

Incarcerated Women's Perceptions of Their Best Selves in Prison: Themes & Age Variations

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Positive Outcomes in Prison

- Studying positive outcomes is not a novel concept
 - Well-being and happiness research (Diener et al., 1999; Huppert, 2009; Oishi et al., 2019)
 - Posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)
 - Positive psychology (Morse et al., 2022)
 - Positive Criminology & Good Lives Model (GLM) (Ronel & Segev, 2015; Ward & Brown, 2004)
- Narratives of reinvention & growth can be located in prisons (Helfgott et al., 2020; Maier & Ricciardelli, 2021; van Ginneken, 2015, 2016)
 - Posttraumatic growth in prison
 - Reflect & envision future self
 - Opportunity for productivity
 - Incarceration as new beginning

Age-Graded Corrections

- Positive outcomes related to aging – purpose in life, well-being, positive affect, coping skills
(Bailey, 2016; Charles et al., 2001; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998; Shook et al., 2017; Skinner & Edge, 1998)
- Desistance & the age/crime curve– developmental & sociological factors
(Doherty & Bersani, 2018; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Scott & Steinberg, 2008)
- Identity development & human agency
 - Desistance as deliberate act of self-change (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009)
 - Identity development related to age & crime (Rocque et al., 2016)
 - Redemption narratives & “tragic optimism” (Maruna, 2001)
 - Early desistance narratives in prison – identity change in prison also related to age
(Martin et al., 2019)

Current Study

- **What are the most common themes among incarcerated women's perceptions of their best selves in prison?**
- **Are common themes among responses invariant when grouped by age?**

Data & Methods

- **Participatory Action Research (PAR)**
 - Team of incarcerated women and ASU researchers (faculty and graduate students)
 - Collaboration in all stages
 - Designing questionnaire
 - Recruiting participants
 - Conducting interviews
 - ASU researchers – 101 interviews
 - Incarcerated interviewers – 99 interviews

Data & Methods

- Women's state prison in Goodyear, Arizona – medium security unit
- Semi-structured interviews with 200 incarcerated women – January-April 2022
- Interview questionnaire – 4 sections, open and closed-ended questions
 1. Appreciative inquiry
 2. Vignettes – perceptions of PAR in prison programming
 3. Trust among women on the unit
 4. Background information

Measures & Analysis

- *Best Self Perception* – “Tell me a story about a time you were at your best in here in the last couple of weeks.”
- *Age* – “How old are you?”
 - Young adulthood (ages 20-35, n = 71)
 - Middle adulthood (ages 36-49, n = 87)
 - Late adulthood (ages 50-83, n = 42)
- Analysis
 - Thematic analysis using Atlas.ti (intercoder agreement = 84%)
 - Frequencies of themes and sub-themes across all 200 responses
 - Frequencies of themes when grouped by adulthood life stages

What are the most common themes among incarcerated women's perceptions of their best selves in prison?

Personal Growth (51%, n = 102)

- Practicing maturity
- Physical health & wellness
- Pride in accomplishments
- Positive attitude
- Perseverance
- Religion & spirituality
- Recovery & sobriety
- Life skills

“Every day you have to find a way to face the struggles and challenges in here.”

Employment (25%, n = 50)

- Working (in general)
- Performing well at job
- Interviewing for or starting new job

“I’m always at my best when I’m working. I’ve never worked this hard before.”

Healthy Relationships (18%, n = 36)

- Relationships with children
- Family relationships
- Relationships with other women on the inside
- Communication with the outside

“Nothing could ruin that day... having my daughter is the one thing in life that I don’t regret.”

What are the most common themes among incarcerated women's perceptions of their best selves in prison?

Incarceration Experience (17.5%, n = 35)

- Appreciation or support from others
- Celebrations
- Case or sentence-related
- Dignity & humanity
- Positive experiences with staff
- Hobbies & leisure
- Health living situations

"It feels good to be trusted by another normal person."

Programming & Education (17%, n = 34)

- Working towards education
- Participating in a program
- Completing a program
- Completing education

Helping & Supporting Others (16.5%, n = 33)

"I usually help people out as best I can. I don't help people to get things in return."

At One's Best Every Day (4.5%, n = 9)

Not At One's Best (3.5%, n = 7)

Are common themes invariant when grouped by age?

Theme	Young Adulthood Ages 20-35 (n = 71)	Middle Adulthood Ages 36-49 (n = 87)	Late Adulthood Ages 50-83 (n = 42)
Personal Growth	43.7% (n = 31)	57.5% (n = 50)	50% (n = 21)
Employment	19.7% (n = 14)	29.9% (n = 26)	23.8% (n = 10)
Healthy Relationships	16.9% (n = 12)	18.4% (n = 16)	19% (n = 8)
Incarceration Experience	16.9% (n = 12)	17.2% (n = 15)	19% (n = 8)
Programming or Education	18.3% (n = 13)	19.5% (n = 17)	9.5% (n = 4)
Helping & Supporting Others	9.9% (n = 7)	16.1% (n = 14)	28.6% (n = 12)
At One's Best Everyday	4.2% (n = 3)	4.6% (n = 4)	2.4% (n = 1)
Not at One's Best	5.6% (n = 4)	1.1% (n = 1)	4.8% (n = 2)

Conclusions & Implications

- Themes as a roadmap or guide for creating more enabling environments
- Several themes were consistent across women of all ages
- Specific opportunities for holistic programming
 - Personal Growth
 - Healthy Relationships
 - Employment
 - Programming & Education
- Older women (middle, late adulthood) – Helping & Supporting Others
 - Mentorship opportunities – benefits for mentee and mentor

Thank you

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