, are highly motivated, and have high self-esteem. While only 12.5% of Leahy’s sample population demonstrated this optimal outlook, almost all of my informants demonstrated a
similar coping strategy. However, it is difficult to draw vast comparisons of these populations since Leahy neglected to acknowledge age and sex in her sample description. Therefore it can only be inferred that her sample is made up of a general inmate population, which typically consists of younger males. Perhaps, it can then be speculated that when comparing the two groups of inmates, effects of compounded time and prison tenure are likely to initiate an optimal coping strategy.

In drawing on Wahidin’s (2002) study of older women’s psychological adaptation to prison and their perception of time while incarcerated, I recognize consistencies in the way that time is differentiated between outside or “real” time and prison time. Wahidin describes women’s experiences of time as being “caught” between inside and outside worlds, resulting in what she terms “carceral time.” This can be said about my findings as illustrated in several dimensions, in which informants voice grave tension between inside and outside worlds. There appears to be a balancing act that occurs in which one’s position and time spent in that position is in constant negotiation and refinement. Wahidin also uses Goffman’s (1961) notion of penitentiaries as total institutions, in which the harsh imposition of rules and regulations impact one’s perception of time inside and outside prison. Related to this, Goffman describes the adaptive process of colonization, in which an inmate of a total institution reduces the tension of either world by integrating the two. This parallel can be drawn to my findings and that of Wahidin, in that inmates create this technique of adaptation to strengthen the link between inside and outside lives. Thus, making acclimation to prison life exist more so in the familiar, which may promote ease of adaptation.

While Kratcoski & Babb’s (1990) study remarks on the differences in institutional adjustment between older male and female inmates, the authors conclude that adjustment “problems” are primarily related to the type of institutional structure in which they are housed, rather than to the gender of the inmates. Since my research does not compare older men and women, I cannot directly comment on the differences in gender; however, I think it is important to consider in future research, the element of gender in adaptation. Perhaps there are gender-linked experiences that are different (or similar) for men and women as they age and adjust to prison life. For instance, the perception and experience of mentoring and parenting roles that some older inmates establish with younger inmates should be further explored.
In Chapter 1, I refer to the broad, encompassing perspective of the life-course, which recognizes that human lives are framed by historical time and are shaped by the unique social and cultural conditions that exist during those times (Settersten 2003). Likewise, we view an individual’s existence as a cumulative product of one’s transitions through life with respect to the continuities, changes, and impacts from earlier years. In light of Elder’s (1996) four themes of the life-course, it is clear that there are many influential sources throughout life that may impact an older women’s adaptation to prison life. Although there are many facets of this process to consider, my findings reveal two major areas that have shaped the adaptation strategies of my informants: health status and social networks.

It is widely known that health status is linked to education level and socioeconomic status, which influences certain lifestyle choices and access to medical care/health insurance over the course of one’s life. It can then be speculated that my informants with reportedly good health status were more likely to have a high level of educational attainment and stable employment and, thus good health throughout their lives. Similarly, informants that maintained strong social support from outside networks have most likely sustained these relationships throughout their lives. Health and social status come together to impact an informant’s ability to access and participate in their social worlds. Maintaining connections to the outside are especially important, which give informants a sense of inclusiveness in the familial experiences of births, weddings, and funerals, to which informant’s are denied access. These are events and rituals that are fundamental to marking age and maturation throughout one’s life, which impact the perception of one’s aging process. Taken altogether, it can then be speculated that good health and reliable social networks throughout one’s lifetime positively impact adaptation to prison life.

As you will recall in the theoretical perspectives section, I explain the main tenets of socioemotional selectivity theory as described by Carstensen et al. (1999), which accounts for lifespan changes in human social networks and the motivations that underlie those changes. Simply stated, this theory relays that with increasing age, people typically experience a narrowing and strengthening of their social networks and a perception of time as limited. In applying this notion to the social lives of my informants as demonstrated in Dimension Two: Interpersonal Relationships, I can also see that it is depth rather than breadth that characterizes their intimate contacts. In addition, there is a sense of withdrawal from other inmates, who are
for the most part younger, as they steer away from potentially dangerous or troublesome situations. As discussed in Dimension Three: The Relevance of Age In Adaptation, this results in the adoption of a more even, go-with-the-flow attitude, which plays a vital role in older women’s adaptation to prison life.

In drawing a connection of my findings to that of a more direct test of socioemotional selectivity theory on older prison inmates, as demonstrated by Bond, Thompson & Malloy (2005), I find fruitful lines of comparison. Bond et al. (2005) empirically tested this theory with inmate and non-inmate populations, with questionnaires given to 256 participants who were and were not incarcerated, between the ages of 18 and 84. Bond et al. (2005) discovered that older inmates, much like older non-inmates, have few peripheral partners, are buffered from the wider population of prisoners, and interact within a small group of very close partners. Moreover, Bond et al. (2005) found that while older inmates are not completely isolated, they maintain fewer network partners as age increases, much like their non-incarcerated counterparts. Finally, both studies reveal the establishment of smaller, more intimate, social networks that increase in emotional value for the older inmate, which is comparable to the older non-incarcerated adult. My research findings are consistent with Bond et al. (2005) in describing the limited social interactions and narrowing of social networks of older incarcerated adults in later life.

Finally, in Chapter 1, I discuss Gubrium’s socio-environmental theory of aging, which posits that people feel most satisfied with themselves and their living conditions when there is a congruency between social expectations or activity norms and personal capabilities, referred to as one’s activity resources (Gubrium 1972). This theory can be used to examine the housing situation of older female inmates. My findings show that almost all of my informants convey a sense of frustration with their current living arrangement. It is clear that some informants have relatively lower activity resources, such as heath concerns and low inside social support, which do not comfortably coincide with that of the high activity norms of the environment made up of young disrespectful inmates. In applying Gubrium’s theory to this scenario there is an apparent inconsistency in personal and environmental expectations, which understandably leads to life dissatisfaction and low morale.

Related to this, in Dimension Four: Programming for an Aging Prison Population, I compare and contrast age-integrated and age-segregated environments, in relation to informants’ requests and preferences for an older inmate housing unit. As I demonstrated in my findings,
there are many important factors to consider when making suggestions for the creation of an age-
segregated unit. Recommending the same environment for all older inmates is difficult without 
referencing the interplay of one’s activity resources, activity norms, personal preferences, and 
the rules and regulations of their environment. Therefore, I would recommend creating a unit for 
older inmates with a voluntary participation policy. This would satisfy those who want to 
participate, without forcing those who do not wish to participate in an age-segregated unit. 
Finally, by allowing older inmates to maintain some choice and control over their living 
arrangement, they are more likely feel a sense of satisfaction in their lives, which thus influences 
and eases their adaptation to prison.

Implications for Practice

In light of the information gathered from interviews with older incarcerated women on 
their adaptation to prison life, I see there are several implications that should be considered for 
those directly working with older inmates. Such topics I will address are medical and health 
needs, aging-related programming, and housing for older inmates, all of which have proved to be 
influential to adaptation. Taken together, these also have important implications for inmate re-
entry into the community and adaptation to life outside of prison.

My findings have illustrated that maintaining a healthy lifestyle and accessing medical 
care, from the perspectives of older women, is met with many complications—most of which 
focus on the lack of available nutritious food and the inadequacies and slow response times of 
medical attention. It seems apparent that these challenges are linked to the institution’s 
population overcrowding, which can ultimately limit the capacity of the institution, particularly 
in their ability to provide care to all inmates on a timely basis.

According to my informants, there is an expressed concern in the lack of aging-related 
programming available to older inmates. As I have demonstrated in dimension four, there are a 
number of programs available to older inmates. However, my findings reveal that the current 
programming focuses more on the needs of the general inmate population, which is composed of 
younger “short-timers” who are nearing parole. Therefore, I find it imperative that institutions 
consider re-implementing programs with an aging-related focus that have shown to have a 
successful participation rate.

Additionally, my findings reveal that there are serious issues to consider related to 
housing older inmates. A major concern for older inmates is being housed with younger inmates,
who are often violent and troublesome. Here there is more than a clash in lifestyle, there are apparent differences in generations and cultures, which results in a blatant disrespect of older inmates by younger ones. In reflection of my findings, I see that housing for older inmates is connected to other aspects of prison life, and is therefore an important and influential component of adaptation. For instance, who an inmate is housed with effects social interactions and relationships, and where an inmate lives within the facility impacts how far one must travel to work, Central Food Services, and other program areas.

Following through on the suggestion to create an age-segregated housing unit for older inmates, I find, to be foremost in the alleviation of the above concerns. Implementing a voluntarily based housing unit exclusive to older females would profoundly impact their social lives, health and medical needs and participation in programming. Allowing inmates the choice to be housed with other older inmates may contribute to a sense of collective reciprocity, which helps in lessening the fear and frustration associated with younger inmates. Since many older inmates exhibit similar lifestyles, preference similar programs, and utilize similar goods and services, age-segregated housing would allow the institution to deliver these services more effectively and efficiently in terms of time, participation, and cost. Finally, in offering an age-segregated environment, older inmates are more likely to be satisfied with their living arrangement, which eases overall adaptation.

Lastly, I would like to consider the role the above issues play in an inmates’ life regarding re-entry into the community, which is based purely on speculation of my findings. Certainly if meeting the health and medical needs of older inmates is ranked highly inside prison, I would speculate that upon release, older adults may be more apt to continue healthy lifestyles and seek medical attention when needed. This of course is dependent upon the particular situation of the older adult and what medical and financial resources she has access to. Furthermore, programming that seeks an aging focus may help the older inmate to understand and prepare for aging-related changes that are relevant to life inside and outside prison. Taken together, these relatively minor alterations have the ability to positively influence an older inmates’ adaptation—currently and upon release into the community.

Methodological Issues

Researchers interested in further exploring the areas of adaptation of older inmates might learn from a few of the methodological issues in this study, which include complications in
gaining access to the prison and limitations in sample recruitment, confidentiality, and sample size.

Gaining access to the institution where the interviews took place was not an easy accomplishment. In fact, it was over three months before I was granted permission to conduct my research, which—in retrospect—comes as no surprise, given that prisons are highly organized, secure compounds that operate under strict bureaucratic rule. Characteristics of flexibility and patience are crucial in this type of research setting, particularly in the minimal amount of control maintained by the researcher. Important steps throughout the research process were more or less influenced or dominated by the institution itself, such as the research location, strategies of recruitment, and confidentiality. These procedures, however, are not blindly or universally applied; for the institution exercises site-specific expertise presumably founded in the experience gained from previous research projects.

With only 221 women who fit the sample criteria, and only three institutions that house older female offenders in the state of Ohio, I was limited in the locations in which I would find my study population. After the location was determined and contacts made, I was instructed as to how the recruitment strategy would proceed. The institution was given three criteria for sampling (variance in age, race and prison tenure), upon which women were chosen by administrative staff and given a brief description of my study. While this procedure resulted in 11 incredibly interesting interviews, I am unsure as to how exactly these particular women were initially chosen. Certainly then, without control over the recruitment strategy, it is a limitation in my research, and one in which I have no further information.

Women who expressed an interest in the project were summoned to meet with me, to be given further details. Upon which, they were required to sign a consent form, provided by the institution, stating that they had chosen or declined to participate, which may present issues in confidentiality. While I guaranteed confidentiality in my informed consent form, so too did the institution’s form, despite the record of their direct choice to participate. Therefore, this too is a limitation in that it can only be assumed that confidentiality was granted, and that no one felt pressure to accept or decline participation. Related to this, is ensuring the inmate that declining to participate will not bring any penalty or loss of benefits, which again is not something that the researcher, as an outsider, has full control over.
Lastly, a limitation in this study to consider is that of the small sample size of 11 interviewees. While the interviews were in-depth, lasting on average of two hours, the goal of 10 to 12 interviews was set as an appropriate number for a qualitative master’s thesis. Of course without the limitations in time and finances, I would have liked to conduct many more interviews. I must remind the reader that although the n is small in this research, it is not my aim to draw vast generalizations or patterns from my informants’ experiences. Rather, as a goal true to qualitative research, I sought to explore and describe the lives of older incarcerated women, and contribute to a deeper understanding of adaptation for an ignored segment of our aging population.

*Recommendations for Future Research*

In recommending directions for future research, I would suggest conducting a larger number of interviews, interview inmates more than once, and vary the types of locations. Since my sample size was small, certainly increasing the number of interviews would further expand the knowledge on this population. Similarly, rather than having one-time interviews, I would recommend meeting with women a number of times, which would enable the researcher to establish rapport. With interviews lasting an average of two hours, there were a number of interruptions that I think could be avoided if interviews were shorter and were spaced out over time. For example, inmate population counts and staff schedules often disrupted interviews, which meant that the inmate was rescheduled a return appointment to complete the interview, a somewhat complicated and timely process. Lastly, I think interviewing older women at pre-release centers as well as those who have been released into the community would draw on diverse experiences and insights, thus further contributing to a deeper understanding of adaptation for older incarcerated women.

*Conclusion*

In conclusion, it is evident that there are several factors that impact older women’s adaptation to prison life, a few of which are explored through four dimensions in the current research project. Findings in *Dimension One: Day-to-Day Life* illustrate that while women’s lives remain regimented, they take pride in maintaining even the smallest amount of control over how they spend their time. This is speculated to positively contribute to one’s perception of autonomy and life satisfaction, which thus eases adaptation to prison life. In *Dimension Two: Interpersonal Relationships* informants convey a sense of emotional detachment from other
inmates, often resulting in feelings of withdrawal and distrust, particularly with younger inmates. For many informants, maintaining meaningful outside social ties is a top priority, and is clearly linked to their ability to adapt to the harsh realities of prison life. In *Dimension Three: The Relevance of Age In Adaptation*, informants illustrate the importance in maintaining a positive attitude and self-concept, which aides in the evolution of personal adaptive techniques. Informants openly expose their personal experiences and associations regarding their awareness of old age in prison, thereby revealing insights into how their age is often perceived as an advantage and a disadvantage. Lastly, *Dimension Four: Programming for an Aging Prison Population* investigates available programming for older inmates in Ohio, which appears to be underutilized by my informants. Informants relay that health and medical care needs are not being fulfilled by the institution and offer suggestions as to what they foresee to be beneficial for older inmates and their adaptation to prison life.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

My name is Leah Janssen and I am a second year graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Gerontology at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Gerontology is the study of aging. I am currently working on my Master’s in Gerontological Studies, in which I am working on a research project on older female prisoners over the age of 50.

The purpose of this study is to find out what it is like to be an older female prisoner. In particular, I will ask you about some of your day-to-day activities, personal relationships, and issues that are important to you in your life. Also, I will ask about whether and how being older affects your current life.

The interviews will occur one-on-one with the researcher, and will last between one and half hours (at the most).

Although there is no physical risk in taking part in this research, you may experience a slight risk of emotional discomfort in talking about your life in prison. However, as a voluntary participant, you have the right to stop or end the interview at anytime, and to refuse to answer any question, without having to explain yourself. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Declining to participate will not bring you any penalty or loss of benefits.

Your participation will help to add to what is known about what prison life is like for older female inmates. Also, by taking part in this research, you may benefit personally from having a chance to talk about and reflect on your life. You will also add to general knowledge of aging in prison, especially for older women.

All of the information discussed in the interviews will be kept strictly confidential. NO ONE but the researcher and her academic supervisor will have access to the interviews. Your real name will not be used with any of the information given. Instead a “fictional” name or number will be used to identify you. The interview notes, audiotapes, and transcripts of interviews will be kept in the researcher’s locked office cabinet, allowing access only to the researcher and her academic supervisor.

Should you have any questions regarding this research project please contact Leah Janssen, at (513) 255-1885. My mailing address is Department of Sociology and Gerontology, Miami University, 396 Upham Hall, Oxford, OH 45056. I will be conducing this research project under the guidance of Dr. Christopher Wellin, a faculty member in the Department of Sociology & Gerontology, and Research Fellow at the Scripps Gerontology Center. If you would like to contact Dr. Wellin, his office phone number is (513) 529-1592, and his mailing address is Department of Sociology & Gerontology, Miami University, 374 Upham Hall, Oxford, OH 45056.
For more general questions about the rights of research subjects should be directed to the Office of Advancement of Research and Scholarship at Miami University, (513) 529-3734 or humansubjects@muohio.edu.

Please note that your signature indicates that you have read and understood all of the information within this consent form, and that all of your questions have been adequately answered. Your signature indicates your willingness to participate in this study. I appreciate your willingness to do so.

__________________________________________________________________________  __________
Signature of Participant                                          Date

_______    Placing my initials on this line indicates my willingness to have my interview audio-taped.
Appendix B: Background Information Sheet

#: ______

Race/Ethnicity:___________________________________

Date of Birth:     _ _ / _ _/_ _ _ _ OR Age: ___________

Place of Birth:  _____________________________________________

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Less than 8th grade
8th-11th grade
Graduate High School
Some College

4-year college degree
Graduate/professional degree
Other (please specify):

Do you live around others your age? Younger? Older? Both?

______________________________________________________________________________

Age at first incarceration: _______________

About how much of your life have you lived or spent time in prison?

______________________________________________________________________________

About how long have you been at this location?

______________________________________________________________________________

In relation to your health, how do you feel today?

______________________________________________________________________________

Do you have any physical or psychological health conditions or problems? If so, please list:

______________________________________________________________________________
Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Day-to-Day Life

1. Describe a typical day for me here.
   Probes:
   What are the most difficult parts of your routine?
   What is your favorite part of the day?
   What are some of the things that make you feel good and positive in your present life? Describe what makes for a good day.
   In contrast, when you are feeling low or negative, what tends to create those feelings?

Interpersonal Relationships

2. How, if at all, have your relations with others changed, as you’ve gotten older—inside and outside the prison?
3. Think of your closest friends here, about how old are they? Older? Younger? Both?
   Probes:
   When you feel badly or need support, to what, or to whom, do you turn for comfort?
   What kinds of contact do you have with people on the outside? (Such as, visits, phone calls, or written correspondence).
   How important are those relationships to you, and why?

Relevance of Age In Adaptation

4. At what age are people considered “old” here? Do you feel old? In what ways do you feel old? In what ways do you not feel old?
   Probes:
   Tell me what times/places/situations you are especially aware of your age?
   Are these in good/positive or bad/negative ways?
   Or, does age not seem relevant to your everyday life here?
   What do you see as advantages, for a person in prison, of being older? (These advantages may be the result of being treated differently, or they may have to do with wisdom or life experience you have)

5. Adaptation here must be difficult. What are some of your ways of adapting? And how, if at all, have they changed, as you’ve gotten older?
   Probes:
   Are these adaptations due to your experience and age, or is this because of your time/tenure spent in prison?
   What are the hardest parts to adapt to?
Programming for an Aging Prison Population

6. Please tell me about the programs that are available here for older women (specific names of programs)? How well do you think this prison deals with the concerns and needs of aging and older prisoners?

Probes:
Have you participated in these programs? If so, which ones and why?
Are there programs available here that you perceive to be helpful/meaningful/interesting in your daily life?
If so, what do you enjoy most about them?
Do you benefit from them? How?
In your view, what do you think some of the problems that older female inmates face?
How well do you think these programs meet the needs of older inmates?

7. What are some of the specific needs of older women in prison that we should know about?
Probes:
What other changes would you suggest, for addressing the needs of older people in prisons?

Closing Question:
Is there anything else you would like to add?