

The Pains of Imprisonment and Contemporary Prisoner Culture in Canada

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Laura McKendy¹
and Rosemary Ricciardelli¹

Abstract

Drawing on interviews conducted with former federal and provincial prisoners in Ontario, Canada, we consider how the unique social conditions in these two institutional contexts shape interpersonal dynamics and the prisoner experience. Despite notable differences in federal versus provincial prisoner culture, we suggest that prisoners in both contexts lived in environments marked by uncertainties and risk; in response, they tended to adapt to a highly individualistic orientation toward doing time. Based on our analysis, we complicate the conceptualization of prisoner culture as primarily serving an adaptive function, suggesting the prison social climate may actually drive the most salient pains of imprisonment.

Keywords

prison culture, pains of imprisonment, prisoner experiences, comparative prison research, carceral habitus

¹Memorial University, St. John's, NL, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Rosemary Ricciardelli, Sociology Department, Memorial University, AA 4066 HSS, 230 Elizabeth Ave., St. John's, NL, A1E 4L6, Canada.
Email: r Ricciardell@mun.ca

Introduction

Well over half a century ago, prison scholars drew attention to the influence of a “prison society” in fundamentally shaping prisoners’ experiences of incarceration (Clemmer, 1940; Goffman, 1961b; Sykes & Messinger, 1960). The prison social world continues to encompass an array of norms that govern daily living; each norm structured around a distinct set of values and beliefs that, in turn, became a key focus of early penal scholarship (see for select examples: Akers et al., 1977; McCorkle et al., 1995). A central insight about prison living, arguably emerging from this work, is that prisoners respond to the fundamental deprivations of prison life through collective modes of adaptation (Clemmer, 1940; McCorkle et al., 1995; Sykes, 1958). In other words, given the limited set of tools and resources available, prisoners work together to make incarceration *less* painful than it might otherwise be through creative strategies of adaptation and/or resistance. The prison social world served the purpose, albeit unofficial, of buffering the psychological harms of imprisonment, primarily by providing prisoners with a sense of structure, social identities, as well as common meanings and goals; in essence, a society of their own.

Given that carceral realities are shaped both by the events and workings in greater society (Crewe, 2009; Irwin & Cressey, 1977), as well as the conditions of prison life (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958), prison research is needed, as Crewe (2015) argues, to shed light on such ‘blind spots’ of penal theory and to provide insights on the lived realities of incarceration within a particular time and place. Within the Canadian context, key historical developments affecting all correctional systems (e.g., the federal governed by Correctional Services Canada, and the 13 provincial and territorial systems) include changes in: sentencing practices; prison population management strategies, and infrastructural changes and prison closures (Office of the Auditor General, 2014; Ricciardelli & Moir, 2013). Moreover, Canadian federal prisons, which hold prisoners serving sentences of two years or more (Correctional Service Canada, 2016), witnessed changes in prisoner demographics. Such changes include more racialized prisoners (Gottschall, 2012), Indigenous and women prisoners (Sapers, 2015), older prisoners (Beaudette & Stewart, 2014; Greiner & Allenby, 2010), and prisoners serving life and indeterminate sentences (Ruddell et al., 2010). Population-specific approaches to correctional interventions, such as culturally-sensitive programming for federal Indigenous prisoners (Derksen et al., 2017) have emerged. In addition, new federal policies regarding the use of segregation, placement of transgender prisoners, and prison needle exchange have been and continue to be introduced (CSC, 2018a; Motiuk &

Hayden, 2016). Collectively, these varied developments shape the landscape of federal incarceration, undoubtedly holding implications for prisoner experiences and prisoner culture.

Developments have also unfolded in the provincial and territorial correctional systems in Canada, which have jurisdiction over prisoners serving less than two year sentences, as well as those remanded to custody to await court proceedings. Contrary to historical trends, remand prisoners have come to account for the majority of the provincial and territorial prisoner population (Deshman & Myers, 2014; Malakieh, 2018). Moreover, many provincial and territorial prisoners serve their sentence, partially or completely, by way of banked remand credit (Deshman & Myers, 2014), a trend that raises implications for the presumption of innocence principle (Deshman & Myers, 2014; Myers, 2016) and the logic of custodial sentencing within the provincial/territorial correctional system. To elaborate, detention centres are typically designed as holding facilities, thus tend to offer little in the way of correctional programming or interventions in comparison to the federal system. Furthermore, conditions are often described as bleak and bare, marked by overcrowding, extended periods of cell confinement, minimal medical and mental health services, and few opportunities for mental and physical stimulation (Deshman & Myers, 2014).

While trends shaping the context of federal and provincial/territorial incarceration in Canada are well-documented, the informal social dynamics shaping prison experiences remain largely under-theorized. As early prison scholars emphasized, the more informal components of incarceration cannot be gleaned from official records; rather, it is at the level of lived experience that carceral realities become known. A key contemporary question, then, is how the “prison society” has changed in the context of modern penal environments. Does, as Sykes (1958) observed, the prison society continue to play a key role in softening the impact of prison deprivations? Furthermore, to what extent does immersion in prison culture continue to undermine the official aims of intervention, as Clemmer (1940) and Goffman (1961a) observed, by entrenching the “inmate” identity? Drawing on our research conducted with provincial and federal former prisoners in Canada, we explore the contemporary and locally-specific nuances of prison culture to discern the implications for prison experiences. We focus on similarities and differences in the social landscapes of federal and provincial carceral environments, while also analyzing common themes in modes of adaptation. In particular, we describe the ‘carceral habitus’ (Caputo-Levine, 2013) that emerges in both contexts to navigate and respond to various types of uncertainty and risk.

Prison Culture in the Western World: Classic Scholarship

Sykes (1958), in his ethnographic study of a maximum security prison in New Jersey, was concerned with understanding the pains of modern imprisonment, as well as the collective ways prisoners responded to them. Of the position that prisons could be “just as painful as the physical maltreatment which they have replaced” (Sykes, 1958, p. 64), Sykes detailed five central “pains of imprisonment,” also referred to as “deprivations” or “frustrations.” These pains included the losses of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. In Sykes’ assessment, while punishment to the body was largely removed in the modern prison, the psychological pains of imprisonment amounted to a “destruction of the psyche” which rendered prisons potentially “just as painful” as historical modes of corporeal punishment (Sykes, 1958, p. 64). The psychological scars of incarceration are often less visible than the embodied scars of physical punishment, or even the physical wear of prison on the body (Moran, 2012); resultantly, the psychological pains of imprisonment are often less easily observed by the outside eye.

Sykes argued that prisoners adapted to imprisonment through the development and maintenance of a prison social system that served to lessen the associated pains. The informal rules guiding prisoner culture – largely oriented around collective prisoner interests and against institutional power – created a certain degree of order, while also enabling the formation of a collective prisoner identity. Sykes viewed the code as enabling less disorder and violence than would otherwise exist without it (Ricciardelli, 2014a; Ricciardelli, 2014b), as it provided a certain degree of structure and predictability in the social environment. Thus enforcing the code – even through force – was key to maintaining order. Solidarity born from the prisoner code had both symbolic and practical impacts. Symbolically the code provided prisoners with a social identity and a relative degree of structure, and practically it served institutional objectives insofar as qualities of predictability and order assisted with managerial goals.

Clemmer (1940), who also studied the social world of male prisoners in the U.S., noted that prisoners became socialized to prison culture through the process of “prisonization,” that is, “the taking on in greater or less degree of the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary” (p. 222). Through prisonization, individuals took on the prisoner identity, adhering to and reproducing the social structures of prison life. Like Sykes, Clemmer emphasized how processes of prisonization were, paradoxically, antithetical to formal correctional goals; “most men in penitentiaries have

no chance of being salvaged if they become prisonized to any appreciable extent” (Clemmer, 1940, p. 313). Clemmer therefore also showed that formal disciplinary and corrective measures at the institutional level were paralleled by a structure of informal social dynamics that emerged at the prisoner level, the latter having arguably equal if not greater impacts on the prison experience and the effects of imprisonment.

Subsequent classic authors, including Irwin and Cressey (1962) and Jacobs (1977), agreed that a prison society emerged in closed-custody institutions; however, they disagreed about its cultural basis. Rather than viewing prison culture as reflective of and responsive to the deprivations of prison life (a view dubbed the *deprivation* perspective), they viewed it as tied to subcultures with roots outside the prison (a view dubbed the *importation* perspective). Illustrating the latter position, Irwin and Cressey (1962) argued that prison culture was reflective of “criminal sub-cultures” that were not necessarily prison-specific (i.e., that also exist in society). Jacobs (1977), for instance, noted that ethnic-based gangs with a broader social presence fundamentally shaped prisoner society.

Prisoner Culture in Contemporary Contexts

Since these early works, countless developments have unfolded both in and outside of the prison that have shaped the dynamics of prison culture (Crewe, 2009, 2011; Ricciardelli, 2014b). Carceral realities may evolve alongside broader social factors, such as legislative and/or political changes, yet the way in which the internal dynamics of the prison maneuver may be unexpected or unpredicted, leaving room for latent, either unintended or unknown, effects within the institutional culture. Understanding the nature of prison culture, therefore, requires examining the perspectives and experiences of those who have lived it.

Several authors have commented on a lack of research examining the prison social world (e.g., Simon, 2000), however, exceptions do exist. In the U.K., Crewe has shown repeatedly how prison culture has evolved alongside policy changes that affect the nature of prison life (Crewe, 2007, 2009, 2011). Developments, including improved material comfort, changing prisoner characteristics, and changes in prison administration and management models, have corresponded with fundamental changes in the nature of prisoner culture. At the level of material comfort, Crewe argues that improvements in the quality of prison conditions “reduced the confrontational and depriving nature of prison life” (2013: 180). In-cell entertainment, regular access to phones, visits and showers, and improvement in prisoners’ rights, soften the harshness of prison life and, correspondingly, the need for

collective modes of adaptation. Simultaneously, the rise of hard drug use in prison weakens prisoner solidarity by breeding opportunities for violence due to inter-prisoner debt and informing; further spurring mistrust among prisoners.

Against this backdrop, Crewe (2007) notes that an administrative system that encourages prisoners to comply with institutional objectives to advance their own interests has emerged. In the U.K., policy reforms in the 1990s, including the development of the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme, have promoted a regime of “self-government and responsabilization” (Crewe, 2007, p. 259). In practice, this individualized focus undermines adherence to the traditional prisoner code. Indeed, Crewe observes that violations of the traditional code (e.g. snitching or informing) have grown quite common. In-group solidarity and opposition to the system, tenets of classic prison culture, no longer appear to shape prisoners’ orientations. Instead a “diluted version” of the code broadly guides behaviour - “prisoners commented consistently that there had been a decline in the importance and intensity of a shared value system of solidarity, mutual aid, and opposition to prison staff” (Crewe 2013, p. 180). A focus on one’s own progress may foster greater tolerance among prisoners, given that condemnation of those who have violated the code (e.g. snitches) or exist outside of it (e.g. sex offenders) may be muted by efforts to “stay out of trouble.” Variation in prisoners’ orientations, however, remains, illustrating how institutional culture varies not only by institution, but also within them.

Less robust research exists on the nature and experiences of prisoner culture within distinct types of institutions in Canada. Recent Canadian research shows, consistent with Crewe (2013), that administrative control within the institutions vary across prisons of different levels of security and impact prisoner-on-prison violence (Ricciardelli, 2014a; Ricciardelli & Sit, 2016). Informal and formal prison norms also shape institutional culture such that formal rules tend to contradict with informal norms of governance, ultimately leaving prisoners vulnerable no matter the course of action taken (Maier & Ricciardelli, 2018). These studies, oriented toward federal experiences of incarceration, leave unclear how various social and administrative changes have influenced prisoner dynamics in different institutions, particularly in provincial or territorial institutions compared to federal.

Current Study

In Canada, and internationally, variations and similarities in prison culture remain understudied across systems of imprisonment; we are unaware of any comparative studies to date. More generally, the differences between

types of penal institutions become obscured in prison scholarship, which tends to base analysis on sentenced institutions (Griffin, 2006; Irwin, 1985; Walker, 2014; Welch, 1999). Yet, there are unique qualities tied to distinct systems of incarceration that create different social backdrops for prisoner experiences. In Canada, a key distinction is between federal and provincial systems of incarceration. While undoubtedly bearing similarities, such systems are marked by considerable differences when it comes to factors such as population dynamics, resources and amenities, opportunities for structured activities, and the legal status of prisoners. In the current research, we explore how social conditions in these distinct settings affect prisoner dynamics, while considering similarities in the 'carceral habitus' (Caputo-Levine, 2013) that prisoners adapt to navigate and respond to the varied risks present in their environment.

Method

The data for this analysis emerged from two separate studies that examined the experiences of incarceration from the point of view of male former prisoners. One study focused on federal former prisoners ($n = 56$), and the other on provincial former prisoners ($n = 17$). In the federal former-prisoner sample, interviewees' ages ranged from 19 to 58 years (mean of 37 years old), while provincial former prisoners were between their early twenties and late 50 s. Participants in both studies had all served time in the province of Ontario and were recruited in the community.

Among the federal sample, 75% of participants had also experienced provincial incarceration outside of remand. Among the provincial sample, most had done more than one provincial stint as either a remand or sentenced prisoner in an institution designed for maximum security capacity. Qualitative interviews were conducted with participants, informed by an interviewing guide in the federal study, and a narrative-style interviewing approach (Spector-Mersel, 2010) in the provincial study. By granting participants significant discretion over the themes and events and discussed, these interview styles allowed the researchers to gain insight into subjective understandings of incarceration and issues of salience in prisoners' accounts.

Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed using a semi-grounded and constructed approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). More specifically, interview transcripts were coded for key themes within and across cases, with the bracketing of particularities in individual/unique experiences (selective coding). Both authors participated in the thematic coding within their central datasets, and agreement across authors' interpretations underpins the data presented in this article. In all data

presented, the words of the participants, their vernacular and word choice remained unchanged. However, for flow, readability, and comprehension, grammar is edited when necessary. Participants' identities are protected using pseudonyms, and identifying information was excluded where necessary.

For the present analysis, we narrowed in on data related to male prisoner culture in federal and provincial settings, critically examining how articulations varied or were similar across samples. Reflecting on former prisoners' experiences, we explore how the social conditions in federal and provincial settings influenced the interpersonal dynamics among prisoners and, resultantly, mediated experiences of incarceration. Specifically, we examine prisoner experiences of social uncertainty and diverse institutional conditions, suggesting that factors related to the institutional environment devise prison culture and, in both contexts, impede the formation of social bonds between prisoners. We show how social conditions may orient prisoners against each other, to a greater or lesser degree, in different institutions.

Results: Social Dynamics and Prisoner Culture in Provincial and Federal Institutions—Social Uncertainty

Characteristics of social uncertainty relate to the array of uncertainties that may exist around one's present and future social circumstances. We suggest social uncertainties may look different for provincial versus federal prisoners, largely due to differences in population dynamics, conditions of confinement, and legal and case circumstances. Although they encounter many distinct types of social insecurities, prisoners in both contexts may face some degree of "ontological uncertainty" (Crewe, 2011), unable to truly grasp the realities of their current and/or future situation.

In the provincial context, the notion of social uncertainty is evident in the social circumstances that characterize conditions in detention centres, which tend to be marked by high rates of turnover due to frequent admissions, discharges, and transfers. The continued changing environment means it is impossible for prisoners to grasp the social nuances of their environment and, hence, the risks or tensions that may be present:

Even if you keep going in and out, in and out, it's still nerve-wracking 'cause you never know what's gonna happen. New day, new group of people (provincial, Ethan).

Consistent with Ethan's experience, Bobby, a former federal prisoner, described social uncertainty when contrasting conditions in provincial

versus federal settings. As he explains, familiarity with one's immediate social environment is impossible insofar as cell mates are constantly changing:

[Provincial has] guys that are coming in off the street, [it's] always changing over, it changes over regularly. I would be in the same cell for months at a time. And, I would go through a new cell mate every couple of weeks..., a guy comes in, he's charged, waits for bail, or he gets out or he pleads so he can get over to sentence side, or change over... [so] new guys would come in and there would be a power struggle, or guys would come in who are crack users or hard junkies or whatever, and they're a mess; they smell or they're sick (federal, Bobby).

Here, participants describe the uncertainties tied to population transiency in the provincial setting and the resulting feeling that the risks embedded in one's environment are perpetually unknown. Such conditions place prisoners in a continual state of perceived social, emotional, and physical insecurity, all states of being that are only intensified by institutional conditions.

Among men in the provincial sample, legal vulnerabilities compounded stress. More specifically, the legal uncertainty and unknown futures that characterize the situation of remand prisoners contributes to an overall atmosphere of tension and emotionality. Because provincial institutions serve as the entry point into the Canadian correctional system, those in detentions centres may be in the early stages of their legal cases, having just been arrested, perhaps coping with the stress of the events that led to their detainment, and preparing for trial. Remand prisoners, who have yet to be tried and/or sentenced, also face a sense of ontological uncertainty insofar as they do not yet know the outcome of their case or how long they will be incarcerated. This uncertainty can become a fundamental pain of imprisonment for those on remand.¹ Time on remand, then, is a 'waiting game'; individuals are left stagnate, unable to practically or mentally prepare for their future. The stress of this uncertainty is aggravated by the lack of meaningful ways to pass time, which breeds greater frustration and boredom. Cody, from the provincial sample, explains: "it's very stressful and hard on anyone, like they're going to be stressed out wondering when they are going to get out and what's going to happen to them when they're there."

To a certain extent, social unfamiliarity is less pronounced in many federal institutions, where prisoners are sentenced and spend longer periods incarcerated. While transiency is not fully removed, prisoners may be in a better position to understand and respond to the risks presented in the social environment, better understanding, for example, the personalities and

biographies of those with whom they live. Therefore, while the threat of violence does not disappear (particularly in higher security settings), prisoners are better equipped, at the level of social knowledge, to mitigate personal risk. Furthermore, federal prisoners typically have greater opportunities to structure their time and days (e.g. by taking part in work, programming and leisure activities), allowing them to partially ease the stress spurred by boredom that characterizes the provincial experience.

For federal prisoners, uncertainties and stressors vary across the different stages of one's sentence and across different institutional settings. For example, in maximum security institutions, prisoners tend to experience stress as they attempt to optimize limited time out of cell, trying to find ways to use a phone, shower, or exercise all within an hour (Ricciardelli & Sit, 2016). The risk of violence may also be greater in higher security settings, partially due to the concentrated presence of prisoners who have been deemed to have higher security risks and/or institutional adjustment needs (CSC, 2018b). Comparatively, those in minimum security institutions typically have demonstrated positive institutional adjustment and are designated as having lower security risks. In an effort to maintain their minimum security status, which brings with it greater freedom and opportunities, minimum security prisoners are motivated to "stay under the radar." In such settings, stresses tend to be oriented around learning to live alongside persons whose offences are perceived as deplorable and coming to terms with the impacts of one's crime.

In general, a major concern among federal prisoners, which may cut across institutional settings, relates to release potentiality and, for those closer to release, post-release plans and prospects. Federal prisoners serving determinate sentences are, in most cases, legally required to be released after serving two-thirds of their sentence. For such prisoners, statutory release dates are known and may be anticipated with mixed emotions, as prisoners may sense excitement for release, yet apprehension about their preparedness and/or prospects. As one participant commented: "You are waiting for your stat [statutory release] and you're waiting for your warrant, you're waiting to get parole, I mean...are you crazy? You're not ready to do anything" (federal, Joey).

In contrast to statutory release, day and full parole releases may be granted by the Parole Board of Canada when a prisoner meets their eligibility dates.² Federal prisoners may operate in a precarious position as they approach their parole eligibility dates, unsure of the certainty of their release. They may be fearful that their eligibility may be compromised by institutional happenings, such as another prisoner sabotaging their case for release (e.g. by engaging them in an incident), or being confronted with institutional charges, for

which they must take responsibility. Smith, a former federal prisoner, maintained he did not commit the institutional charge of which he was convicted, yet felt compelled to take responsibility: “you can’t tell your Parole Officer ‘I’m not guilty.’ If you tell them that, they don’t give you parole... they send you to medium security to do the denial program”.

In addition to the stress of qualifying for release, like Smith described, federal prisoners approaching release eligibility dates face the anticipated stresses associated with reintegration. Given they have likely been incarcerated longer than provincial releasees, federal prisoners may be more disconnected from their pre-incarceration lives and/or the current dynamics (social, technological, economic, cultural) of the outside world. Thus, much like the shock they may experience at the early stages of incarceration, they may likewise experience apprehension and anxiety as they face re-entry into the outside world. Hence, unknown release decisions and post-release prospects/outcomes can serve as key forms of ontological uncertainty for federal prisoners.

Socio-Spatial Conditions

In addition to varied social uncertainties, institutional conditions also appear to shape the interpersonal relations and dynamics among prisoners. In fact, the social problems stemming from socio-spatial factors were often cited as reasons for federal participants’ preference for federal rather than provincial living. Provincial participants likewise described how conditions marked by a large number of people crammed into small spaces negatively impacted social relations. Ethan, for example, spoke of how overcrowded conditions of confinement increased tensions and opportunities for conflict and altercations:

Four men, even four women in a cell, like sooner or later you guys are going to start getting annoyed with each other, start fights. Like one of you might not want to shower for a week, and so it’s like “okay, you gotta get a fuckin’ shower or you’re gonna get hurt” (provincial, Ethan).

The level of overcrowding described by provincial participants, including up to four individuals being held in a cell with a capacity of two, is something rarely noted during experiences in federal custody. Overcapacity living in the provincial context was compounded by long periods of in-cell time, leaving prisoners without opportunities for solitude and, thus, carrying out all personal activities in the presence of others (e.g., including toileting). Furthermore, the shared air that is easily made stale and unpleasant by

controllable body odors (i.e., showering) and uncontrollable realities (i.e., toileting) are just more layers of strain for prisoners living together in a single cell. The simple noises of life (e.g., chewing, breathing, and so on) can become intensely difficult to live with among strangers in small spaces. Blake detailed his experiences living in a prison dormitory unit, where 30 adult men shared a small space:

You get 30 guys in a room together. You're locked up together for more time then you would spend with your closest [people]; your family, your wife, your children, your husband, whatever. You're locked in a room with these 30 people for X amount of time. You got 30 different personalities. And it's just difficult. It's very tense. There's a lot of aggression. There's no room for feeling sorry for yourself or anybody else (provincial, Blake).

Blake's words also detail the lack of privacy and solitude tied to dormitory living in prison. Further, the greater number of personalities living in confined space, he noted, was the source of tension and stress. In provincial custody, prisoners exist as a collection of largely transient strangers, often without a known history or context; yet, they undertake all basic and intimate human activities in close proximity.

Due to conditions in provincial custody, transfer to federal custody was often a welcomed change according to those in the federal sample. Of course, transfer to federal reception centres does not remove the transiency factor and related problems, as intake units may bear the same stresses of the transitioning population often described in provincial institutions. Nonetheless, many participants described experiencing a sense of relief when they moved into the federal system; they were grateful for the solitude and quiet they were afforded. Johnathan, who spent time on remand in provincial custody, noted that he plead guilty – waving his right to a fair trial – in order to be transferred to federal custody:

Provincial is absolutely ridiculous, it's a storage facility for human beings, there is so little stimulus, that part of the reason that I pled, rather than fight it, because I could potentially of gotten it down to some type of self defence. However, thirteen months of sitting in this facility was driving me crazy... provincial is the reason why I will never get charged with anything every again... In my opinion, the federal system is operating pretty well where it should be, I mean [institution name removed] was a good go, there is lots of opportunity there, if you take advantage of it. The provincial system needs an overhaul, books, magazines, schooling...

As evidenced in his words, this former federal prisoner, like others, was keen to move out of the provincial environment. He actually cited conditions in the provincial system as a reason for never wanting to go back to prison.

Food and Eating Practices

In both the federal and provincial contexts, participants' accounts suggest that food was another key factor that had (albeit often different) social meanings for prisoners, whether positive or negative. The importance of food to prisoners is not surprising. Prison scholars have well-articulated the symbolic and practical meanings of food and eating within penal settings. Scholars have emphasized, for example, how food is the site of power and control, a symbolic 'status degradation' ceremony and a concrete pain, yet, simultaneously, the site of resistance (e.g. through activities such as food modification, black market activities, and alternative food practices; see, for example, Smoyer and Lopes, 2017).

The symbolic and practical meanings of food appeared most pronounced in the provincial context, where prisoners have few to no personal possessions (in the federal context, prisoners are allowed an approved set of personal items) and few opportunities for positive activities. While food was frequently discussed by provincial participations in relation to its poor quality and insufficient quantity, it was simultaneously a highly-valued commodity and a rare source of pleasure. Rather than providing an opportunity for social connection, however, food often became the source of division and conflict. For example, Dale, who spent time living in a dorm unit in a provincial institution, explained that prisoners self-served their food and, resultantly, valued items were prone to being stolen or hoarded:

Say there was bananas on the [meal] cart that came in... they'd just like push it in and then everyone has to, you gotta get your own meal, if you don't get your own meal, someone's gonna grab your meal and they're gonna be eating your meal. So, a lot of people would be like, banana day or cookie day or whatever, some guys would take extra cookies and then fights would arise from that (provincial, Dale).

Like Dale, Joseph also described food as a commodity in the dorms, noting prisoners used food to express power:

The meal comes in and when they push in the meal on the cart, it's the inmates that give the meal out, not the guards that work there. The two biggest guys... They just handed me the food. They don't even want you to say thank you... they would give

you whatever they wanted to. So later at seven o'clock at night, we're hungry... Obviously they got the food from all of us. The new fish. And they're bigger than me so I'm like "hey, I'm giving you all the food you want." I didn't question it (provincial, Joseph).

In the provincial setting, issues with food quality and quantity also influenced the social climate by producing hunger among prisoners, which in turn had a negative effect on prisoner mood and dispositions. As Blake and Floyd noted, prisoners could feel the effects of insufficient food quantity: "I mean it will get you through the day but it's just barely enough to pretty much get you through the day. If you don't have money for canteen, you're pretty much feeling like you're starving all the time" (Blake, provincial). "It's just enough to keep you alive; it's not very much.... You starve in there basically" (Floyd, provincial). Another prisoner commented on how hunger bred violence: "most of the fights and most of the violence and most of the discontentment is caused by the hunger" (Brett, provincial).

Like other conditions of confinement, participants in the federal sample were quick to point out that food was more appealing in federal institutions compared to provincial yet, still a point of contention, although less conflict-oriented given it was more available and of slightly higher quality. Seth, for example, explained that even in the maximum security federal institution he was transferred to for reception, conditions were an improvement upon those in the provincial context, partially due to the "better food" (federal, Seth). Likewise, in comparing his experiences in segregation in the provincial and federal system, another participant noted that conditions in federal segregation units were better, in part due to having access to better food: "solitary over there [federal] and in provincial is two different things. Over there [federal] you have your TV, you get to pick out your food, you get to order, not order, but like you're just in a room with your TV, you can't go crazy like that. [In provincial though] you're just in a cell (federal, Abel)." Thus, despite criticism of food quality and quantity in the federal system, participants did report that comparatively, federal options were more satisfying than provincial.

Experiences with food were also different for federal prisoners insofar as food became the site of positive social meanings, as did acts of dining and food preparation. Some participants spoke of maintaining their cultural and religious identity through food in the institution, either by way of food choices or by where, and with whom, they ate.

The guard [was] really nice because we are in camp we don't have too much pressure. We cook our own food, we go to the store, you have your own key, you're treated good... I was fasting and I was waiting for two more minutes to eat my food (federal, Chad).

...we got a Muslim guy cooking our food in [prison name removed]. He don't cook for the whole population, only for the Muslims. [We are] eating Halal food.... (federal, Frank).

Another participant, Ian, explained his experiences with food after being diagnosed with diabetes, and transferring to a lower security institution:

Because I'm a diabetic, other guys they used to take away their food. But I come through the door with my food, they don't bother me or anything. They give me a card [stating his illness], diabetic. So they don't really bother me, they never harass me. Diabetic. They treat me pretty good (federal, Ian).

Evidenced across the words of these interviewees is the ways food, being Halal or simply appropriate to need, maintains some semblance of normalcy in the prison experience. Fasting, eating with friends, and preparing food in ways considered culturally appropriate were central to the food experience. Such flexibility, however, was restricted to less secure prisons (i.e., low medium or minimum security). Participants also spoke of positive food-related experiences in the context of institution-based cultural groups. Involvement in such groups allowed them to engage in activities, including feast nights, with which they could identify and/or feel socially connected. As part of membership in such groups, prisoners could consume culturally appropriate foods as well as spend time with individuals with whom they felt connected. For example, although he was not pagan, federal Matty, explained that:

I ended up joining the pagan group... All the guys I tattooed too were in the group...Half the group was these crazy artists. It's kind of why I went. 'Cause of the pagan thing is like... And we were allowed to have matches. It was one of the only groups, that and the Native group... there were only like eight people in the pagan group... It would be tempting to join a couple of groups, if you get a lot of different dinners and stuff... (federal, Matty).

Another federal participant, Patrick, participated in multiple groups. He justified his interest in being part of many groups by his love of food:

Well you can have the informal group and still join in part of the feast if you pay what they call dues... [I joined] mostly all of them. I love to eat (Patrick, 36).

The words of these participants show that feasting, eating, and fasting together, as well as having culturally relevant food choices, is a way for prisoners to connect and respect each other and their cultures/subcultures. Here, the role of food in facilitating social relationships stands in contrast to the divisive effects of food described among men in the provincial system. In both cases, as a key condition of confinement, food and food-related practices influence the social relations that are possible and likely within the environment. Of course, there are exceptions to such patterns in both cases; for example, provincial participants spoke of how food is a common currency in underground trade and gambling practices. Such practices can allow prisoners to engage in mutually-beneficial interactions in a context where choices are few, a finding consistent with the experiences of formerly federally incarcerated, although largely regarding canteen and special food items. Overall, the food systems in place, including food quality, quantity, and meal practices, precipitated distinct types of social relations and patterns of interaction.

Prisoner Culture

Despite notable differences evident in the social circumstances across federal and provincial systems, underlying conditions marked by a set of vulnerabilities mediated the nature of adaption in both settings. Across samples, we found that prisoners responded to the uncertainties that characterized institutional social dynamics by adopting an individualistic orientation that prioritized one's own survival and well-being. This ethic of individualism was illuminated by frequent references to the notion of "doing your own time." In application, this principle was explained as tuning out one's environment, not becoming involved in the affairs of others (minding one's own business), and focusing only on one's own situation. As a mode of adaptation, this individualistic orientation was paradoxical in that, while intended to mitigate personal risks, it served to perpetuate an environment of uncertainty by precluding the formation of solidaristic bonds.

As a form of coping, an individualistic orientation constitutes an adaptive response to the carceral environment that directly responds to, and, hence, ameliorates two key elements of prison living: (i) the pains associated with physical living conditions marked by 'batch living' (Goffman, 1961a) and (ii) the potentiality for violence. In the former, as an adaptive response to institutional conditions, an individual orientation may provide prisoners, if only symbolically, with a sense of autonomy and dignity in a context

marked by mass cohabitation and deprivations (Sykes, 1958). In conditions of batch-like living (Goffman, 1961a, 1961b), evident in both federal and provincial institutions, prisoners have little if any space to call their own and no choice in their social surroundings. The adoption of a hyper-individualized orientation may, in part, be seen as a response to conditions of mass cohabitation, thereby serving the function, in the Syksian sense, of ameliorating the pains of imprisonment.

A key irony of this individualistic orientation is the considerable amount of social coordination it requires; prisoners must tacitly work together to promote conditions enabling individualism. Social coordination, here, is epitomized by a set of informal “ground rules” to which participants made frequent mention. Such rules were fundamentally oriented around “keep ing to yourself,” and a generalized notion of “respect.” In general, the “code of conduct” appears to bear considerable similarities across federal and provincial settings. This code, previously identified by Ricciardelli (2014a), holds that prisoners are to: (i) avoid staff and not “snitch” on other prisoners; (ii) “be dependable,”; (iii) act in accordance to rules guiding behaviours (i.e., hygiene, eye contact); (iv) mind their own affairs; and (v) “act tough.” As shown in the excerpt below, particular rules, rooted in general principles, serve to render the institutional setting more predictable and structured than might be otherwise possible:

The rules are pretty simple; keep to yourself, don't look at other people's stuff, don't take stuff from other people, mind your business... shower every day or at least every second day... No noise before 11 in the morning or after 11 at night. Just basic, you're living with other people rules. Clean up after yourself... Always wear your shoes. Don't walk around naked. Just participate in the cleaning... Just mind your own business, do your time and leave everybody else's shit alone. Pay your debts, don't make promises you can't keep (provincial, Blake).

Similarly, speaking to his federal experience, Tyson noted:

Not to be a rat or an informant that's a big one, to hold your own if somebody tries to get at you, you gotta defend yourself or you're a punk. If you don't defend yourself, then you're no good. If you can't stand up for yourself, then you're not a man in there. That's the criteria... Just honour your word, that's the big thing and pay your debts when you owe, and mind your own business... (federal).

Blake's description of the norms of prison living are indistinguishable from those described by former prisoners in the federal sample, such as

Tyson. Such ground rules across correctional systems, including minding your own business, respecting others and their property, maintaining proper hygiene and cleanliness, eliminating noise during sleeping hours, and keeping your word, assist in promoting some degree of predictability and structure in settings otherwise marked by unpredictability and disorder – qualities that are particularly pronounced in the overcrowded and transient provincial context.

While benefitting the prisoner collective interests, rules, at times, may precipitate conditions of insecurity. Perhaps most notably, the code of silence, whereby prisoners are expected not to inform on each other, prevents those who have experienced or witnessed violence from speaking out for fear of being labeled a “rat.” The rule, evidenced in both classic and contemporary studies of prisoner culture (Ricciardelli, 2014b; Sykes & Messinger, 1960) highlights the asymmetries in power that characterize institutional environments. Ethan, speaking to his provincial experiences of incarceration, explained:

You keep your mouth shut, keep your mouth shut, mind your own business, if you see something, you didn't see it... If somebody says “hey, did you see what happened?” “I was reading my book.”... And all the inmates are like fuck; “ok good, at least he's not a rat, you're solid” and then they'll take allegiance with me. The instant you open up your mouth and say, “eah, I seen it all”, pack your shit... and leave right now. Why? Cause you're about to get hurt (provincial, Ethan).

Much like Sykes (1958) observed in his classic prison ethnography, violence underpins the apparent social contract that structures everyday prison life, as this excerpt from Ethan reveals. Prisoners use violence to teach the informal norms of prison living, perhaps because it is a method that cannot be ‘taken away’ easily like other imposed deprivations tied to custodial living (e.g., material goods). Within federal institutions, the rules of prison living are generally well-known and well-established; prisoners have learned how to ‘do time,’ they have spent time in the provincial or territorial system, have been sentenced, have learned from others, and are prepared for the longer prison stay. In other words, they have come to take on the ‘carceral habitus’, or the mentality and social dispositions necessary to navigate the prison social world (Caputo-Levine, 2013). Federal participant Victor explained:

Through my provincial custody my mentality was more different then. I'd mess with more people, but more or less just because I didn't know... But when you

hit Federal there, it's so different, it's so different. It's better. Your time is better but it's a lot more dangerous too cause there's a lot more things you have access to but it just depends on how you do your time.

Victor continued to describe the norms of federal prison living, often making reference to his closest friend in the institution and what it means to "have each other's back" while adhering to the informal rules guiding behaviors, including "keeping to oneself." His words reveal an approach toward "doing time" that prioritizes survival as a mode of responding to the uncertainty and unpredictability characterizing social living (and dynamics) in prison.

Someone comes and starts talking to you I'm walking away ten feet, I'm not listening to what you're saying. And everybody else knows that I'm good and I'm not going to because I want people to know I don't care. I don't want to know because if someone ever does rat you out or your involved in something when I say "listen, I don't know. I don't know because I don't"... I tell people straight up "don't brag around me" because you hear things, you talk to people... like "I'm not associating with that person" and I would make sure I wouldn't period. I always kept to myself especially when I got to federal, I just focused on my school, I just really focused on my family and I really planned ahead for my parole.

This highly individualized manner of being, described by both provincial and federal prisoners represents the subjective disposition adopted by prisoners to navigate prison social structures. 'Habitus' involves the set of behaviours, mannerisms, and dispositions – the technical and symbolic 'know how' – that enable actors to act appropriately in a given social setting with minimal conscious thought (see Bourdieu, 1985). In the prison context, Caputo-Levine (2013) uses the concept of the carceral habitus to describe the mentality and social dispositions adopted by prisoners to promote social survival in the prison field.

As mastering the carceral habitus requires "practice," it follows that deviations, and hence violence, are more likely in provincial settings. Provincial participants described violent repercussions in response to social infractions as common place, particularly when the infraction negatively impacted others' abilities to autonomously do time. Pierre, a former provincial prisoner, recalled in graphic details the violent repercussions a prisoner suffered for contravening the hygiene rule. As Pierre's words reveal, poor hygiene makes the living environment even more uncomfortable, and thus can result in violence similar to that precipitated by failure to repay debts.

They had this guy, his neck was almost coming off his body. They stomped him almost to death. You don't even hear about this in the paper... They had this poor little guy - 'cause he wouldn't shower. We were in the dorms. He wouldn't shower. They kept asking him to shower, "you stink", and he did... and he wouldn't shower... They threw him right up on top of the window and left him for the guards to pick up (provincial, Pierre).

As Caputo-Levine (2013) notes, the carceral habitus is largely oriented around managing the threat of violence in the prison context. Participants in both samples described a strategy of "keeping to one's own" as a means of reducing the likelihood of conflict. Therefore, the individualized orientation is not only a means of promoting individual autonomy as noted prior; it is also a survival mechanism intended to avoid conflict in a space marked by perpetual risk. In practice, this strategy involves retreating from any unnecessary social interaction, not impinging on another's space physically, socially, emotionally (e.g., intruding into another space via touch, sent, sight, noise), and avoiding social behaviours (such as eye contact or mere acknowledgement of others) that could raise concerns that one's privacy has been violated. Joseph, a former provincial prisoner, explains: "even if they don't hurt you, it's a mental abuse that they get you. The intimidation. For me personally I was petrified. I talked to nobody. You can't eavesdrop. You can't look over there. Or over there. He thinks I'm looking at him."

Participants also spoke of a tendency (and need) to continuously monitor and assess their immediate social environment, taking on a disposition that involved being "on edge," "always on guard," "watching your back" and "not trusting anyone." In all social situations, then, prisoners delicately balance the need to maintain a social "blankness"— what Caputo-Levine (2013) refers to as the "yard face" — *and* a keen social awareness. Participants in both samples described how such a disposition shaped nearly every activity and interaction in day-to-day life. Indeed, the need for hyper-awareness and the inability to let one's guard down became a continuous and embodied pain of prison life. As a provincial prisoner recounted, echoing others;

The way it's set up, especially if they don't like you, you're always at risk, so you're always on edge. You're always watching your back... Jail is a hostile place. And anywhere, in any remand centre, you'd be a stupid man not to watch your back, in any type of situation ... (provincial, Stan).

As illustrated in the above quote, which are consistent with the words of men in the federal sample, the prisoner disposition has paradoxical effects.

On the one hand, an individualized orientation enabled some degree of individual autonomy and reduced personal risks. On the other, an individualistic disposition reinforced a sense of insecurity and mistrust by perpetuating social uncertainty. Consequently, the function of prisoner culture is not only to respond to and hence ameliorate the deprivations associated with imprisonment. Rather, very social conditions experienced and reproduced by prisoners can drive the most salient embodied and psychological pains of imprisonment – i.e., perpetually existing “on edge.”

Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis of interviews conducted with male former prisoners from provincial and federal systems reveals that the prisoner code may be increasingly oriented around the individual, failing to promote a shared social identity or the in-group mentality, as Sykes (1958) observed in his classic study. In both the provincial and federal contexts, the nature of institutional conditions and the social dynamics that shape the penal settings, we suggest, inform this individual orientation. Our work therefore parallels that of Crewe (2015) in the U.K., who suggests a focus on one’s self and one’s time has become key to the carceral experience. Crewe links this individualization of prisoner culture to the new forms of ‘administrative risk’ (e.g., outcomes tied to institutional and security risk ratings) rather than the physical and psychological risks embedded in the prison social environment (see also Ricciardelli & Sit, 2016). Across findings, however, is an illustration of how socio-historical particularities, each tied to factors in and beyond institutional contexts, impact the day-to-day experience of incarceration and prisoner responses to conditions of confinement. Therefore, equally important to analyzing official policy changes and macro trends in the realm of social control and punishment is discerning how the informal aspects of incarceration are shaping carceral experiences (Crewe, 2015).

As we have hoped to articulate, an individual orientation among prisoners does, in some ways, serve an adaptive purpose in the Syksian sense of reducing the pains of imprisonment (i.e., by promoting individual autonomy and reducing opportunities for conflict). Simultaneously, however, this individual orientation perpetuates uncertainty by impeding the types of social bonds that Sykes observed. The carceral habitus, we argue, is oriented around contradictory aims - minimizing social contact while simultaneously assessing one’s environment for threats. That this disposition tends to shape all interactions within the institutional environment raises key concerns for competing institutional mandates, most notably correctional interventions intended to lower criminogenic risk and need. Correctional programming that promotes pro-

social values and behaviours occur as prisoners are learning, perhaps mastering, the carceral habitus. This habitus, while serving an adaptive function in prison, can actually impede social reintegration, as Caputo-Levine (2013) found in her research with former prisoners.

The present analysis is based on samples drawn from a particular regional context in Canada. Therefore contextual factors that are regionally varied, such as gang presence, Indigenous over-representation, and drug sub-culture (Michael & Stys, 2015; Zinger, 2018), and are undoubtedly affecting prisoner culture in distinct settings, are obscured. As a multitude of factors at the regional, institutional, unit, and interpersonal levels shape prisoner cultures, further research is needed that provides nuanced and localized accounts of prisoner culture and helps to better understand how factors across levels mediate social dynamics. We also urge researchers to explore experiences of such dynamics from the perspective of prisoners from their different social standpoints, such as aging and older prisoners, Indigenous prisoners, and women prisoners – groups which are all increasing in numbers in Canadian custodial populations (Beaudette & Stewart, 2014; Malakieh, 2018).

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Notes

- 1 Freeman and Seymour (2010, p. 138) found in their study of remanded youth, that legal uncertainty is a salient pain of remand, which they describe as “one of the most taxing and unstable prison experiences.”
- 2 In the case of prisoners with determinate sentences, full parole is set at the lesser between one-third of the sentence or seven years, while day parole eligibility is set at six months prior to full parole eligibility. In the case of indeterminate sentences, parole eligibility dates are determined at sentencing; eligibility is set at 25 years for first degree murder and between 10 and 25 years for second degree murder (Correctional Service Canada, 2014).

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Author Biographies

Laura McKendy, PhD, is a post-doctoral researcher at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her research interests include prisoner health, prison culture and experiences of incarceration, and community reintegration.

Rosemary Ricciardelli, PhD, is professor of sociology, Memorial University. Elected to the Royal Society of Canada, her research centers on evolving understandings of gender, vulnerabilities, risk, experiences, and issues within different criminal justice system facets. Her current work focuses on the experience of correctional staff, given the potential for compromised psychological, physical, and social health inherent in the occupation.