

Interpersonal Hostility in Prison: Explaining Conflict Styles among Inmates

Erin Pavioni
Department of Applied Communications,
University of Arkansas at Little Rock, USA.
erin.pavioni@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The aim of this study was to understand which style of face negotiation theory inmates prefer when presented with a potential dilemma: avoidance, compromisation, obligation, integration, or domination. This study utilized a narrative, qualitative analysis to discuss the responses of 18 inmates to a series of vignettes relating to inmate social life, conflict styles, and communication patterns. Prisoners were asked a series of vignettes designed to illicit their idea of ethical or unethical behavior through means of conflict management, with the findings thematically analyzed using face negotiation theory. How each inmate answered each scenario also determined which of two cultures he represented himself to be: collectivistic or individualistic. Findings suggest inmates will choose to avoid conflicting situations but will negotiate an agreement if a friend is involved.*

Keywords: Prisonization; convict code; collectivistic culture; individualistic culture; face negotiation theory

Introduction

Institutional life involves situations of hardship and depravity. Prisoners are often forced to reside in crowded conditions, with frequent exposure to threats and other forms of brutality from fellow inmates (Listwan, Sullivan, Agnew, Cullen and Colvin, 2013). This violence, both interpersonal and intergroup, is an unfortunate method of prison conformity used by many inmates as an effort towards assimilation (Ellis, Grasmick and Gilman, 1974). Prison has been shown to aggravate psychological weaknesses, reinforce criminal and/or hostile behavioral patterns, and diminish the advancement of rationality needed to behave within society (Porporino and Zamble, 1984).

This research seeks to consider whether or not an inmate would adhere to the convict code when placed in a difficult situation with other inmates. Prisoners were asked a series of vignettes designed to elicit their means of conflict mediation, with the findings thematically analyzed using face negotiation theory. Each inmate's answer also determined which of two



cultures he represented himself to be: collectivistic or individualistic. The aim of this study is to understand which style of mediation strategy inmates most prefer: avoidance, compromise, obligation, integration, or domination. To date, no other study utilizing face negotiation theory to study conflict management among inmates could be located.

Inmate Behavior, Institutional Factors, and Communication

While prisons were not created with the purpose of inciting aggressive behavior, situational factors often have harmful impacts on the cultural adaptations and personally adopted identities of those incarcerated. As reported by Goffman (2018), a person will verbally and non-verbally project an identity believed to be acceptable throughout a given situation. Some inmates readily adhere to the violent norms and mannerisms of prison because they originate from hostile social environments. For individuals raised in environments conducive to violence, ordinary interactions may intensify to brutality, leading scholars to speculate the standard reasoning that hostility plays in regard to understanding and acknowledging social situations (Lee and Ousey, 2011). Thus, antagonistic behavior coupled with a harsh living environment could exacerbate violent conduct within an institutional setting.

Behaviors manifested within the institutional setting are characterized as a specific culture known as *prisonization* (Clemmer, 1958). These acquired skills are defined as a gradually absorbed and integrated knowledge of expected mannerisms, language, and values of living in the penitentiary (Garabedian, 1963; Addams, 1992; Clear and Cole, 2003). The conformity of inmates from various cultural backgrounds housed within the condensed living space of prison increases the importance of respective behavior towards one another (Colwell, 2007). This expectation of deference between inmates is illustrated by a “convict code”, which argues an inmate shouldn’t interfere with the problems of another inmate (Jacobs, 1975). Faced with a new set of civil norms, an inmate must now decide to either share the culture and expected behavioral norms of prison or continue with his or her own constructed moral code.

Due to the mental and emotional strains of prisonization and the expected adherence to the convict code, an inmate could be forced to construct a new identity for his or herself separate of his or her status within society. This negotiation of self-identity, also known as the projection of one’s “face”, occurs at all times but is emphasized more so during conflicting situations (Wilmot and Hocker, 2001). Face negotiation theory, a catalyst within this research, assumes that people of various cultures are concerned with the continual presentation of their face (Ting-Toomey, 1994). The theory places emphasis upon the differing viewpoints of members of collectivistic and individualistic cultures and how each person manages interpersonal discord.

Face Negotiation Theory

Face negotiation theory argues that people in all cultures try to cultivate and negotiate face in every situation (Ting-Toomey, 1994). Individuals view their own identity as projected upon



them by other people (Goffman, 2018). This identity, referred throughout this manuscript as one's "face", is a metaphor for self-image. The concept of face becomes precarious in situations when the established identities of the individuals involved are questioned. Individual circumstances can affect the use of "various face-work and conflict strategies in intergroup and interpersonal encounters" (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003, 600). Prison, with its accumulated population of various cultures, could be seen as a breeding ground for clashing identities, viewpoints, and precarious situations. Most people have a predominant conflict style, but it is possible to alter styles in regards to a specific situation (Wilmot and Hocker, 2001).

Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2003) identified five responses most commonly found when managing conflict: avoiding, compromising, obliging, integrating, and dominating. Most people respond to discord using one or more of these five reactions (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003). An inmate may start out attempting to compromise his or her interests for the sake of negotiating the disagreement and reaching a favorable outcome. If a favorable outcome is not reached, the inmate may attempt to force his or her ideas onto the other inmate by dominating the situation until that inmate reaches an outcome in his or her favor.

When it comes to avoiding a conflict, a person might respond by eluding the topic, the person imposing it, or the entire confrontation altogether (Ting-Toomey, 2005). These people see no positive outcome; therefore, their mediating response is to avoid the situation. Using integration, a win-win resolution can be achieved for both individuals through open discussion (Griffin, 2012).

While one inmate might oblige another during a confrontation by giving in to the situation and allowing the other inmate to win the argument, another inmate might seek to compromise to retain some of his or her objectives and still save face. Obliging is an admission of defeat in which the person complies with the wishes of the opposing party, while compromising allows each party to work out an agreement (Griffin, 2012). Some people feel this is the safest way to avoid conflict as at least one party can save face. If a person chooses to dominate the conflict, he or she will stay and argue to have their views confirmed, no obligation or compromising accepted (Griffin, 2012).

Collectivistic vs. Individualistic Cultures

Developed within the vast array of prison cultures are two specific prison modification styles: collective and individualistic (Zamble and Porporino, 2013). Affixing oneself to another inmate or group of inmates is common prison decorum but is not a required social standard. It is possible for an inmate to complete his or her sentence of incarceration without the added benefits of companionship (Colwell, 2007).

Inmates favoring a collectivistic manner would engage within the convict social system of routine activities, prison hierarchy, and general disdain of penitentiary administration (Zamble and Porporino, 2013). An assemblage of inmates may hold each other responsible



for the behavior of other members of the group. The group's motivation for restricting (rather than allowing) external behavior dwells on the expected consequences such behavior might invoke (Colwell, 2007).

If one inmate acted in a disrespectful manner, the entire group could be held accountable and disciplined. This congregation of inmates would be described as members of a collectivistic culture. These allied individuals prioritize their goals to meet everyone's needs. In utilizing a *we*-identity, those who are members of a collectivistic culture feel responsible for the safety and care of those around them (Ting-Toomey, 1994). A sense of loyalty prevails in that the person sacrifices his or her needs in favor of the objectives of the group.

Inmates preferring an individualistic adaptive style would be withdrawn and isolated (Zamble and Porporino, 2013). Individualistic inmates would only consider completing a goal if he deemed it to be self-compensating. By employing this *I*-identity, these inmates tend to care only for themselves, are exclusive of any group, and extend their priorities to their personal needs over the objective of others (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003). One's identity is often challenged within social interaction, during these confrontations individuals often seek to save face through negotiating and impression management with others.

Prisonization and Environmental and Situational Factors: Inmates should rely on assimilation and dexterity skills conducive to fully adjusting to prison culture and homogenization (Lawson, Segrin and Ward, 1996). To do so, they would need to utilize several adaptations within prison, many of which are influenced by the subcultural norms and values, environmental stressors, and individual attributes of institutional life (Lockwood, 1982).

Conflict-management Style, Face Concern, and Self-construals

There are three commonly used variables in relation to face negotiation theory: conflict-management style, face concern, and self-construal (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003). As noted above, conflict management refers to the process of limiting the negative aspects of discord while attempting to increase the positive elements (Wilmot and Hocker, 2001). Face concern is conceptualized as the interest for a person's own carefully constructed image and mutual regard for one's self and another's image during conflicting situations (Mak and Chen, 2006). Self-construal is the self-image derived of both independent and interdependent conceptions (Zhang, Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, 2014). For the purpose of this study, the researcher chose to focus solely on inmates' conflict-management style, preferring to delve into other variables in future manuscripts.

Methodology

The present study utilized a narrative, qualitative analysis to discuss the responses of 18 inmates to a series of vignettes relating to inmate social life, conflict styles, and communication patterns. The primary goal of the interviews is to understand which conflict



mediation strategies are most utilized within a prison setting. The added factors of situational, environmental, and identity stressors are also analyzed in an effort to determine what circumstances impact inmate responses to conflict throughout their stay within the penal institution. With IRB approval from the university and access granted by the prison, the student researcher conducted rigid interviews, as only a specific amount of time was allowed to complete all interviews. The possibility of a force-completion with an unfinished interview was undesirable. Only when an inmate chose to discuss an incident unrelated to the question being asked would the interviewer request further explanation.

Respondents Selection and Characteristics

All inmates within the sample have served previous sentences in state prisons. Inmates (18 respondents) were selected through convenience sampling. Interviewees were recruited through a re-entry program, with a total of 35 inmates being asked to participate and 18 agreeing to be interviewed. A consent form with detailed information regarding the goal of the interview, how it could benefit the inmate, and the improbability of repercussions associated with the cooperation of being interviewed was given to each inmate. Participation was voluntary and anonymity was insured for all involved. All interviews were performed individually and audio recorded with participant's consent. The sample of interviewees consisted of short-term and long-time offenders.

On the basis of race/ethnicity, the sample interviewed was representative of the diversity in the southern state's male inmate population (60% African-American, 40% Caucasian, and 0% Latino or "other"). At the time these interviews were conducted, 50.7% of the southern state's inmate population was African-American, 48% listed as Caucasian, and 1.3% as Latino or "other" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014).

As typical with convenience samples, one possible negative outcome is that of selection bias. Here, respondents either resemble the more conformist inmates or their behavior is potentially biased due to the prospect of impending parole. However, in an attempt to negate the latter bias, respondents were notified that participating in the survey had no impact on their overall sentence or parole decision. Last, all text quoted from the interviews utilize pseudonyms and have not been edited for grammatical correction.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. Next, the researcher analyzed each inmate's responses to examine word frequency. How often the words "I", "me", and "my" were used in relation to an inmate's identity during the interviews determined whether or not the inmate was considered to be individualistic. Individuals who saw themselves as part of a collective were more likely to use the words "we", "us", and "our" during the interviews. Along with enumerative analysis, the researcher analyzed the responses for themes under the framework of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a



process used to understand how interviewees construct stories and narratives from their own personal experiences, as heavily evidenced by Riessman (2015).

Data analysis identified two recurrent themes: absolute avoidance of any and all conflict and unexpected portrayals of physical violence. These themes were identified through the use of repetitive phrases and self-identification as stated by inmates. Data analysis was reduced into organized categories, each in relation to the open coding of inmates conflict mediation styles: avoidance, compromise, obligation, integration, or domination. These categories were then compared back to the initial theoretical framework of face negotiation theory.

Finally, the data is reported using low inference descriptors. Verbatim quotes from the transcripts are used to further describe each finding. Rich quotations allow readers to understand the viewpoint of the participants and also aid in determining the validity of research pertaining to the correlating effects of inmate identity, environmental and situational stressors, and conflict mediation.

Low-inference descriptors explore recorded information “in terms that are as concrete as possible, including verbatim accounts of what people say, for example, rather than researchers' reconstructions of the general sense of what a person said, which would allow researchers' personal perspectives to influence the reporting” (Seale, 1999, 148).

In an effort to understand the effects of cultural identities in relation to prisonization, the convict code, and environmental and situational factors during conflicting situations, inmates were interviewed using four open-ended vignettes. These vignettes were designed to encourage dialogue of various situations with each individual being asked how they would respond to a particular event. In this way, the structuring of the vignettes was planned to stimulate responses that would refer to different forms of self-identifications (individualistic or collectivistic) and the conflict styles of each interviewee (i.e. how the prisoner would respond to the situation through the mediation styles used within face negotiation theory). Each vignette, gleaned from discussions with local prison staff, was created using real-life events that have occurred within the primary researcher’s state penal system. During the interview, inmates were asked following questions:

Research questions

1. John is an inmate in Cellblock B. Another inmate starts an argument with John over a game of cards, accusing John of cheating. You consider John a friend. What do you do?
2. You see Mike hide several cigarettes in his bunk bed. You know the guards will be tossing beds later, looking for contraband. What do you do?
3. You work in the cafeteria. Your job is to bake the bread to be used for lunch and dinner that day. Jake also works in the cafeteria but his job is to clean the fruits and vegetables. Jake says there are extra apples left over for that day. He keeps a few and offers you the rest to take back to your bunk bed. What do you do?



4. You were playing a game of basketball with other inmates when Billy accuses you of not playing fair. He calls you “a coward” in front of the other inmates and starts to complain to anyone who will listen that “you’re a cheater”. The other inmates look like they believe Billy. What do you do?

Results

The aim of this study was to understand which style of mediation strategy inmates most prefer. The major findings of this study were: (a) more than half of the inmates utilized strict adherence to the convict code, choosing to walk away from the situation or to decline in participation; (b) other than avoidance, negotiation was the most common, usually preferred when a friend was involved; and (c) once the act of unwanted physical contact is initiated by another prisoner, inmates saw no choice but to respond in self-defense, with the situation escalating immediately into violence.

Previous research has argued most inmates prefer an individualistic approach to prison adaptation and resolving communicational discord (Addams, 1992). It was also argued that inmates assimilate to a convict code of conduct that explicitly calls for avoidance to situations where the inmate is not a direct participant (Irwin, 1972). This study sought to examine if inmates were pressured by the convict code or their perceived affiliation with other inmates when confronted with difficult situations. The two identities that presented themselves, individualistic and collectivist identities had connections to both. Furthermore, these identities had large impacts on what type of conflict mediation the individuals would choose to defuse the situation.

Individualistic Identity

Of the 18 inmates interviewed for this research, nine favored an individualist identity to their relationship with the prison as well as their inmates. Inmates who utilized an *I*-identity protected themselves and completed tasks they considered personally rewarding. Furthermore, this identity association had impacts on conflict management decisions by the inmates. These individuals favored such phrases as “I’m not going to put myself out there for him”, “they need to stay out of my personal space”, “I’d walk away”, “I’d stay out of it”, and “that guy’s got his space and I’ve got mine.” These inmates did not submit to conflicting situations by allowing the other inmate to dominate the altercation, nor did they consider problem-solving to be a solution either. This finding coincides with the convict code, as the inmate preferred not to involve himself in the problems of others. Only when a friend or acquaintance was involved might the inmate attempt to negotiate a compromise to resolve a conflict. Even then, the compromise would usually involve intervening and attempting to diffuse the situation by asking the friend to walk away.



Collectivistic Identity

The remaining nine inmates favored a collectivistic identity which had differing implications for conflict management than those who adopted individualist identities. In utilizing a *we*-identity, inmates considered to be members of a collectivistic culture felt responsible for the safety and well-being of those around them. A sense of loyalty existed in that the inmate would sacrifice his needs in favor of the overall goals of the prison group. Those that were deemed collectivistic favored such phrases as, “I don't want no consequences for everybody because of something you done did”, “It helps to get along”, and “We have to stick together”. These inmates favored compromising, because they felt the result being reached was the best for all parties involved, not just themselves. Even when the prospect of disciplinary action was considered, the inmates chose to protect the coherence of the group in order to avoid possible punishment for all.

Face Negotiation Theory

Goffman (2018) suggests individuals will verbally and non-verbally project an identity believed to be acceptable throughout any given situation. Most people have a preferred style of managing conflict, which could be affected by one's identity (Wilmot and Hocker, 2001). This individualistic or collectivistic style is usually in accordance with the cultural ideologies established within that person's identity.

Prison contrasts with a person's constructed identity due the effects of the convict code and the individual's loss of autonomy throughout incarceration (Goodstein, MacKenzie and Shotland, 1984). In the following sections, the authors analyze mediation styles using face negotiation theory as a lens in an attempt to understand the struggle between prison assimilation and the retention of personal identity.

Avoidance

Collectivistic cultures tend to use avoidance strategies more so than individualistic cultures (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Collectivists emphasize group cohesion, with members seeking to avoid anything that might damage the group. As a result, they often avoid conflict while allowing others to save face when a conflict is inevitable. This study contradicted Ting-Toomey's finding, as six inmates who preferred the use of avoidance were found to be individualistic. This is more in line with the ‘doing one's time’ and avoiding trouble adherence to the convict code (Irwin, 1972).

When given the scenario of playing a basketball game with a group of inmates and another accused him of cheating [Q4], 11 of the 18 inmates said they would quit the game and walk away. As for the remaining seven inmates, they would continue the verbal altercation until one or both parties walked away. As Robert, a collectivistic Caucasian in his mid- to late-40s, claimed,



“I would just leave it alone cause... I've learned that... in here, that... anytime an occurrence happens, the first five minutes is where it's gonna escalate or it's gonna die... I've had so many people try to pick a fight, try to do this and if you'll just leave it alone? It's over with. But if you go back and try to apologize, you go back and try to explain yourself ... the more you influence yourself in it, the worse it's gonna be. And 9 times out of 10, if you'll just turn and walk away, it's over with.”

Each of the 11 inmates who chose to avoid the conflict by withdrawing from the situation declared that a verbal confrontation was not worth them getting into trouble over. As stated by “Jimmy”, an individualistic Caucasian in his late 20s: “If I'm gonna ruin my visitation or I'm gonna get in trouble, it's gonna be over something that's worth it.”

One theme that became salient in the course of the interviews was, “I'd just walk away.” It was often stated, “There is a general code about minding your own business [while in prison]”. Even when the confrontation involved a friend, most of the inmates would allow the two men to work it out amongst themselves unless it became physical.

Compromising

Certain scenarios might not benefit from avoidance. If an inmate believed he could diffuse a situation when an acquaintance was involved, he would discuss a compromise on behalf of his friend. When presented with the scenario of witnessing a friend being accused of cheating at a game of cards [Q1], 11 of the 18 inmates chose to assist their friend in reaching a compromise by either stepping in on their friend's behalf or by pulling their friend aside and insisting he abandon the game entirely. Of those 11, seven were collectivistic and four were individualistic. This finding is in accordance with Ting-Toomey's (2005) theory, which states collectivists are more likely than individualists to use compromising mediation tactics.

The phrase “it's not worth it” was uttered in almost every interview regarding the first vignette [Q1]. This is concerning the punishment of loss of privileges due to starting a fight. Bill, an individualistic Caucasian in his late-40s, said, “I would tell him, “It's not worth it” to get into a fight over a dang 'ol card game... Try to encourage him to get up and come with me, to cool off and leave it alone. It's not worth it... [a disciplinary action of] Class 4 and 30 in the hole over a card game?” Even Steve, the dominating inmate, would attempt to diffuse the situation:

“I would go to John and be like, “Look, bud, this stuff ain't worth it” and I would pull him away from the situation before it would escalate. And I'd talk to the other dude, just be like, “Man, just leave it alone. It's not worth it, whatever it is.” I'd take John and put him back over into my corner or cell.”



Obliging

Previous research has shown collectivists tend to use more obliging conflict styles than members of individualistic cultures (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Within this sample, six collectivistic and two individualistic inmates chose to give in to certain situations when conflicts arose. When they did, it was always in response to the issue of getting caught with contraband [Q2 and Q3]. The act of getting caught with contraband is not the issue at hand; it's the *type* of contraband that creates the most concern. A deck of playing cards might cause an inmate to receive a written citation in his file but getting caught with cigarettes could place the inmate in solitary confinement and his few luxuries taken away.

Nine of the 18 inmates interviewed refused the apples [Q3], claiming they would leave them there. Only one inmate stated he did not like apples, so oranges were substituted; he still refused them. The inmates were concerned with how prison authorities would react if the inmates were caught with the fruit. As Steve explained, "The first thing they're gonna even wanna do is saying, "You're carrying contraband and you're gonna make some hooch [drinking alcohol] out of it'. They don't even wanna think that you're actually trying to *eat* healthy."

Another example of obliging would be the vignette of the inmate observing another inmate hiding cigarettes in his bunk [Q2]. Eight of the 18 inmates interviewed favored the response of obliging in this case, choosing to say something to the offending inmate in order to avoid trouble for everyone else. Of the eight inmates, six were classified as collectivistic and two were individualistic. This finding is in accordance with face negotiation theory, which argues people of collectivistic cultures tend to utilize compromising styles of conflict more often than those who identify as individualistic (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

One inmate viewed the opportunity as a chance for personal gain and responded by suggesting the two of them smoke the cigarettes together. As Robert explained, through a collectivistic approach:

"I'm being honest, I'm gonna try to get "Mike" to smoke them with me cause... there's no good place to hide cigarettes... And honestly, I want some, we might as well smoke these up before they get here."

To this inmate, the scenario would become a win-win in that the contraband would be disposed of and both inmates would share the joy of prohibited cigarettes.

Integrating

According to face negotiation theory, members of collectivistic cultures use more integrative face work strategies than individualistic members (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Current findings support this conclusion to some degree, as there was only one integrator within the entire group. The lone problem solver was Ryan, a collectivistic African American in his mid-30s.



While he agreed that prison is a place where everyone tries to “mind your own business”, he was the type of person who tried to prevent conflicts from occurring, even if it meant going behind another inmate's back for the sake of keeping the peace. When presented with the hidden cigarettes scenario, he responded:

Ryan: “Probably uh, get 'em and move 'em. For the simple fact of “we have to stick together”... They [the guards] might not even toss his bed, they might just run the dog around him... So, I would move 'em and then tell Mike later, like go, “I had to move 'em cause they brought the dog in and I didn't want you to get messed off... and if you mad at me, I'll take care of it, I'll pay for it”. When you get into trouble in prison, you lose the best privilege you have and that's to see your family [visitation]. We look forward to *every day* for a weekend just for a few hours to see our family. Or to pick up the phone for 15 minutes to call home. That's the only thing that keeps ME and a lot of other fellas motivated to, to just *make it* in here.”

To this inmate, even if it meant upsetting the offending individual, it was more important to rid his bunk of the contraband and deal with the consequences later than sit back and watch the other inmate, or possibly the entire barracks, be punished for such a preventative “crime”.

Dominating

Individualistic cultures prefer dominating or competing conflict styles more than collectivists, primarily as an effort to maintain face within a group (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Such is the case with the lone competitor, Steve. He preferred the style of dominance when it came to conflicts. The sole scenario presented to him where he chose something other than domination was to negotiate the scenario of watching a friend being called a cheater during a game of cards [Q1]. He suggested he would pull the friend away from the situation before it escalated into an altercation. This too could be considered an effort of domination as Steve directly used his physical power to control the situation by removing his friend from impending harm.

When given the scenario of witnessing another inmate hide cigarettes [Q2], Steve chose to confront the offender, saying,

“You know, that's not my business but if they come in here and they bust you with that, you better own up to your own behavior. If not, me and you's gonna have issues. I'm not gonna rat you out but, you know, we gonna solve it one way or the other cause if I'ma get wrote up, I'm about to hit you.”

Steve took offense to the situation and saw the contraband as a personal threat. Even though the cigarettes were not in his personal area, he insisted that all of the inmates within the barracks would be punished for the indiscretion.



Situational and Environmental Factors and Identity

Situational factors within an institutional environment are also known to apply influence over inmate behavior (Gadon, Johnstone and Cooke, 2006). These factors refer to the nature of the situation where the violence occurs rather than the characteristics of the people involved (Megargee, 1982). Situational factors may be immediate, such as verbal abuse, or extensive such as the expectations of other inmates (Cooke, 1989). Environmental factors might be the level of social approval for violence (Cooke, 1989).

An example of a situational factor correlating with an inmate's identity would be the prospect of contraband. Several inmates found a way to avoid getting caught with it. Jerry suggested he might eat what fruit he could stomach [Q3] and leave the rest, saying,

“It's not worth me losing my visits. If they catch you takin' something out the kitchen, it's grounds for a disciplinary...You lose your visits [weekend visitation rights], you lose your phone privileges, you lose going to commissary, and you're back out on the “hoe squad”.

Eight of the 18 inmates being interviewed echoed the same mentality with a twist: eat some of the apples but leave the rest. James stated he would only accept the apples if the supervisor on duty gave him permission. Only two of the inmates being interviewed agreed to take the apples back to their barracks, but only if a particular guard was working the door. As Robert explained,

“You know the guards that care and one's that don't. If you got somebody on your door that you know you can't get nothing in on, 'course you don't take it in. If you got somebody on the doors we call “cool”, then we take 'em and we eat 'em. There ain't no sense in throwing them away.”

If the inmate didn't feel threatened by the prospect of being punished, he would accept the fruit. Another example of situational factors and inmate identity was the scenario of observing another inmate hiding contraband in his bunk bed [Q2]. Some inmates viewed the situation as lose-lose, in that everyone in the barracks would get into trouble due to one inmate's actions. As “Luke”, a collectivistic African American in his early 30s, pointed out,

“You putting everybody in trouble. So, if you would just take 'em – I don't care what you do with 'em – but you gotta move 'em from here so then everybody would be clear or so when they come in. I don't want no consequences for everybody because of something you done did so... just hold your end of the bargain.”

Rather than keep the information to himself, Luke would choose to confront the other inmate and suggest he hide his contraband elsewhere, for everyone's sake. “Bill”, an individualistic Caucasian in his late-40s, agreed, “I try to mind my own business, but even in a prison setting, he would be warned, not by me, but by somebody else in the barracks.”



An example of an environmental factor would be the introduction of acceptable sanctions, which was relatively agreed upon by both individualistic and collectivistic members. Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) suggests that violent behavior is used to maintain position and status within the prison subculture. It may also be used to 'save face' (Cooke, 1989). If an altercation occurred and the person being accused was guilty of the allegations, other inmates may feel his or her punishment was justified.

When presented with the scenario of witnessing a friend in an altercation over a game of cards [Q1], Mark, an individualistic African American in his mid-30s, argued, "I wouldn't just let him beat him [the friend] to DEATH, but if it's within the realm of reason, then he take his punishment." Jerry, a collectivistic African American in his late 20s, reiterated by saying, "If he [the friend] place himself in that situation, then you know what goes on with that type of behavior, be it gambling or just – most people ain't playing no cards to be playing cards, you know – they be the type to gambling. So when you put yourself in that type of environment, then you have to deal with what's going on." In other words, each inmate must be aware of his own actions and take the consequences resulting from the altercation, whether they are good or bad.

Another example of situational factors and identity is the act of one inmate insulting another inmate's masculinity. To attack an inmate's manhood is the verbal equivalence of bodily harm. During recruitment, it was brought to my attention that "coward" should replace the word "punk" during vignette four. It was agreed to be the closest in definition to the insult I was intending. In society, a punk is an inexperienced person, but in prison, it refers to a male who presents himself as a homosexual partner to another inmate. Once the interviews began, everyone responded to the scenario in a calm fashion, except for Steve. He did not agree to the change of wording and chose to explain. He said,

"They told you to change "coward" [from "punk"]... you know, that one just slides off of us. But that "punk" word, that would get a lot of us riled up, because you're really calling us a "b word" [bitch] or a homo, or whatever... something that would take away from our man identity, our manliness, or masculinity... We'd probably get more rowdier... we'd tell dude, "man, don't let that word come out your mouth again"... Because that's a very disrespectful word because we still have respect in here and we have laws within these gates, inmate to another inmate... You don't get in other people's business, but you don't call 'em the "b word", you don't call 'em a woman either, you know what I'm saying? And, because we are all *men*, and we treat each other like that, and if not, then there's ways to handle it... Cause, in here, your pride plays a big part cause you're confined with nothing but testosterone so when you feel like someone is challenging you, it's just natural to rise up... let 'em know, "I'm still a man" and I'm not gonna be ignorant and throw the first punch but, you know, you need to *respect* me."



Thus, to Steve, words as well as actions equal respect. When asked to elaborate further on the issue of being called a “coward”, he clarified his response, saying,

“When you call me that punk word, that's just a whole different mentality and it's a bad mentality. Since I'm close to going home, I'm trying to break that mentality because, out there in the world, there's words people say out there that don't have the same meaning as they do in here. Every day is a challenge, mentally, because this ain't our temporary – this ain't our permanent place, you know. That word's a little *harsh* but we get through it.”

As long as another inmate verbally respected him, Steve did not see the situation as threatening. A strong relationship between environmental and situational factors with an inmate's identity is the act of being disrespected (environmental) while other inmates watch (situational). To allow another inmate to show such incivility towards you without reprimanding him in some way is a major sign of inferiority (Ekland-Olson, 1986). Having another inmate (or group of inmates) witness the altercation creates a conflict of interest: avoid the conflict and maintain your good behavioral status with the prison staff or give in to the situation to maintain your identity among the other inmates. If it's a verbal altercation, the results within this study suggest the inmates would walk away. If the altercation became physical, *all* of the inmates responded they would fight back. This finding is strongly connected to the convict code of not backing down. It did not matter if the inmate considered himself to be individualistic or collectivistic – if he found himself in a brawl, he had to fight back before anyone else would even consider stepping in on his behalf.

A similar response was echoed by another inmate, “Paul”, an individualistic Caucasian in his late-20s, explained:

“A crowd makes a big difference. The more people who are watching, the more a man, an inmate, feels like he has to back up everything he's saying. I would hold – stand my ground – assert my *innocence* that I wasn't cheating, try to *evade* the fight... I think it would be bad, on my part, in here, if I ran from the fight. Because it sends a message to everyone else that now I'm an easy target and it will lead to more confrontations later.”

Not every inmate felt the same way. Most chose to walk away from the situation, equating the name calling to a simple bluff. The problem solver of the group, Ryan, went so far as to question the bluff itself, asking,

“Because a person says something, does it hurt you physically? If it doesn't hurt you physically, then something mentally can be worked out. A name doesn't change you.”

In summation of the interviewees, just because an inmate is disrespecting another inmate, the contempt does not have to escalate into a physical altercation. Knowing when to respond to



mockery and knowing when to walk away are highly valuable skills to acquire while being incarcerated.

Several inmates said they keep their heads down to avoid conflict. Being anti-social could be seen as beneficial in that it deters the possibility of social confrontation, even if the individual in question is not reclusive. Self-imposed isolation is used as a survival tactic in order to avoid any potential provocations in future scenarios. As Bill would agree, "I don't try to put no more chances on myself because I'm trying to go home."

Bullying was alluded to off and on throughout several of the interviews and several of the inmates chose to recall specific incidents. Intimidation tactics used by other inmates to gauge a new inmate's attitude is not a novel occurrence. Sometimes, such dominating instances might simply be a bluff. Carl, an individualistic Caucasian in his early-40s, agrees:

Carl: There was three guys and one guy had a lawnmower blade that they had ground off to make a knife out of it and... He thought he would kill me with it."

Me: "Why did he want to kill you with it?"

Carl: I don't know. It was just one of those things. It was the first, like the uh, it was part of that game. It was uh, the first... 30 days or so... that I was here.

Me: "So, you feel like he was testing you?"

Carl: "Not quite sure. Never did really figure it out but... something changed his mind... He dropped it to his side and turned around and walked off and then his friends went with him. I heard one of his friends try and like, "Well, if you're gonna get him, now is the time"... I stood my ground but I didn't really say anything aggressive either."

Although an explanation was not fully provided, one might assume the encounter to be a scare tactic to see how the intended victim would react. As Carl chose not to cower or back down, perhaps the instigator decided the killing was not worth his time or he never meant to actually commit the offense. Carl did not elaborate further and gave no indication he wanted to discuss the occurrence at length, so the researcher moved on to the next question.

Discussion

Through an analysis of inmate-to-inmate interaction and their conflict management skills, several theoretical and practical implications were drawn. The analysis focused on the discourse among inmates that showed evidence of face protection and management of altercations with other inmates. This study illustrated the ways in which inmates used avoiding, compromising, obligating, integrating, and/or dominating skills of face negotiation to maintain control of their projected identity during compromising situations. This study



also examined the relationship of situational and environmental factors, convict code, and inmate identities in relation to mediation tactics throughout the vignettes presented.

This research supports claims made by face negotiation theorists. Nine of the 18 inmates interviewed adopted an individualistic approach to conflict management by labeling themselves to be independent of any group and placing their needs before the needs of the others. These inmates did not submit to conflicting situations by allowing their accuser to win the altercation, nor did they consider problem-solving to be a solution either. Their main response was to 'mind their business' or to 'walk away'. They did not state that by walking away, it was best for both parties, but did imply that to indulge in the situation was not in their best interest because it was not worth the loss of visitation, privileges, or early parole. This type of response is clearly in connection with an *I*-identity in that the inmate is protecting himself from any possible disciplinary actions.

The remaining nine inmates who adopted a collectivistic identity considered themselves to be part of a group and viewed their actions to be in relation to the goals and needs of that group. These inmates chose to respond to conflicting situations by attempting to negotiate the situation or integrating a win-win solution so that all parties involved reached a favorable outcome, one in which the conflict was resolved (or averted all together). Their response was that everyone had to work together in order to get through their period of incarceration. Even when the prospect of disciplinary action was considered, the inmates chose to avoid possible punishment for the overall group. This type of response is in connection with a *we*-identity in that the inmates who are members of a collectivistic culture feel responsible for the concern of those around them.

It should be noted that if a scenario involved a verbal altercation, those who presented themselves to be individualistic preferred to avoid the conflict (only one collectivist, Frank, preferred to avoid conflict but would oblige if a friend was involved). If the incident involved contraband (fruit or cigarettes), all who presented themselves to be collectivistic gave in to the situation one way or another (i.e. accept the fruit; warn the friend of possible detection of cigarettes). Those who presented themselves to be individualistic tended to avoid the situation but would oblige if it involved a friend or acquaintance).

Several results suggest the collectivistic and individualistic identities of the inmates reinforce face negotiation theory in various ways. Inmates considered collectivistic felt responsible for the overall welfare of the group while individualistic inmates considered themselves independent of any group and placed their needs before all others. Collectivistic inmates favored a compromising mediation strategy during conflict, supporting Ting-Toomey's (2005) conclusions. In regard to conflict mediation styles, these findings offer a contradiction. Ting-Toomey (2005) suggested collectivists would be more likely to use avoidance strategies during conflict, but findings suggest the opposite to be true as individualistic inmates used avoidance strategies the most.



A few surprising themes within this research also confirmed previous studies. Situational and environmental factors were found to play a significant role in mediation strategies, as verbal altercations (environmental) would usually end in avoidance but physical altercations (situational) would always end in inmate-on-inmate violence. But results regarding the rule of the convict code, which states inmates should not interfere in the problems of other inmates, were somewhat muddled. Most prisoners avoided conflicting situations between other inmates (which confirms the convict code) but would intervene if a friend was involved (which contradicts the convict code). Further research would be advantageous in correlating the convict code, situational and environmental factors, and inmate conflict mediation. Policy makers could benefit from examining empirical testimony of day-to-day conversations and factional inmate communication patterns in an effort to design and implement institutional behavior reforms.

Conclusion

This study examined whether individualistic or collectivistic cultures further promote prisonization and the convict code, due to the diminishing environmental and situational factors of incarceration. These additions to the extant literature are consistent with Lawson et al.'s (1996) call for an expansion of *intra-prison variables* (i.e. communication style, misconduct, and/or social skills) associated with conflict mediation, while addressing the deficiency of prior studies by adding the perspective of inmate communication.

This study sought to explore the significance of cultural interpretations, social behavior, and mediation strategies within a racially diverse group of inmates. Determining whether inmates classified themselves as individual or collectivistic showcased different methods of preserving face and dissolving conflict, while their use of face negotiation provided alternative methods resolving conflict. Previous research regarding the convict code has not emphasized the role of communication concerning inmate conflict management, an omission the present study sought to address.

Qualitative data obtained from participant responses to vignettes describing potential conflict situations were analyzed with the purpose of examining the struggles of prisonization and cultural assimilation. Some inmates displayed an image of solidarity, while others preferred to disassociate themselves from the group. A few even projected themselves as part of a group when, in actuality, they favored being left alone. These carefully constructed images were performed with the desire to hinder the possibility of inmate-on-inmate violence and allow the inmates to finish their respective sentences without incident.

Prior research regarding prison and the situational and environmental effects of incarceration on inmate behavior have emphasized the importance of the convict code and its capacity within the behavioral evolution and conformity throughout an inmate's stay (Jacobs, 1975; Porporino and Zamble, 1984; Addams, 1992; Clear and Cole, 2003; Lee and Ousey, 2011). Inmate behavior cannot be hypothesized without attributing to the derivate of cultural expectations and prisonization within individual and group conflict progression.



Some inmates willingly comply with the violent norms and mannerisms of prison. The forced compliance of inmates from various cultural backgrounds housed within the prison walls increases the importance of respective behavior towards one another, especially during violent situations (Colwell, 2007). This cooperation amid personal and societal encouragement for such behavior determines the self-ritual practices of the inmate community.

Despite these contributions, this study suffers several limitations that merit further discussion. The results from this research are limited to the living conditions of the inmates involved and cannot be generalized to other security facilities. The inmates interviewed were of a minimum-security facility, housed in open barracks, and capable of roaming their designated areas. The inmates were not strictly confined. Therefore, environmental stressors are greatly reduced as the inmates are allowed more freedom to interact each other. If the inmates were housed within a maximum-security facility, environmental stressors would be heightened as the psychological pressure of close confinement and loss of personal freedom would be more prevalent among these particular inmates.

They were also limits to the number of inmates used to conduct the study. In regards to population size, it is possible within larger prisons that inmates have a greater chance of encountering other inmates with similar socio-cultural inclinations. The unit housing the inmates interviewed for this research has a maximum capacity of less than 1,000 inmates. Only 18 of these inmates were interviewed, resulting in less than 0.02% of the population being represented. Furthermore, the small size of sample limits the generalizability of findings outside of the sample. However, even given the small sample size, the richness of the data generated is hoped by the researcher to vividly illustrate specific examples of how respondents responded to conflict incidents to help aid further investigation into this important topic.

This research supports the notion that male inmate behavior is determined by situational and environmental factors. Findings focused on the importance of correspondence between individualistic and collectivistic needs in the promotion of prison adjustment. The culture of prison contradicts the culture of society. As Robert lamented, “You never know what you have till you lose it. Being locked up, they strip you of everything... There's no drug out there in the world that would *ever* tempt me to come back to this place.”

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