CAPTIVE KNOWLEDGE: CENSORSHIP AND CONTROL IN PRISON LIBRARIES

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from 162 surveys and 26 in-depth interviews with state prison librarians throughout the U.S., this research addresses the processes of censorship that occur in prison libraries, as well as the roles of the library and the librarian within the organization of the prison. Most state prisons have a library, though size and quality vary greatly from one institution to the next. Wardens and other administrators have a great deal of control over the way the library operates, as they make decisions concerning budget, space, and materials. The prison librarian is also an essential part of how a prison library functions and the kind of role it plays within the institution. Prison librarians often simultaneously experience conflict with security personnel who challenge the contents and purpose of the library, while also being expected to perform some type of security function themselves, thus leading to a situation in which they feel role conflict. While many librarians see the library as a rehabilitative tool, they argue that the majority of custody staff and administrators see it as a mechanism of social control, albeit one that they are less than enthusiastic to support with resources. Both formal and informal processes of censorship occur in the prison, and there is significant variation in which materials are censored from one institution to the next. A central thesis of this document is the notion that censorship constitutes an exercise of power. The practice of censorship occurs between human beings, yet it is also influenced by the organizational structure of the prison and the laws of the state, so that possible courses of action are structured (though not determined) for individuals within the organization. I create a typology of censored materials, which fall into two main categories: (1) items considered a risk to the safety and security of the institution, and (2) materials deemed to be ‘counter to the goal of
rehabilitation’. A broad array of materials falls into each of these two categories. I also outline the primary justifications given for the censorship of each category of items.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In June 2007, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) implemented its Standardized Chapel Library Project in response to growing fears that an increasing number of people are being exposed to the ideologies of, and converting to, ‘radical’ Islam while incarcerated. The intent of this project was to create and disseminate a list of approved religious materials for federal prison libraries. Chaplains were ordered immediately to remove anything that was not on the list. The policy was met with fierce criticism and resistance from religious leaders and civil rights activists, eventually culminating in lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of the list. The BOP has since acquiesced to this pressure to some degree, returning most previously verboten titles to the libraries, while maintaining the right to censor any religious texts “that could be radicalizing or incite violence” (quoted in Banerjee 2007).

A few years later, in the summer of 2010, Steven Hayes was on trial, accused of murdering a family in Connecticut. He had served many years in prison prior to the alleged crime, and his defense attorneys motioned that any records of the books he had read while incarcerated be kept confidential. There was much speculation about the types of books he had read while in prison, with a particular concern that Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* had influenced the murders. Though it was never established that Hayes had actually read Capote, or any other books containing depictions of murder, Connecticut Senator John Kissel publicly announced his intention to remove books containing real or fictional accounts of graphic violence from Connecticut’s prison libraries because of the effects they might have on prisoners (Goldberg 2010).
CENSORSHIP AS EXERCISE OF POWER AND VIOLATION OF RIGHTS

These two recent incidents have caused correctional professionals, academics, politicians, journalists, and other concerned individuals to think about and discuss prison censorship, an issue that many of those outside the prison system had likely never given much prior consideration. The topic of censorship elicits strong reactions and ignites fierce debates in American society. So too does the issue of prisoners and the nature of their punishment. Discussions of censorship in prison, then, are centered on two highly divisive and controversial issues. These are not merely discussions about censorship in American society, but rather are more fundamentally debates about what prisoners deserve. They are debates that essentialize prisoners as a (marginalized and excluded) class of people who do not retain the same rights as other Americans. According to the logic of both the BOP and Senator Kissel, all prisoners, regardless of who they are, where they come from, or why they are incarcerated, not only have the potential to be persuaded to commit violent acts by reading materials they access while incarcerated, but also lack the constitutional protection of the First Amendment.

The prison and the library are two institutions whose raisons d’être seem fundamentally at odds. One exists to confine and discipline the defiled and dispossessed, the other to provide knowledge, with all its emancipatory powers, freely to each and every member of society. How, then, did this curious blend of institutions become a regular feature of the American criminal justice system, so that today almost all prisons contain within their walls some sort of library? The Boston Public Library, the first publicly supported municipal library in the U.S., is engraved with a motto that provides insight into the philosophical underpinnings of this merging of institutions: “The Commonwealth Requires the Education of the People as the Safeguard of
Order and Liberty.” The idea that reading can transform individuals into responsible (obedient) citizens of a democratic society was part of the rehabilitative ideology that spawned the penitentiary in early America, and it is this notion that books can be mechanisms of personal transformation that has given the prison library its continued (though not uncontested) justification for existence even into contemporary times, when goals of rehabilitation have lost merit amid the clangor of retributive rhetoric, and concern for prisoners’ rights is often trumped by the objective of maintaining institutional order.

The long and turbulent history of the struggle for prisoners’ rights is rife with incidents such as strikes, boycotts, riots, and lawsuits in which prisoners have emphasized the importance of access to reading materials. In perhaps the most famous prison riot in American history, the inmates of Attica prison listed as the fourth of their fifteen proposals the “end to all censorship of newspapers, magazines, letters and other publications…” (The Inmates of Attica Prison [1971] 2000). Forty years later, this proposal has yet to be implemented, though significant legal and institutional changes have since been made concerning censorship. Thus, this research reveals just one of many ways in which power is exercised by the state at the organizational level. Given that the prison is arguably the most despised of all organizations, containing the most dispossessed and excluded members of society, it is essential that we examine the myriad ways in which individuals in this group are affected by the decisions made by those in power; critically address the ways that our society treats its most vulnerable populations; and document the abuses of rights (such as censorship that clearly violates constitutional rights) that often happen as part of mundane, everyday life in the prison.

Censorship is practiced in several locations within the prison. First, incoming mail is
subject to inspection, and many prisons have restrictions about what kinds of reading materials can be sent to prisoners and who can send them. For example, most prisons only allow books and magazines to be sent by publishers or retailers such as Amazon; many do not allow hardcover books (which are thought to be convenient hiding places for weapons, drugs, or other contraband); and beyond these regulations, certain restrictions apply to the content of materials. Second, prison libraries are subject to the censorship policies of administrators, which are enforced and/or contested by prison librarians. For many prisoners, the library is their only source of books, magazines, and newspapers, as they lack both personal finances and friends or family members who are willing or able to purchase and send materials through publishers or retailers. A third site of censorship is the educational and occupational programs that are available in some prisons. Teachers must follow the rules and regulations of the institution and do not have the academic freedom comparable to the kind found in universities to choose course content and materials. Censorship is an important issue in each of these sites, but because not all prisoners have access to incoming materials or educational and occupational classes, the library stands as the most prominent source of reading material in the prison and thus will be the focus of this study.

THE PRISON LIBRARY AS A NEGLECTED SPACE WITH POTENTIAL FOR INCREASING LITERACY

In their analysis of penal architecture, Armstrong and McAra (2006:23) call for research on “spaces of the prison that have either been neglected in earlier periods of study or which have only become visible under current conditions.” The prison library is one of those neglected and
understudied spaces within the prison. Stearns (2004:62) notes: “Criminologists and corrections professionals rarely even mention libraries in their research. The prison library literature consists chiefly of what the librarians themselves have contributed…” The library is a microcosm in which debates that happen surrounding policies and practices—about rehabilitation, reentry, retribution, and so on—reflect larger discussions in the academic literature, as well as society more broadly, yet it has been virtually ignored in the criminological and sociological literature.

Additionally, given the low rate of literacy among U.S. prisoners, the library stands as one location within the penal institution that has the capacity to improve people’s literacy skills. American adults who have not completed high school are more likely to be incarcerated than those with an education level of high school or beyond; 39.7 percent of state prisoners, as compared to 18.4 percent of the general population have less than a high school level education (Harlow 2003:1). One of the possible explanations for this is that, beyond the formidable structural barriers faced by those who lack the requisite degrees to compete in the labor market, limited literacy skills could act as an additional barrier to attaining fulfillment in multitudinous aspects of life, ranging from concrete phenomena like access to health care and employment to more abstract components of human existence, such as having self esteem and a sense of meaning and belonging in the world.

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) surveyed individuals incarcerated in state and federal prisons as well as those living in households. In a report entitled “Literacy Behind Bars,” Greenberg, Dunleavy, and Kutner (2007) compare the household and prison data along several dimensions, including race, gender, age, and level of education. They also look specifically at the prison data to determine if various aspects of prison life, such as
work assignments, vocational training programs, use of the prison library, and frequency of reading are correlated with literacy levels. Finally, the authors compare the 2003 results with those of a nearly identical study done in 1992 in order to assess the changes that have occurred over the decade. The results portray a complex picture of the relationships among literacy, race/ethnicity, educational background, age, and incarceration. Overall, both female and male prisoners have lower average prose, document, and quantitative literacy skill than those of the same gender living in households (Greenberg et al. 2007).

When the data are analyzed using race/ethnicity, White prisoners have significantly lower average prose, document, and quantitative literacy than Whites living in households, while incarcerated Blacks have higher average prose literacy, but statistically similar document and quantitative literacy, compared to Blacks living in households. For Hispanics, prisoners had higher prose and document literacy, but similar quantitative literacy, as those living at home. The authors also assessed the relationships between educational attainment and literacy. For those with less than a high school education, prison inmates had higher literacy in all three areas than did their counterparts in households. Not only is educational attainment correlated with literacy, but participation in a vocational program also appears to be correlated with higher literacy. Greenberg et al. (2007) observe that, while “inmates who enter prison with higher literacy may be more likely to use the library and computers, read, and even get certain work assignments, participating in any of these activities may help inmates improve their literacy” (p.57). Given the disparities in literacy skills among incarcerated and non-incarcerated adults, it is important to recognize and understand the library’s potential (which the data show does exist) to reduce the disparities, particularly because of the extent to which the U.S. incarcerates people.
The rapid and unprecedented expansion of the U.S. penal system in the past few decades has resulted in the highest incarceration rate in the world, both in terms of the sheer number of people imprisoned and per capita. There were over 2.4 million people incarcerated in local jails and state or federal prisons at the end of 2008, placing the imprisonment rate at 750 per 100,000 (Bosworth 2010:2). When we include those serving parole, probation, and other non-custodial sentences, the total number of people under the supervision of the criminal justice system surpasses seven million (Abramsky 2007:xviii). Rates of incarceration vary drastically by race/ethnicity for both women and men. The male imprisonment rate per 100,000 is 487 for whites; 1,200 for Hispanics; and 3,161 for blacks (Sabol, West, and Cooper 2009). For women, the rates are smaller but comparably disproportionate: 50 for whites; 75 for Hispanics; and 149 for blacks (Sabol et al. 2009). If we compare these statistics to those of other Western nations that are economically and culturally similar to the U.S., we see a gaping disparity. For example, the imprisonment rate in the U.K. is 148 per 100,000 and in Germany, 93 per 100,000; these differences in incarceration are not simply an expression of crime differences (Bosworth 2010:3). Thus, millions upon millions of individuals are affected by the carceral experience and are subjected to various deprivations of rights while incarcerated in the U.S. This research will address a particular aspect of the conditions of their incarceration—access to information.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study will address several research questions, which were modified over time as more information was gathered. First, in Chapter 4, I ask, What is the purpose of the library within the prison context? Librarians differ in the ways they answer this question, and they also provide
insight into the ways they perceive that others within the institution (administrators, custody staff, etc.) understand the library. While many librarians see the library as a rehabilitative tool, they argue that the majority of custody staff and administrators see it as a mechanism of social control, albeit one that they are less than enthusiastic to support with resources.

Second, Chapter 5 addresses the question, How is prisoners’ access to reading materials in prison libraries censored by institutional regulations and individuals who work in the prison? Prisons are not required by federal law to maintain recreational library facilities, but most prisons do have a library, though size and quality vary greatly from one institution to the next. Wardens and other administrators have a great deal of control over the way the library operates, as they make the rules and regulations concerning budget, space, and materials. The prison librarian is also an essential part of how a prison library functions and the kind of role it plays within the institution. Even if the Warden is the ultimate arbiter of policy, the librarian controls the day-to-day operation of the library and has at least some degree of power to enforce or contest the administration’s decisions.

Third, Chapter 6 asks, What types of information, knowledge, and materials are censored, and what are the social, cultural, and institutional processes and interactions that shape censorship? I create a typology of censored materials, which fall into two main categories: (1) items considered a risk to the safety and security of the institution, and (2) materials deemed to be counter to the goal of rehabilitation. A broad array of materials falls into each of these two categories. I also outline the primary justifications given for the censorship of each category of items.

Finally, the fourth question, addressed in Chapter 7, asks how prison librarians’ attitudes,
values, and beliefs influence censorship. Prison librarians have varied personal and educational backgrounds, and they must make ethical choices about how to run their libraries. In their roles as prison librarians, they often simultaneously experience conflict with security personnel who challenge the contents and purpose of the library, while also being expected to perform some type of security function themselves, thus leading to a situation in which they must be “continually cognizant of the fact that the greater good sometimes must be purchased at the cost of principle” (Singer 2000:12). Some librarians may be more willing to bend or break institutional rules for what they believe to be the benefit of their patrons, while others may develop an authoritative and uncompromising relationship with inmates. Still others may use their position to impose their own beliefs upon the prisoners. For example, a librarian may refuse to order books s/he deems inappropriate for prisoners, such as mystery novels or other escapist literature, and instead build a collection comprised primarily of self-improvement and religious materials on the grounds that these will aid in the rehabilitation that s/he believes prisoners require. These are ethical decisions based on the librarian’s values and beliefs, and they have significant consequences for prisoners, who have few other means of accessing reading materials. So even where formal institutional rules about censorship and library materials are similar, the actual shape a library takes can differ greatly based on who works as the librarian. This research will explore how prison librarians make these ethical choices from within specific institutional contexts.

A larger goal of the research is to expand sociological understanding of the ways in which knowledge and power are inextricably bound up with one another and, more specifically, how this affects incarcerated individuals and those who work in penal institutions. Any restrictions or
limitations placed on the information that is available in the prison library must be understood within the context of institutional power dynamics. Though ample research has been conducted on the work of prison guards and administrators, and how those individuals understand their work and shape the experiences of inmates, very few researchers have addressed the same issues regarding prison librarians, who act as gatekeepers of knowledge within the institution. This research aims to fill that gap. It will contribute to larger theoretical discussions of power, penalty, discipline, and social control, as well as add to the existing literature on prison work.
CHAPTER 2: CONTEXTUALIZING THE RESEARCH

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRISON LIBRARIES

In the earliest American prisons, inmates were subject to a regime of “separation, obedience, and labor” (Rothman 1971:105). In both the Auburn and the Pennsylvania systems, prisoners entered a harshly disciplined world that was justified by a Christian ideology which espoused the goal of transformation, if not outright salvation. The inmates were expected to change their deviant ways through the benefits of solitude, silence, prayer, and work. The Bible was a fundamental part of this regime. Though some evidence suggests that a few books other than the Bible (generally prayer books and other religious tracts) may have been available at the earliest institutions such as the Walnut Street Jail and Newgate Prison, both systems considered the Bible vital in their missions to reform deviants (Sullivan 1989). As the concept of the penitentiary spread throughout the U.S., so too did the idea that religious instruction and scriptural reading could be part of the convict’s spiritual transformation. In fact, the Boston Prison Discipline Society posited in 1840 that “next to labor, reading is the most valuable and extensive means of improvement” (quoted in Sullivan 2000:56). This aspect of rehabilitative ideology, coupled with the notion that reading encourages docility, gave rise to the prison library in the late 19th century.

Perhaps the greatest challenger of the idea that religious materials were the only works suitable for prisoners was Eliza Farnham, the matron of the women’s section of Sing Sing prison in the 1840s. Farnham, an enthusiastic student of the emerging sciences of criminology and

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1 Almost unbelievably, just this year (2011), the ACLU filed a lawsuit against a jail in South Carolina for banning all reading material other than soft cover bibles ordered directly from the publisher (Flood 2011).
phrenology, brought classic literature, magazines, and popular fiction to women prisoners in an attempt to help modify their behavior and inculcate them with a proper code of morality and feminine domesticity (Vogel 2009). She believed that exposing criminals, who were largely ignorant and uneducated, to the new ideas found in books and magazines could be an effective tool in coercing them to conform to social norms. Farnham was ultimately accused of heresy and corrupting women prisoners by the prison chaplain, who charged her with supplying the women with “such morally destructive literature as Dickens’ Nicholas Nickleby” (quoted in Engelbarts 1972:27). Though this allegation led to her resignation from prison librarianship and the removal of such contested materials, she was responsible for introducing the idea that filling prison libraries with a variety of works, including fiction and magazines, could be an effective form of social control.

Until the 20th century, nearly all prison libraries were run by chaplains, who were responsible for supplying books (through donations) and maintaining the library, which was comprised principally of religious volumes and works of moral or reading instruction. The chaplains, who often espoused the idea that prisoners should read for “moral improvement,” and the prison administrators who supported library development as part of their rehabilitative ideology, used the library as a way to “inculcate the moral and religious ideas of the hegemonic classes” (Vogel 2009:3). Even those prison reformers such as the Pennsylvania Prison Society, whose goals were more social than spiritual, championed the idea that prison libraries should be places where prisoners could access books that would help them become morally sound people (Coyle 1987). At this time, new scientific fields such as psychiatry and criminology, which prison reformers looked to for theoretical guidance, produced knowledge of the individual and
created new techniques of control that targeted the ‘soul’ or the mind of once deviant bodies in order to render them docile (Foucault 1977). Reading and moral instruction fit nicely with these theories of control and discipline.

As rehabilitative ideology became the dominant discourse in penality in the early 20th century, the prison library struggled to find its place and legitimacy within the prison. The influence that books and other reading materials had on prisoners was contested within penal institutions. While some advocated the introduction of well-stocked prison libraries as a means of maintaining order and providing inmates with moral guidance, others fiercely disapproved of introducing the influences of the “outer world” to prisoners, who were expected to be separated from any corrupting forces that might threaten their reform (Coyle 1987:19). These notions were crucial to the development of library collections, since, as Sullivan argues, the “prison library as a rehabilitative tool was by its very definition a censored library, one that contained only ‘positive’ and moral literature” (1989:28). The idea that books can influence human behavior, for better or worse, still affects contemporary debates about prison libraries and the censoring of materials.

As prison reformers began to emphasize the importance of education as a component of rehabilitation, and a new class of professional librarians arose, the two groups coalesced to generate a justification for prison libraries that would ultimately lead to the establishment of libraries in all federal and some state prisons. Linking libraries to education departments within the prison would lend legitimacy to the cause and produce a lasting effect, such that many prisons still house libraries within larger educational programs. When the BOP was establishing and defining itself in the 1930s, each federal prison instituted its own professionally staffed
library (Suvak 1977). At the same time, a warden in a Wisconsin state prison claimed that the library was the “biggest single factor in the maintenance of our discipline and in the building of the morals of our inmates” (quoted in Coyle 1987:30). Concurrently, the ALA created its Committee on Libraries in Correctional Institutions, which worked with the American Prison Association to publish suggested guidelines and catalogs for prison libraries (Vogel 2009).

Despite a general acceptance of the usefulness of prison libraries by the mid-twentieth century, lack of funding and coordination among state prisons threatened their continued existence. However, a new form of rehabilitative therapy was introduced during the 1950s that gave the library a renewed purpose. Psychology and group therapy were increasingly championed by penal reformers as new, scientific means of reforming deviants, and the concept of bibliotherapy emerged as a promising tool for transforming prisoners (Cummins 1994). Bibliotherapy is essentially a group reading program in which inmates read and discuss selected works of literature with a librarian, psychologist, or teacher who guides discussions that should ultimately lead to the inmates’ introspection and change. The library played a central role in this type of programming, both as a provider of texts and a space for gathering together inmates and professionals. The promise of the healing powers of bibliotherapy led to the Library Services and Construction Act of 1966 (LSCA), which allocated federal funding for the creation and maintenance of state prisons libraries and required state libraries to aid prisons in library development (Coyle 1987). Even when bibliotherapy began to lose its appeal in the late 1960s, as people came to condemn theories of rehabilitation as paternalistic, the funding had been secured, and the concept of the prison library as a fundamental part of the institution had been established.
As professional librarians began to work in prisons, they promoted reading not only as a rehabilitative tool, but as an intellectual pursuit from which all human beings should benefit. Thus, the civil and human rights oriented philosophy of the “right to read” entered penal discourse in the 1960s and 70s (Coyle 1987:49). The rights-based rhetoric embraced by prison librarians was enmeshed in the larger prisoners’ rights movement that was gaining ground at the time, much of which was fueled by leftist professionals. Jacobs (1977) argues that the efforts of non-inmate activist groups fundamentally changed prison administrations and living conditions for inmates. He claims that “it was only when outside interest groups began making demands on the prison and holding the administrators accountable for their decisions that traditional authoritarian systems of institutional authority became untenable” (Jacobs 1977:10). Prison librarians began to insist upon building their collections with not only ‘rehabilitative’ and educational materials, but also with novels and other leisure works that reflected the preferences of the prisoners themselves (Sullivan 2000). Whereas prior to the late 1960s, the primary debates surrounding the prison library were centered on ascertaining the best way to ensure prisoner discipline and rehabilitation, the focus now shifted to prisoners’ right to access reading materials, and prison libraries became sites of political contest when prisoners and their advocates began to take issues of civil rights and censorship to the courts. These grievances resulted in several important court cases, which will be discussed below, that had lasting changes on prison libraries and prisoners’ access to information. Prison libraries were reconceptualized as spaces for recreation and knowledge attainment rather than mere instruments of discipline and rehabilitation.

The substantial gains made by prisoners by the 1970s, coupled with the more stable
funding supplied by the LSCA and the increased presence of professional librarians, resulted in nearly all federal and state prisons housing some sort of library (though the size and quality of both the collection and the space varied greatly from one institution to the next). These factors, along with the library’s continued association with educational programming, gave prison libraries the lasting foothold they needed to survive into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1980s, the ALA published its <em>Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions</em>, which outlined a position maintaining that prisoners have just as much right as anyone else to libraries that provide “recreational, educational, and informational services” (Coyle 1987:66). The underlying principles of the document remain at the heart of prison library services today, and the American Correctional Association (ACA) has adopted many of the ALA’s positions as its own, though the ACA stops short of referring to reading as a “right.”

As penal policies changed in the 1980s and 90s, when the nation shifted politically toward the Right, prison libraries suffered a major blow. In the mid 1990s, when tough on crime rhetoric, punitive sentiment, and draconian mandatory minimum sentences were sweeping the nation, the LSCA was essentially dismantled and replaced by the Library Service and Technology Act (LSTA), which eliminated both federal funding and state library support for state prison libraries (Vogel 2009). The LSTA instead made aid to prison libraries optional, and many state prisons lost much needed support, thus reducing or even eliminating many of the library services available to inmates. Though libraries still exist in most prisons, many are not staffed by professional librarians and even more lack adequate resources, often depending solely on donations to build their collections. Those who work in these libraries do so within an institutional context where the correctional staff’s goal of maintaining tight security and
discipline takes precedence over the provision of library services, which can lead to both interpersonal conflict among staff members and internal dilemmas about the purpose of one’s role as librarian (Singer 2000). In this climate, even librarians point to the library’s social control function in order to justify its place in the prison. The Library Coordinator for the Oregon DOC recently stated that libraries “can be a place where inmates experience a model of institutional social support that gives them the opportunity to voluntarily consent to be governed” (Jorbet 2011:1).

Though prisoners are not constitutionally entitled to recreational library services, they are guaranteed access to some sort of legal recourse, which generally takes the form of a law library (Vogel 2009). The distinction between a recreational library and a law library is foremost a legal one, but many institutions actually house these two separately. Since the existence of court mandated law libraries is the result of the numerous lawsuits that were made by or on behalf of prisoners in the 1960s and 70s, their development will be detailed below along with a larger discussion of prisoners’ access to information and censorship in prison. In order to situate the prison library within a larger social context, I will first provide a wider discussion of censorship in American society, as well as in public and school libraries.

AN OVERVIEW OF CENSORSHIP PRACTICES

Though censorship has been practiced in various forms around the globe for millennia, contemporary debates about censorship in the U.S. are generally grounded in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which states that “Congress shall make no law…abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press…” The language of the First Amendment seems limiting,
with its references to ‘speech’ and ‘the press’, as if these two modes of expression encompass the totality of what needs protecting from censorship. We should also not assume that it is only through law that information is censored. With Derek Jones, I argue that censorship should be understood more broadly as a “variety of processes…formal and informal, overt and covert, conscious and unconscious, by which restrictions are imposed on the collection, display, dissemination, and exchange of information, opinions, ideas, and imaginative expression” (2001:xii). It is this definition of censorship, which makes explicit the various levels at which censorship occurs, that will be used throughout this work.

In response to the numerous challenges to both freedom of expression and the practice of censorship that have taken place in the history of the U.S., the Supreme Court has interpreted and clarified the First Amendment by ruling that the government may practice censorship only when it is done to protect national or individual security, and furthermore, some types of expression, such as obscenity, libel, and ‘fighting words’ are not protected under the First Amendment (Riley 1998:14). These terms are, of course, open to interpretation, and current debates about censorship are not as politically dichotomous as they once were. The traditional “conservative” vs. “liberal” divide that once may have polarized the censorship debate has become more pluralistic as ideological justifications for censorship have become more nuanced. For example, many liberal politicians and activists argue that limiting freedom of expression (such as hate speech) is sometimes necessary to ensure the preservation of cherished values like “self-determination, equality, and freedom from racial hatred and prejudice…” (Dworkin 2006:130).

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (one of only three of the nine international human rights treaties and covenants recognized by the United Nations
High Commissioner for Human Rights that the U.S. has ratified (Somers and Roberts 2008) states that any expression of racial, religious, or national hatred that incites discrimination or violence should be outlawed (Petley 2009). This notion is at odds with the earlier sentiment expressed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which proposes that everyone should have the “freedom to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Dworkin (2006) argues that even if the statements found in the ICCPR are made as a demand for justice, freedom of expression is either something a society adopts to protect the voices of the unpopular, or it cannot claim this freedom at all, since allowing censorship of unpopular sentiments like hate speech “would leave room only for the pointless grant of protection for ideas or tastes or prejudices that those in power approve, or in any case do not fear” (p. 132).

Because the U.S. prides itself as a nation that protects free speech, the fact that censorship is practiced at all creates a paradox that requires exploration of the “uniquely American causes and motivations of its censorship practices” (Garry 1993:xv). Garry (1993) claims that, although censorship in the U.S. generally follows a not uncommon generational pattern in which the younger generation creates itself through new forms of expression that are censored by the older generation, which is struggling to maintain control, American censorship is not necessarily always a matter of powerful, conservative forces imposing themselves upon the relatively powerless. In fact, in recent decades, as we saw above with the example of hate speech, attempts to censor specific forms of expression can come from ‘below’—from certain civil or human rights activists or feminist organizations—and reflect the increasing plurality of competing viewpoints present within contemporary, multicultural American society. Garry argues that much
American censorship reflects not a mere reaction against free speech itself, but rather, that a cultural belief in the extraordinary power of speech leads to attempts to censor, thus reflecting “a desperate move to release society from being a hostage to [destructive] speech” and a “fear that if society indulges...violent and degrading speech, the society itself will become more coarse, brutal, and indifferent” (1993:11).

Stavans (2008) proposes that “words have echoes: they carry consequences,” and because of the power of words, censorship “is a feature of every hierarchy—be it capitalist, communist, democratic, etc.—where a few are in control of the information” (p. 128). It is not, then, a question of whether or not censorship is being practiced, but rather, what kind of censorship is occurring in any given place. Cultural battles about censorship have been fought over the information contained in newspapers, books, TV, film, music, art, and most recently, the internet, and have centered on diverse social issues, such as war, political ideology, and obscenity.

*Freedom of the Press and Political Dissidence*

Even as they endeavored to define themselves as a free nation, granting citizens the right to free expression through the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, leaders of the U.S. simultaneously struggled with the knowledge that words can be powerful tools during time of political unrest, and, fearing the revolutionary ideas that were brewing in France at the time, passed the Sedition Act of 1798, which gave government the right to fine and imprison anyone who made statements “with intent to defame” the government or that could “excite against the government the hatred of the people” (quoted in Riley 1998:10). After coming to power,

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2 This idea is particularly pertinent in the context of prisons, where hierarchy and control play out in the extreme.
Jefferson overturned the Sedition Act in 1801, and Americans faced relatively few judicial attempts to censor political opposition throughout most of the 19th century. Of course, the protections granted by the U.S. government at this time were granted almost exclusively to white men, since African American men were not full citizens with the right to vote during most of the 19th century, and women only in the 1920s.

During the onset of World War I, the U.S. government again took legal action to suppress unpopular political views. Fearing opposition to the draft, Congress passed the Espionage Act of 1917, which effectively criminalized expression of disloyalty to, or obstruction of recruiting for, the armed forces; falsely reporting information that could interfere with military operations; advocating the views held by enemy nations; and acquiring or sharing defense information (Riley 1998). It was with reference to the Espionage Act that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously spoke of a “clear and present danger” that justifies curtailing freedom of expression.³

The bill originally called for overt press censorship, but this portion of the bill was defeated. However, the wording of the act left room for interpretation, and some antiwar writers were hesitant to publish their views, while more than 2000 others, such as journalists for The Masses, a socialist magazine, anarchist activists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, and the Socialist party’s presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, were arrested and taken to trial for violating the Espionage Act (Caso 2008).

Just after the Espionage Act took effect, the Sedition Act of 1918 was signed into law, thus criminalizing criticism of “the war, the federal government, the Constitution, the flag, and

³ This reference to the immediacy of danger has contemporary salience regarding the notion of ‘legitimate penological interests’ (to be discussed below), which is now used to justify prison censorship.
the armed forces, including their uniforms” (Caso 2008:26). The Sedition Act was used as a tool to repress radicals and striking workers throughout the U.S. during the so-called Red Scare of the following years, but was repealed at the end of 1920 when the political climate changed. After the war effort ended, a renewed focus on vice suppression and morality emerged, embodied by the Temperance Movement and the resulting Volstead Act, which outlawed alcohol distribution and consumption for the next 13 years. Censorship efforts no longer focused primarily on the press, but rather turned toward other forms of media, such as film, where issues of morality were troubled by an emerging cadre of writers and artists in Hollywood.

The proliferation of journalists and newspapers during the first half of the 20th century, along with the growing tendency for some papers to print violent and scandalizing stories known as ‘yellow journalism’, led to some minor, local attempts to curb free speech in the press, but the federal government almost consistently held up the First Amendment in defense of the press (Riley 1998). However, the most salient political concern in the ensuing decades was the threat of communism, and most efforts at censoring political dissidents concentrated on rooting out and silencing those who were confirmed or suspected members of, or sympathizers with, the Communist Party. In 1951, Congress passed the Smith Act, which made it illegal to teach, write about, or advocate violently overthrowing the government, or to hold membership in any organization that espouses such ideology (Paxton 2008). The Smith Act would provide legitimacy for Senator McCarthy’s now-infamous hunt for communists, which lasted until the end of the 1950s, when the Cold War and the “threat” of Communism diminished.

As the civil rights and antiwar movements threatened the status quo in the 1960s and 70s, several attempts were made to quell the spread of countercultural ideas, but overall, the period
saw significant advancement in guarantees of freedom of expression. The new generation of Americans embraced the concept of freedom of expression like never before, and the politically subversive sentiment that prevailed at the time created a context that was ripe for instituting change. A 1964 landmark case about press censorship, *New York Times Company v. Sullivan*, led to a Supreme Court decision granting the press greater protections from libel suits in incidents where critical remarks are made against the state (Caso 2008). Then, with the release of the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971, the New York Times (NYT) again found itself in court, also with a favorable ruling. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) attempted to censor the NYT from releasing the papers, charging that doing so was a violation of the Espionage Act, but the Supreme Court ruled that the NYT had not broken any laws and was free to print the papers. The decision even went so far as to state that the DOJ seemed “to have forgotten the essential purpose and history of the First Amendment” (quoted in Riley 1998:27). Though press censorship, particularly during times of war, has continued despite these substantial gains, these cases have remained instrumental in protecting the freedom of the press. In the following decades, when the nation shifted to the Right politically, other types of media were scrutinized and censored to a larger degree than was the press.

In recent times, freedom of the press has also faced some serious challenges related to the American-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, most notably with regard to the practice of “embedding” journalists. Embedding was practiced prior to the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan during U.S. military involvement in Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, but the practice has gained notoriety from its use in Afghanistan and Iraq (Paxton 2008). Most journalists, particularly in the early stages of the wars, have been embedded in the military, and thus, subject
to both formal military censorship and informal self-censorship. Though the military has commonly censored journalists during wartime, the practice of embedding is relatively new and discourages criticism of the war and the military, since embedded journalists must travel with a specific military unit that protects their very lives, thus creating a one-sided perspective that is almost certainly influenced by feelings of camaraderie and group loyalty (Paxton 2008). So, rather than outright censorship by a law passed by the federal government, the censorship of Iraq and Afghanistan war reporters takes place at a different level.

**Obscenity and Pornography**

It was not the threat of war or revolution that spawned the largest attack on freedom of expression in the 19th century, but rather a moral battle waged by Anthony Comstock, a Christian anti-vice crusader who was largely responsible for the 1873 passing of the agonizingly titled Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles for Immoral Use, otherwise known as the Comstock Act (Caso 2008). Both the importation and internal mailing of obscene materials were already illegal, yet these laws had not previously been enforced with any diligence. The federal act gave Comstock, as postal inspector, the right to confiscate and destroy any material sent through the mail that he deemed obscene. Lacking any concrete guidelines for what qualifies as obscenity, Comstock confiscated anything he thought could invoke a reader’s lust, which he rather melodramatically claimed “defiles the body, debauches the imagination, corrupts the mind, deadens the will, destroys the memory, scars the conscience, hardens the heart, and damned the soul” (quoted in Paxton 2008:101). Using his incredibly broad and subjective definition of obscenity, Comstock seized more than 160 tons of
material between 1873 and his death in 1915, including books, photographs, artwork, pamphlets, and other information about social issues such as birth control, which he considered immoral (Caso 2008:24). Though the Supreme Court subsequently limited the types of items that can be classified as obscene, mailing obscene items remains a criminal offense today. The furor of Comstock’s moral crusade essentially died with him in 1915, when the federal government turned its attention towards more pressing international and political concerns aroused by the onset of World War I, which resulted the Espionage and Sedition Acts described above.

More tempered government and public concern about obscenity and pornography have nonetheless remained part of American politics after Comstock’s death, and much litigation has attempted to define and regulate obscenity. In 1957, the Supreme Court ruled in Roth v. U.S. that obscenity is not protected under the First Amendment as free speech. Though several attempts at clarifying the definition of obscenity were made in the first half of the 20th century, it was Roth v. U.S. that first codified the legal definition of obscenity as material that “whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest” (quoted in Paxton 2008:103). Exactly who the “average person” was, or what “community standards” meant, were less than clear. Thus, the following decades produced one case after another in which the defendant of an obscenity charge challenged the legitimacy of the charge on the grounds that the material in question was not, in fact, obscene. It was during one of this long string of obscenity cases heard by the courts that Justice Potter Stewart offered his oft-repeated opinion: “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of materials I understand to be embraced within that shorthand definition [of hardcore pornography]….But I know it when I see it…” (quoted in Paxton 2008:104).
Because of the vague and interpretable nature of the previous definitions of obscenity, the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision in *Miller v. California* attempted to clarify the requisite elements of obscenity that are still used today: the “average person” test from Roth; a patently offensive depiction of sexual conduct as defined by state law; and a lack of scientific, literary, artistic, or political value (also known as the SLAP test) (Paxton 2008). Using this newfound definition, the courts would hear numerous cases in the coming decades during which they declared it illegal to produce or distribute, but not to possess, obscene materials, unless that material contains depictions of minors, in which case even possession is a criminal offense.

Several challenges have been made since *Miller*, most of which have come from two seemingly uncongenial groups: feminists and conservative Christians. Some feminists, most notably Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, argue that pornography is inherently misogynistic and harmful to women and thus should be outlawed, while some Christians are concerned that it undermines Christian morality, encourages sex crimes, and destroys families (Lambe 2004). Despite social and legal actions, however, these unlikely bedfellows have failed to convince the Court that mere possession of obscenity (unless it involves children) constitutes a crime. Some in these same groups are among those who have supported censoring non-obscene materials they deem morally, socially or politically offensive by challenging books in public schools and libraries, which will be discussed below.

*Visual Arts, Theater, and Film Censorship*

The line between obscenity and art is subjective, contextual, and moveable. Thus, art pieces created as expressions of an artists’ ideas, feelings, values, and so on, have always been
subject not only to artistic criticism, but also to the wrath of would-be censors. Though visual art, such as painting, sculpture, and photography, has been, much like any other medium, the focus of political censors, art censorship in the U.S. has primarily centered on depictions of nudity and sex (Paxton 2008).

The theater has produced fear and prompted attacks since people began to perform plays, and the Puritan influence on American culture and politics has certainly affected the trajectory of the theater in the U.S. Throughout most of its history, American theater was a localized affair, with regulations coming from local officials and religious leaders. In fact, it was not until the surprisingly late date of the 1960s that the Supreme Court granted theater the right to protection under the First Amendment, when a theater production company challenged the banning of the musical *Hair* (Paxton 2008).

During the first two decades of the 20th century, when film was a new and controversial medium, local authorities around the country attempted to censor movie shows they deemed immoral, in much the same way they had already been doing with theater. The Supreme Court allowed cities and states to decide for themselves how to censor film, as they considered it a business rather than something to be protected as free speech (Paxton 2008). In order to avoid local censorship that could damage profits, the film industry began to practice a type of self-censorship that still exists today in the form of a ratings system. Morality codes were enforced by non-governmental bodies like the Production Code Administration, and later the Motion Picture Association of America, which controlled access to resources and film distribution and banned projects deemed too controversial (Petley 2009).

Censers in Hollywood were originally most concerned with obscenity and morality, but
code enforcers also kept an eye out for artistic expression of radical politics. The focus on politics was intensified after World War II, when the hunt for communists and their sympathizers was reinvigorated. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) reignited another Red Scare and led an assault on free speech that was cloaked in anticommunist propaganda. The HUAC began its investigation in Hollywood, creating a climate of fear that led to over 300 entertainers and producers of film, TV, and radio being blacklisted from working in Hollywood, thus silencing a significant component of leftist artists (Caso 2008). Senator McCarthy and the HUAC also banned myriad books, music, artworks, and other literature they claimed were produced by ‘communists’. Even so, as film became a more accepted part of modern life, the Supreme Court, in 1952, reversed its 1915 decision and declared film to be protected by the First Amendment (Paxton 2008). Thus, the film industry enjoys some legal protection from external censorship, yet remains a self-policing system in which resources are controlled by the select few who constitute the ratings board.

Television and Music Ratings Systems

Another primary arena of self-censorship is the television industry. During the 1980s and 90s, parents and conservatives became progressively more concerned about the level of violence and the prevalence of sexually explicit materials on TV. Increasingly vocal opposition to televised sex and violence prompted President Clinton to sign the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which mandated programmable antiviolence chips (v-chips) be installed in all new TVs (Riley 1998). Though restrictions were already in place regarding nudity and sexuality, definitions of violence were more subjective, and so, much like the film industry, rather than be
subjected to burdensome legal processes, the television industry chose to police itself,
implementing its own ratings system.

Another form of industry self-policing arose in the 1980s when the Recording Industry
Association of America (RIAA) responded to the moralistic outcries of the Parents’ Music
Resource Center (PMRC), who claimed that popular music lyrics were corrupting the minds of
the youth, by implementing a “parental advisory” notification on all albums whose lyrics
contained reference to violence, sex, or drugs and alcohol (Garry 1993). The music industry has
long censored popular music by refusing airtime or changing lyrics when songs were deemed
inappropriate, but the new ratings system signaled a willingness to openly display a certain moral
position about music and freedom of expression. The hype around music censorship was
intensified in the early 1990s when hip hop group 2 Live Crew’s album *As Nasty as They Wanna
Be* was found to be obscene by a judge in Florida, and the group members were subsequently
arrested (Riley 1998). These events constituted an open challenge to the First Amendment, and
debates about freedom of expression were sparked throughout the nation, with many defending
the rights of artists, writers, and entertainers to freely produce and disseminate materials, even if
they are classified by some as ‘obscene’.

**Banned Books**

Book censorship has occurred throughout U.S. history both informally by authors,
publishers, librarians, teachers, and school administrators, and also formally through the courts.
Prior to 1932, when the Supreme Court heard *United States v. One Book Called “Ulysses”* (James Joyce’s work), books could be banned outright for even a single scene, which, taken
alone, could be considered obscene (Paxton 2008). The Ulysses ruling declared that a work must be considered in its entirety, and therefore, any scientific, literary, artistic, or political worth of the book as a whole outweighs a questionable section. The American Library Association also adopted its Bill of Rights in 1939 to take a stance against what they saw as unjust censorship of materials based on religious and political motivations (Office of Intellectual Freedom 2010).

Book banning and even book burning were common throughout the U.S. in the first part of the 20th century and reached a peak in the 1940s and 50s as a result of several social phenomena: the Red Scare and anti-communism; the increasing tendency of modern writers to challenge the social structure in sometimes quite overt ways; and the sheer volume of public and school libraries with growing collections (Paxton 2008). Books were removed from libraries due to political, social, and sexual content, and authors and publishers practiced self-censorship lest they be accused of siding with the communists. A decrease in anti-communist efforts in the 1960s resulted in a temporary weakening of book banning efforts during that decade. However, censorship campaigns both increased and changed in nature during the last three decades of the 20th century. Garry (1993) argues that, despite several court rulings against government censorship in these decades, would-be censors continued to “flow up from the grassroots of society rather than down from a social elite or the traditional leaders of censorship in society” (p. 7). Campaigns launched by feminists against sexism and violence against women called for censorship of materials that promote these ideas, while civil and/or human rights activists aimed to censor images and words that disparage or discriminate against ethnic, sexual, or religious minorities. Both conservative fundamentalists and liberals came to advocate censorship of certain books, particularly in schools and public libraries, usually by banning books from
libraries and censoring textbooks.

Public and School Libraries

As institutions that disseminate free information and materials to the public, libraries have repeatedly come under the scrutiny of censors. Whereas much of the censorship discussed above takes place at the level of production, library censorship is concerned with dissemination of currently available materials. Libraries are state-funded institutions and are thus beholden to both the voting public and the acting leaders who determine the level of support they will receive. Both the government and the public have challenged the appropriateness of certain library materials. These challenges have sometimes resulted in the removal of specific items from a library or even the censorship of whole categories of materials.

School libraries are particularly contentious places, as the students who access materials are minors. Parents and school boards have often removed controversial books, such as Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* and Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, from school libraries, and until *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* in 1982, students had little recourse when these incidents occurred (Paxton 2008). In *Pico*, the courts ruled that schools may not remove items from their libraries once they are already in place. However, the decision left ambiguous the school board’s right to censor during the book purchasing process.

Both the Christian Right and the liberal Left have waged campaigns to remove books from public and school libraries. Though earlier censorship efforts generally came from religious fundamentalists, during the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, some on the Left increasingly rallied to remove books they considered to be racist, sexist, homophobic, or
intolerant of differences. Even the ALA, which has historically embraced intellectual freedom and opposed censorship, passed a resolution opposing racism and sexism in library holdings (Paxton 2008). Despite this resolution, the ALA’s Library Bill of Rights explicitly states that libraries “should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment,” and materials “should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation” or “proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval” (Office of Intellectual Freedom 2010:49).

The Internet and the 21st Century

As the 20th century drew to a close, censorship debates were increasingly centered not only on traditional media such as newspapers, books, TV, and music recordings, but also on the internet, which was becoming a ubiquitous part of American society. Because it is essentially a network of information nodes that lacks centralized control, the internet presents a new set of challenges for would-be censors. The primary concerns about the internet were, and still are, child access to pornography and dissemination of child pornography, though little has been done directly to censor pornographic websites (Caso 2008). Though individuals and institutions can install internet blockers in computers, the internet as a whole (partly due to the difficulty of controlling such a non-centralized system) remains relatively free of censorship in the U.S. Free access to the plethora of information on the internet is championed as a hallmark of freedom, which has special applications to the problem of prison censorship, which will be discussed below.

In the 21st century, book banning, textbook censorship, “voluntary” rating systems in
film, TV, and music, as well as internet and TV filters that can be installed by parents or institutions, continue to curtail freedom of expression. The Espionage Act of 1917 also remains on the books, though the likelihood of its enforcement is low (Caso 2008). However, several developments have recently affected the trajectory of American censorship policies so that they have come into more direct conflict with the ideal of free speech promoted by the First Amendment. Perhaps the most important of these is the government’s reaction to the attacks of September 11, 2001. The USA PATRIOT Act was signed into law only a month after the attacks occurred, with little debate or dissent among politicians, as George W. Bush began his “War on Terror” despite intense opposition. The PATRIOT Act grants greater powers of surveillance and search to law enforcement officials and allows non-citizens to be detained or denied entry to the U.S. for having written any materials judged to be critical of the U.S. government. Critics argue that the act is unconstitutional, yet members of government have repeatedly upheld it. In fact, when the NYT ran a story about a controversial PATRIOT Act-sponsored domestic surveillance operation, several Congresspeople proposed the story’s authors and the NYT be tried for treason under the Espionage Act (Paxton 2008). The Obama administration has renewed the PATRIOT Act despite its initially ‘temporary’ nature, thus continuing the criminalization of certain types of expression in the U.S. The above overview of American censorship policies and practices provides the context for a more focused discussion of censorship in prisons to which I now turn.

ACCESS TO READING AND LAW MATERIALS IN PRISONS

As seen above, recurrent challenges to the First Amendment and the ability to express oneself have plagued American history. This proves to be of particular concern for the members of
society whose civil and human rights are most contested – those held in our prisons and jails.

The notion that speech or communication can be dangerous seems to lie at the heart of most attempts to censor. However, this idea elicits questions about the nature of susceptibility and influence. Davison (1983) argues that people attempt to censor others’ access to information because they overestimate the degree to which others are influenced by information, even while they consider themselves relatively immune to such influence. He claims that the censor thinks the “greatest impact will be not on ‘me’ or ‘you’, but on ‘them’—the third persons” (Davison 1983:3). This theory is especially suitable to a prison context, as prisoners qualify as ‘the Other’ by their very status. Though censorship takes various forms in prisons today, the degree to which prisoners can access information and express themselves is the result of a hard fought battle waged in prisons, in the streets, and finally, in the courts.

The Supreme Court’s Role in Prison Regulation

Prior to the 1960s, the federal courts had a policy of nonintervention into prison regulation; prison management was considered a state-run practice, and the courts were reluctant to get involved. In fact, the Eighth Amendment (protection from cruel and unusual punishment) did not even apply to prisoners until a ruling of the Warren court (1953-1969) decided that it should apply to all citizens, regardless of whether or not they had been convicted of a crime. The court stated that the amendment is about “nothing less than the dignity of man,” and the ban on cruel and unusual punishment “must draw its meaning from the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society” (Fliter 2001:74). Jacobs (1980) notes that this litigation should be understood as the extension of a process that began in the mid-1950s with the
burgeoning civil rights movement, when “one marginal group after another...pressed for admission into the social mainstream,” and there was a general tendency in the U.S. to “extend citizenship rights to a greater proportion of the total population by recognizing the existence and legitimacy of group grievances” (p. 432).

Within the prisons, it was the Black Muslims who were at the forefront of legal challenges. In the early 1960s, Black Muslims, using jailhouse lawyers, appealed to the courts on the grounds of religious and racial discrimination. Between the years of 1961 and 1978, federal courts heard sixty-six cases associated with Black Muslims (Gottschalk 2006:175). Black Muslims did not speak in terms of ‘prisoners’ rights’, but rather invoked the constitutional right to practice their religion without discrimination. Because freedom of religion is a core American value, and race was such a prevalent topic in social and legal discourse at the time, the environment in which they made their appeals was a fertile one; the federal courts heard their cases and responded by granting them the freedom to practice Islam and have access to religious texts and spiritual leaders (Jacobs 1980). Once the attention of the courts was turned toward the prison through this discourse of religious freedom, judges became more receptive to hearing inmates’ cases, and the long tradition of the courts’ ‘hands-off’ approach to prisons came to an end. In the following years, federal courts ruled in favor of prisoners in cases concerning access to medical care, provision of legal aid among prisoners, ease of due process, and censorship (Gottschalk 2006:175).

However, in the past few decades, the retrenchment of the courts and deference to prison administrators has decreased prisoners’ rights. Fliter (2001) argues that prisoners’ rights are influenced by “public attitudes toward crime and punishment, interest group advocacy, case-by-
case decision making, and the changing political composition of the Supreme Court,” but “more than any other variable, the policy preferences of the nine individuals sitting on the Supreme Court have shaped the development of prisoners’ rights” (p. xvii). The contemporary Right-leaning Court that first emerged in the Reagan era has repositioned itself vis-à-vis America’s incarcerated.

*The Prisoners’ Rights Movement and the First Amendment*

Inmates would likely not have been so successful in the courts had it not been for the support of countless prisoners’ rights activists and prisoner advocates both within and outside of the prison. By the late 1960s, civil rights lawyers’ reformist practices had faded into the social background, and revolutionaries took center stage in the struggle for what was now conceived as the “vanguard of a worldwide liberation movement for oppressed people, especially people of color” (Gottschalk 2006:178). Because of the radical political climate of the late 1960s and the 1970s, both prisoners and activists on the outside were able to create a movement using a language that had previously been unavailable. Thus, the strength of the prisoners’ rights movement was rooted in its appeals to larger political issues such as racism, colonization of people of color, and economic oppression.

Among black prisoners, a new kind of politicization was taking place that differed drastically from the type that had occurred earlier with the Black Muslims. Radical black liberation groups such as the Black Panthers began flooding prisons with contraband literature that provided a Marxist class analysis of crime and punishment (Gottschalk 2006). Prisoners formed reading groups and taught one another about radical politics. Because black
revolutionaries were so frequently criminalized and incarcerated throughout the U.S., a constant flow of both people and information penetrated the walls of the prison, allowing for prisoners to feel closely connected to people on the outside (and vice versa). The late 1960s and early 1970s saw an eruption of both prison strikes and riots throughout the nation as prisoners, now able to apply a political analysis to their circumstances, not only demanded better treatment but also questioned the legitimacy of the prison system and the authority of its staff. As a result of increased writing and other forms of agitation, prisoners were subjected to policies and procedures that aimed to restrict access to law books, increase mail censorship, and ban prisoners from writing about prison conditions (Cummins 1994). Censorship of both incoming and outgoing materials played a central role in inmates’ grievances, as evidenced by the fifteen demands of the inmates who rioted at Attica prison, which included an “end to all censorship of newspapers, magazines, letters and other publications…” (The Inmates of Attica Prison [1971] 2000).

Access to Information and Censorship in Prisons

By the early 1970s prisoners could watch TV, listen to the radio, and make phone calls, so censoring incoming information had become much more difficult (Cummins 1994:84). The prison system also officially embraced the notion of rehabilitation, so it did not have the moral authority to justify strict censorship. Nonetheless, prison administrators attempted to control prisoners’ access to written materials, leading to a number of court cases that would substantially change the way censorship is practiced in prisons.

Many state prisons currently have a list of titles, often referred to as the Restricted or
Disapproved Publications List, that are not allowed to enter the prison, either through the mailroom or the library. These lists take shape in assorted ways, depending on state and institutional regulations, but they essentially contain works that have been disapproved for inmate consumption, usually by a prison or government employee. Some lists, like the one recently condemned and dissolved by the courts in the state of Virginia (Stinolis 2010), are of such epic lengths that they are redolent of the now defunct *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* created by the Catholic Church in the 16th century. The *Index* served as a restricted list for Catholics for centuries and was updated as recently as 1948 (though few books from the 20th century were added). In its most recent incarnation, the index contained over 4000 titles deemed morally offensive, including such works as non-Catholic translations of the Bible, stories and essays by Voltaire, Mill, and Rousseau, and even Hugo’s *Les Miserables* (Petley 2009). The Catholic church, much like many prison administrators, claims that the list of restricted titles should serve as an *admonitum*: “a warning…that a book might be dangerous” (Petley 2009:31). In both cases, the lists result from those in positions of power imposing their ideological convictions on the relatively powerless and deciding what is appropriate for the ‘masses’ to read. The current Disapproved Publications lists ensue from several court cases that outlawed indiscriminate censorship in prisons and provided legal guidelines within which prison administrators must operate while deciding what kinds of materials to restrict.

*Procunier v. Martinez* (1974) set a new standard for censorship of prisoner mail. The

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Court decided that widespread censorship of prisoner mail violated the First and Fourteenth Amendments, and prison officials should no longer read prisoners’ mail as a matter of course. Though this decision was intended to apply primarily to personal correspondence between prisoners and non-prisoners, it has often been referenced with regard to incoming publications such as magazines, newspapers, and books, as Judge Marshall’s opinion strongly stated that prisoners are entitled to the mail as “a medium of free expression not as a privilege, but rather as a constitutionally guaranteed right” (Fliter 2001:103). *Bell v. Wolfish* (1979), however, allowed for certain restrictions—which were said to be penologically necessary—on receiving packages and hardback books unless mailed directly from a publisher or bookstore.

Despite the gains made by *Procunier* and other cases in the 1970s and early 1980s, the mid 1980s saw a significant change in the composition of the Court and, consequentially, a retrenchment from a position supporting the rights of prisoners. The majority of cases heard by the Rehnquist court (1986-2005) showed great deference to prison administrators. *Turner v. Safely* (1987) is arguably the most important case from the late 20th century concerning the role of the courts in prisons. It set the standard that is followed today, namely that prison regulations are justified in curtailing prisoners’ constitutional rights if doing so is “reasonably related to legitimate penological concerns” (Fliter 2001:155). The term ‘legitimate penological interest’, otherwise known as the *Turner* test, is used as the primary justification for restricting access to certain types of information and materials in prisons.

The Rehnquist court did, however, overturn a ruling by the Burger court that prohibited mail containing “derogatory remarks against prison personnel or inflammatory political, racial, religious, or other views” (Fliter 2001:156). *Thornburgh v. Abbot* (1989) set limits to the legal
grounds for censorship but upheld the Court’s previous decision in *Turner* to defer to prison administrators’ judgments by stating that any item may be censored if it is determined “to be detrimental to the security, good order, or discipline of the institution or if it might facilitate criminal activity.” The finding also ruled that prison authorities cannot reject a publication “solely because its content is religious, philosophical, political, social[,] sexual, or . . . unpopular or repugnant,” nor can they create a list of excluded magazine or newspaper publications, but rather must make a separate review of each individual issue of a subscription. This decision was made because the restrictions were said to violate the First and Fourteenth Amendment rights of the free citizens who produced the materials – not those of prisoners. Nevertheless, this decision does not stop certain prison authorities from censoring materials that fit these requirements if they can argue that the items pose a threat to the safety and security of the institution, a phrase largely interpreted by prison authorities themselves.

As discussed above, most prisons have some form of recreational library, though the quality and quantity of space, materials, and access varies widely from one institution to the next. There are no federal mandates requiring minimum standards for recreational libraries, though many states have regulations in place. However, all prisons must provide some sort of legal access to the courts (typically a law library) for inmates due to the 1971 decision in *Bounds v. Smith* that required prison authorities to provide inmates with “adequate law libraries or adequate assistance from persons trained in the law” (Fliter 2001:124). *Bounds* provides some security for law libraries, but the details of its guarantee have since been challenged. In *Lewis v. Casey* (1996), the Court reinterpreted *Bounds*, claiming it did not guarantee an “abstract, free-standing right to a law library or legal assistance,” but rather the right of mere access to the courts (Fliter
Although federal and state laws provide a certain framework which institutions must work within to create their incoming publications policies, the rules and regulations for prison libraries are more ambiguous. Much of the censorship that occurs in prison libraries is seemingly arbitrary and varies widely from state to state and even from one institution to the next within a given state. Since prisons are not required to have formal collection development policies for their libraries (though professional librarians strongly encourage the practice [Clark and MacCreigh 2006]), what enters and leaves the shelves depends largely on who works as the librarian and who she must answer to in the prison hierarchy.

For example, in his chronicle of California’s radical prison movement, Cummins (1994) shows how Herman Spector, San Quentin’s librarian from 1947 to 1968, attempted to create an environment of almost total censorship of reading materials, written documents, and radio broadcasts. His aims were twofold: to forbid inmates’ access to “ideas deemed dangerous that might sneak in from the outside,” and to prevent the public from reading inmate writing he considered to be “libelous, pornographic, or critical of the Department of Corrections or any other law enforcement authorities, glorified crime or drug use, or might be offensive to any race, religion, or organized group” (Cummins 1994:23-4). Though Spector was arguably freer to create his own despotic type of governance in a relatively unregulated prison system than a prison librarian would be today, the lack of legal, and sometimes even administrative, oversight of prison libraries does create an opportunity for individualized collection development and policy interpretation, though there is a dearth of information about how this actually plays out in the daily lives of inmates and librarians.
Several decades ago, Roberts (1980) recognized the need to understand how the prison library affects inmates’ experiences both while they are incarcerated and after they leave the prison. He found that most of the prisoners he spoke with used the library in similar ways to non-prisoners, that is, for “entertainment, enjoyment, information, and knowledge,” and suggested that a good library could improve the lives of inmates (Roberts 1980:77). In a survey of 34 of the 50 most populated prisons in the U.S., Roberts found that the most commonly censored materials were those that were thought to pose a threat to security, such as books about lock picking or weapons making, and hardcore pornography, though definitions of pornography varied across states. Some institutions also censored books about revolution or social activism, as well as materials that glamorize crime. In two thirds of the surveyed prisons, the superintendent or other prison authorities made the ultimate decision about which materials entered the library, and thus, prison librarians were “not consistently given the authority to plan and fully implement prison library acquisition procedures” (Roberts 1980:82).

Although librarians do not always have ultimate control of their collections, the ALA encourages prison librarians to provide as much access to information as possible within the confines of the institution. The ALA adopted the Prisoners’ Right to Read in June, 2010 as part of its Library Bill of Rights, stating: “When free people, through judicial procedure, segregate some of their own, they incur the responsibility to provide humane treatment and essential rights. Among these is the right to read” (ALA 2010). And though the ALA recognizes that prison librarians must follow the laws of their states and the regulations of their institutions, they maintain that only “items that present an actual compelling and imminent risk to safety and security should be restricted” (ALA 2010).
Beyond censorship of specific reading materials like books and magazines, another medium of information is almost entirely censored in prisons: the internet. Currently, prisoners in federal and state facilities are denied direct access to the internet, though some institutions have provisions for librarians to act as gatekeepers to the Web by looking up and printing out certain types of information for inmates (Vogel 2009). This denial of access is particularly ironic given the lack of internet censorship elsewhere in America. Sullivan (2000: 58) argues that denying internet access in prisons “limits a convict’s ability to make the transition back into the community” in an age where education and job seeking often require Web navigation skills. He argues that, despite the potential benefits of internet access for reentry, we exist in a social context that emphasizes “punishment, confinement, control, discipline, atavistic vengeance, and even exclusion” so that discourse about prisons is had in “terms of retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation, not freedom to read or surf the Web” (Sullivan 2000:56-7). This is the context, then, in which prison administrators make decisions about the kinds of information and knowledge inmates can access and acquire while incarcerated and prison librarians perform their often contradictory and precarious roles.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY, AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The population for this research consists of librarians working at state prisons throughout the U.S. Because of the substantial differences between the administrations, policies, populations, and funding of state prisons, federal prison, and local jails, the research population has been limited to those librarians serving state prisoners. Not all state prisons have a librarian, and some large prisons have more than one person employed in the library, while some librarians are responsible for more than one prison. I did not send surveys to prisons that do not have a librarian. Because there is not a one-to-one relationship between prisons and librarians, I addressed surveys to the head librarian at those institutions that have more than one librarian and sent only one survey to a librarian who manages more than one prison.

The study employs a mixed methods research design involving both quantitative and qualitative components, though I primarily use a qualitative approach to data analysis. The initial step in the research process was to mail survey questionnaires to each state prison that has a librarian (excepting those where a single librarian operates more than one prison), for a total of 786 surveys. I used a public list of state prison librarians, available online through the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation’s website, to gather the names and addresses for the survey. The purpose of distributing surveys to the entire population of state prisons with librarians (save those where the librarian serves more than one facility) was to capture data from a wide range of subjects who work in prisons with various security levels and live in diverse geographical regions. In mailing the surveys, I was able to reach a much larger sample and
broader range of participants than I would have been able to access through the use of only qualitative research methods such as interviews or participant observation.

The survey contains both closed and open-ended questions and has a completion time of roughly 15 to 20 minutes. I sent the paper surveys along with self-addressed stamped envelopes, asking participants to mail back the survey by a given date, no later than three weeks after the initial mailing. I also included a letter of introduction, giving librarians the option to log onto a Survey Monkey web page to complete an online version of the survey. Each survey was coded with a sequential number so that the respondent’s institution could be identified. Two weeks after the date the surveys were due back, those who had not responded were sent a postcard reminder. The postcard asked the respondent either to complete and return the paper survey or complete the online version. A copy of the survey is attached as Appendix A.

I received 65 surveys marked “return to sender” from the postal service, leaving the total of potentially received surveys at 721. These returned surveys were either rejected by the prison or marked as improperly addressed by the postal service. Some reasons for the rejection could be that the letter was addressed to a former, rather than the current, librarian (and some were simply address to “Librarian,” as no name was provided by the Maryland source), or the prison’s address had changed slightly and so, it was deemed undeliverable. In total, after the initial mailing and the postcard reminder, I received 162 completed surveys, for a 22% response rate. I received surveys from 45 of the 50 U.S. states. Given the low response rate, I make no claims that the survey results are generalizable, only that they represent a section of prison librarians—those who both received and completed the survey. As mentioned above, mailing paper documents to prisons can be fraught with difficulties, and there is no guarantee that the librarians
ever received the surveys even in those prisons for which I did not receive a returned envelope. Mailroom staff could have rejected or chose not to deliver the envelope for any number of reasons. In addition, some librarians I spoke with during the interview phase expressed to me that they felt nervous or scared about completing the survey at work, so it is possible that others chose not to complete the survey due to similar fears they may have about their jobs or the propriety of participating in academic research that has not been officially sanctioned by the DOC.

Because of the lengthy process of requesting official permission from a DOC to do research with employees or inmates, I chose not to formally apply for their permission to conduct research. However, the DOC’s from several states (NY, OH, OR, and PA) contacted me when they received notification that I had sent the survey, asking me to complete a formal research request. I completed the request for all four states, but the only one to follow through and respond to my request was Oregon, which granted permission for the research. The failure of the other states to respond (either positively or negatively) is an indicator of why I chose to forgo this process from the outset of the project. It is likely that my failure to seek official permission led to a lower response rate than would have been the case with DOC-sanctioned research. Still, I believe it would have been impossible to complete the research in a timely manner had I filed a research request in all 50 states.

The second phase of the research consisted of conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a smaller number of prison librarians (n=26). The in-depth interviews provide a deeper exploration of the research questions with a smaller number of prison librarians. During interviews, participants are able to convey their experiences, attitudes, values, and beliefs in a
way that cannot be adequately represented by quantitative survey data. This research explores the effects of censorship on the prison and its inhabitants and employees, the interpretations of censorship policies by librarians, as well as the nature of librarians’ interactions with others within the institution. The complex and varied nature of these phenomena can only be explored adequately using qualitative research methods. The interview data complements the survey data, allowing for a richer and deeper analysis than survey data alone could provide.

The survey asked all participants who were interested in doing an interview to communicate their interest either on the returned survey or by email or telephone. Though 42 people initially agreed to an interview, after numerous attempts to contact participants by email and phone to arrange a time for the interview, I was able to set up and complete 26 interviews with prison librarians. I also conducted an interview with a former prisoner who is now a public librarian and holds a position with the ALA section for prison librarians, the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA), for a total of 27 interviews. In the survey, I told participants that we could arrange an interview at their convenience, either face-to-face interviews for those who live in the New England area, or by telephone for those who live further away. Of the 27 interviews, 26 were conducted by phone, and one was done through email at the participant’s request (due to a hearing impairment). The interviews ranged in length from about half an hour to just over two and a half hours, with an average length of approximately one hour. Prior to conducting the interviews, I also attended the annual meeting of the ALA in New Orleans in June 2011, where I met several prison and jail librarians and held an informal focus group to gather information and ask for assistance with the interview questionnaire. A copy of the interview schedule is attached as Appendix B.
I have used a grounded theory approach in my research. I have not set out to prove or disprove a given hypothesis, or to apply a certain theory to a specific substantive issue, but rather I began with some general research questions and first collected the data, which I then used to build a theoretical framework. This process has allowed me to continually reevaluate the initial research questions and propositions, and to use the acquired data to inform the direction of the research (Glaser and Strauss 1967). According to Dennis and Martin (2005:207), this approach allows us to “minimize a priori assumptions and maximize the capacity of empirical materials to address theoretical problems in sociology,” thus providing a way to “show how power as manifested in real situations generates and shapes both the individual and his or her social context.”

Data Analysis

The participants mailed the surveys back over a period of several months, and I collected, coded, and entered the data into SPSS for analysis as it was received. As the surveys were being collected, I used the information gained from the surveys to guide the direction of the interviews, which were scheduled during the following months. The survey information was used to adjust the interview schedule so that questions were focused and informed by the survey data. Once I received all the surveys, I focused primarily on calculating descriptive statistics. I also transcribed and coded the written responses to the open-ended questions and entered them into ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. These were then treated as qualitative data in the same manner as the interview data.

Next, I recorded and transcribed all of the interviews, with the exception of the email
interview, which was already in electronic format. In-depth interviews produce data that reveal complex phenomena such as individuals’ values, beliefs, and experiences. Analysis of interview data, unlike quantitative analysis from surveys, relies on “interpretation, summary, and integration” of the data (Weiss 1994:3). Following a grounded theory approach, I then coded the transcripts by creating analytic categories that address the research questions and can be used to inform the theoretical analysis. I assigned codes to the data and then grouped them conceptually into larger ‘code families’ using ATLAS.ti.

After coding all data into conceptual categories, I organized an outline of the findings, which were then divided into four chapters based on emergent themes. After having made a detailed outline for each of these chapters, I wrote the findings without reference to existing literature or theory. Once these findings were written, I developed a theoretical framework based on what the data suggested. This framework was used as a foundation for the remaining work in the data chapters. I then incorporated the relevant existing literature into each substantive chapter and provided a conclusion and analysis for each separate chapter, always referencing the larger, overarching theoretical framework during analysis. In working through this process, it is my hope that I have stayed as true as possible to the principles underlying the grounded theory approach.

Ethical Concerns

Research involving human beings invariably raises ethical concerns. This research has been approved by the Internal Review Board of Northeastern University (IRB), and I have adhered to the Professional Code of Ethics and Scientific Standards set forth by the American
Sociological Association. I have made every effort to protect the privacy and dignity of the research subjects, and I have taken all necessary measures to ensure that participants have been treated with the utmost care and respect, and that their identities are kept confidential.

The risk of someone suffering harm due to their participation is minimal, though some participants may have felt somewhat uncomfortable sharing their attitudes and beliefs about censorship, particularly when those beliefs contradict those of the institution in which they work. I informed all participants that they did not need to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Because identities will be kept confidential, the likelihood of any job-related harms occurring as a result of participation are minimal.

I obtained informed consent from all participants. I included an Unsigned Informed Consent document with each survey. This document, which has been approved by the IRB, informs participants of their rights and provides contact information for the researcher, the principal investigator, and the director of Northeastern’s IRB so that participants may inquire about any concerns with the study.

During the beginning of the interviews, I introduced myself and explained the informed consent process to the participants. The interviewees were then given the option of receiving a Signed Informed Consent document through the mail or by email, or allowing the Unsigned Consent document from the survey to stand as their consent for the interview as well. I reminded the interviewees of their rights and emphasized that they were free to refuse to answer any question and/or stop the interview at any time. I then asked permission to begin conducting and recording the interview. All respondents granted permission and completed the interview without
objection. For the phone interviews, I used a microphone earpiece attached to a hand-held digital audio recorder. I then transcribed these recordings myself, assigning each interviewee a pseudonym.

Any publications based on this research will use only group data or pseudonyms and will not identify individuals by name or the state in which they work. I will refer to each respondent by a given pseudonym and the region of the country where the prison is located (e.g., Northeast, Midwest, etc.). I am the only person who saw each survey, and all identifying information will be kept confidential. Survey data were entered into SPSS and saved to a personal computer with password protection. Paper surveys were then destroyed using a paper shredder.

Interview recordings from the digital audio recorder were stored on a password-protected computer until transcribed. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym during transcription, and people or institutions mentioned in the interviews were also given pseudonyms. Transcriptions were done as quickly as possible, before being saved to a personal computer with password protection. Transcriptions were assigned a number and only contain the pseudonym and the state where the person works. I deleted the digital audio recordings when transcription was complete. Only the researcher and the principal investigator have access to the data, and any publications or other written material will refer to participants only by pseudonyms. No real names will be used for any purpose. Signed consent forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet for three years following the end of the study.

Participants were not compensated for, and are unlikely to receive any immediate benefit from, the research. However, some participants have taken a professional interest in the study, requesting that I provide them with either a summary of the results or a copy of the completed
research. It is also possible that prisoners, prison librarians, and prison authorities could benefit from any policy implications that may arise from the research.

Limitations and Biases

Quantitative research has been criticized for its weakness in “understanding the context or setting in which people talk,” while qualitative research is often accused of being “deficient because of the personal interpretations made by the researcher, the ensuing bias created by this, and the difficulty in generalizing findings to a large group because of the limited number of participants studied” (Creswell and Clark 2007:9). The use of mixed methods is a means of mitigating the limitations and weaknesses inherent in both quantitative and qualitative research.

Nonetheless, limitations remain for both components of the research. First, the information gathered from the survey is unable to provide deep, meaningful details about the participants’ experiences. Second, there is no guarantee that all librarians received the survey or felt comfortable or compelled to respond, thus limiting the response rate. Third, the interviews are designed to more fully capture participants’ attitudes and beliefs, but the interviewees are not likely to be representative of the population as a whole, and so the data gathered from interviews, while transferable, is certainly not generalizable (Guba 1981).

This research is largely exploratory, and there is limited previous research in the area, so it is especially important to acknowledge that the analysis will be subject to the researcher’s own interpretations and biases. Total objectivity is, of course, impossible, but we can work to identify and subsequently quell our biases. All researchers have biases based on personal experiences and ethical or moral notions of right and wrong, and all data, whether qualitative or quantitative, are
collected and analyzed through the lens of these biases. Thus, it is important that researchers recognize their own biases and attempt to conduct their research as objectively as possible.

My own biases going into this research should be stated upfront. I have a strong conviction that incarceration, as it is currently practiced in the U.S., is ethically untenable and constitutes a social harm. With Wacquant (2001), I believe that in order to explain mass imprisonment, we must understand that the criminal justice system serves an “extra-penological function…as an instrument for the management of dispossessed and dishonored groups” (p. 97). For Wacquant, mass imprisonment and the overrepresentation of African Americans in the criminal justice system cannot be understood simply as the result of economic or policy changes, the rise of specific political or religious groups, bias in arrest and sentencing, poverty, or any other such factor. Instead, he insists that we understand the prison together with chattel slavery, the Jim Crow system, and the ghetto as ‘peculiar institutions’ that have “successively operated to define, confine, and control African-Americans in the history of the United States” (2002:41).

I also believe that censorship limits human potential and infringes upon both individual expression and the advancement of social justice. If we deny the voices of those who disagree with us, we deny our own need for and right to expression. If we believe we know what is best for others and deny them the opportunity to make their own judgments, we thus implicitly give permission to others to do the same to us. However, I acknowledge that censorship in prisons is a highly contextual and complex issue. It may be that the prison as a particular (“peculiar”) institution—but not, in my opinion, the prisoner as a particular ‘type’ of person—necessitates a reconsideration of the wholesale rejection of censorship on principle. Therefore, I entered this research with an open mind, willing to suspend my own biases to the greatest extent possible and
inviting challenge to my political/ethical position, in order to explore the various political, ethical, and administrative positions taken by individuals and institutions on this issue.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section of the manuscript outlines the basic theoretical framework that the subsequent chapters are built upon. Although this is not a comprehensive overview of all of the literature that I will draw upon throughout the dissertation, it provides the underlying theoretical foundations from which I will undertake the examination of the main research findings. Each of the substantive chapters that follow will introduce new literature specific to the topic of the chapter (each of which is quite distinct), but each will also draw upon these major themes.

A Foucauldian Perspective on Power

A central thesis of this document is the notion that censorship constitutes an exercise of power. In his early work, Discipline and Punish, Foucault (1977:26-7), argues that power is something that “is exercised rather than possessed…it is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them.” Power is inherent in social relations and is a productive force, in that “it produces social reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault 1977:194). Following this conception of power as a relation that is both repressive (it impedes specific behaviors) and productive (it also encourages or produces behaviors and definitions), numerous scholars, as well as Foucault himself, have elaborated upon the central tenet of the definition. While he originally conceived of power as relations between individuals, as something that was always already
present in every social relation, Foucault would later emphasize the notion of power as an activity and thus, decontextualize interactions and downplay the emphasis on power as relational. The resulting field of governmentality studies that stemmed from the publication of Foucault’s lecture series (see Foucault 2003, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, among others) has similarly emphasized the activity rather than the relation (Rose, O’Malley, and Valverde 2009). Power came to be understood as the ‘conduct of conduct’—a deliberate attempt to direct the conduct either of others or of oneself; this notion also incorporates ideas about the structuring of the field of possible actions one can realistically take (Foucault 1982). Despite this theoretical move away from the “old” Foucault’s discipline (1977) and toward the “new” Foucault’s governmentality, it is important to note that in his later writings, Foucault (2007) emphasized the idea that the new apparatuses of power had not displaced the old ones, but actually supplemented them so that both systems of power continue to coexist in a new regime of power (Munro 2011:6).

Hornqvist (2010) argues that to conceive of power only as an activity—as something decontextualized from social relations—makes it difficult to “separate what is power from what is not power” (p. 3). He claims that “[c]onceptually, power as an action presupposes power as a relation. Without inequality and relative positions of strength, there is no sense in talking about exercising power as opposed to exerting influence in general terms” (Hornqvist 2010:3). Thus, it is the context in which the activity occurs that distinguishes power from ordinary practices of influence. It is Hornqvist’s (2010) definition of power that I will use to discuss the practice of censorship within the prison context:

Power is the activity that starts from and reproduces power relations. It comprises acts by a party superordinate in relation to another, to influence which acts are carried out by that second party, with the intention or the effect of reproducing the inequality between them…. [O]ne cannot assume that those who exercise power always share a specific intent; neither can one assume that all acts of power actually do reproduce such relations. (P. 4)
Fundamental to this definition of power is the always present potential for resistance. As power constitutes activities performed within an unequal field of relations, just as the superordinate party may exercise power, so can the subordinate party exercise resistance.

Following Foucault, Hornqvist (2010:4-5) argues that power relations are “unequal, contentious and unstable,” and therefore, are always in flux, being vulnerable to disruptions, resistance from subordinate parties, and influence from processes or parties outside the direct relation. However, these unstable micro-level relations are simultaneously reproduced at the macro level in the social structure in a way that is relatively “permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing” (Foucault 1978:93). This paradox—that power is “also collective rather than individual, stable rather than fragile, and structural rather than situation-dependent”—can be elucidated by examining the ways in which meso-level processes that occur through organizations, discourses, technologies, and strategies work to reproduce and solidify transient and unstable micro-level interactions (Hornqvist 2010:6). Hornqvist’s argument is that “power is essentially exercised in an organized form,” which he calls a strategy; these “organized and calculated attempts to shape behaviour in relation to goals” are multidirectional, in that they flow downward from research and policies that attempt to intervene in individuals’ lives, and they also flow back up from individuals through, and even beyond, the organization (2010:14-15). It is through this lens that I will examine the various processes of censorship (i.e., strategies) that occur within the prison as an organization (and the library as a particular place within that organization), as well as discuss the ways that power and resistance are exercised in the relations between librarians, administrators, custody staff, and inmates, who inhabit unequal positions within the organizational hierarchy.
This notion of censorship as an exercise of power within a field of social relations will emerge throughout the document, but I will present here a very brief summary of how this concept is applied to censorship in the prison library. First, drawing from Foucault’s groundbreaking (but now somewhat taken for granted) idea that power can be productive, I argue that censorship, as an act of power, is both repressive (i.e., inmates are denied access to materials because these items are considered dangerous in that they may encourage people to engage in violent or disruptive behaviors inside the prison) and productive (i.e., certain materials are restricted because they are considered inappropriate to the inmate’s rehabilitation, which is an attempt to produce a particular type of person – the law abiding, working subject necessary in a capitalist society).

Second, although the practice of censorship is something that occurs between human beings (i.e., individuals working within the prison system make decisions and take actions regarding censorship that affect other individuals), it is also something that is influenced by the organizational structure of the prison and the laws of the state, so that the possible courses of action are structured (though not determined) for individuals within the organization. For example, there may be DOC regulations about what can and cannot be censored, and these rules are at times influenced by actors outside of the prison (such as judges’ rulings in court cases). Meanwhile, within this context, individuals who work in the prison also engage in activities that uphold, circumvent, or ignore these rules and thus, exercise power and/or resistance from within the kind of unstable, unequal, and contentious power relations discussed above.

Even though rehabilitation is arguably a remnant of the past (in our new punitive era), it remains a stated goal of the prison as an organization, and therefore it provides justification for censorship (this will be discussed later in much further detail).
And third, the prison, as an organization, provides certain techniques or strategies that work to reproduce the inequality that exists both between inmates and staff, but also among various staff members who occupy different positions within the organizational hierarchy. The inequalities that exist within the prison (particularly those between prisoners and staff) are not generated within the prison without reference to historical context and social structure. They are rooted in longstanding (but flexible) notions of who prisoners are as group of people and how they deserve to be treated. These ideas center on the meaning and process of exclusion, such that prisoners, in our society, are not considered full “citizens,” but rather, represent the Other that requires differentiation.

Exclusion and (Non)Citizenship

The concept of exclusion or ‘othering’ is a useful way to think about the justification of punishment (among other phenomena). Social exclusion is certainly nothing new or specific to contemporary Western cultures (for example, Allman [2013] traces social exclusion practices from 5th century Greece through the 20th century stigmatizing processes described by Erving Goffman [1961a]). Additionally, many of the core concepts of deviance, boundaries, and social solidarity were laid out by Durkheim (1973) long ago (though his theories presupposed a set of mutually shared values that the authors to follow would not endorse). Despite these longstanding processes, many scholars have argued that increasingly punitive and exclusionary practices have become exaggerated in late modern Western societies as a result of ontological crises in which trust in the state and constant threat of uncertainty about the future have become the norm (see Bauman 2000; Bosworth and Palmer 2012; Garland 2001; Young 1999, among others). Bauman
(2000) argues that societies (or, more specifically, the people who make up societies) have a desire for order, and norms act as a means of imposing that order on those who would deviate from the kinds of behaviors that are deemed acceptable or tolerable. He states that “‘[o]rder’ and ‘norm’ are the sharp knives pressed against the society as it is; they are first and foremost about separation, amputation, excision, expurgation, exclusion” (Bauman 2000:206). Because exclusion is linked to norms, the excluded are blamed for their own exclusion, under the assumption that they had a choice to behave in a conforming manner and chose to behave otherwise. Thus, the imposition of order upon them (i.e., punishment) is justifiable, since it was their choice to behave contrary to the norm; the imposition of order is seen as good and necessary for the continuation of society.

Though coming from a slightly different perspective, a number of social theorists have recently written about the changes that have occurred in the penal system in terms of ‘the new punitiveness’. These theorists focus on the ways in which punishment has become more severe and similarly embrace the concept of exclusion. Brown (2005:282) defines the new punitiveness as “a new way of using punishment, a new form of penal power…that represents a radical departure from previous trends in punishment” and is “characterized by…a few enormously important reconfigurations of the state-subject relationship achieved through new forms of punishment.” Hallsworth (2005) argues that the process of exclusion is the technique used by the neoliberal state to deal with its unwanted elements. Whereas the modern welfare state attempted to include social deviants (through work and social welfare programs), the less ‘productive’ members of society are now excluded and presented as Others who can only be understood as dangerous. Hallsworth (2005:251) claims that the criminalized ‘underclass’ now stands as a
threat to the “white nation of free consumers.” Young (1999) also considers the practice of enhanced exclusion a product of late modernity. He argues that we have shifted from an inclusive (modern, welfarist) society to an exclusive (late modern, neoliberal) one in which wealth disparities have increased, crime has become a normalized part of everyday life, and ontological insecurity (stemming from globalization, multiculturalism, individualization, etc.) is commonplace. These phenomena combine and produce a society in which exclusion of the least desirable members of society takes place through essentialization (i.e., “they” are different from “us”), and punitive policies are implemented and justified despite the lack of evidence that they do anything at all to reduce crime. The result is a society similar to the one theorized by Bauman, in that the ‘Others’, the excluded, are shut away, punished, and deprived of rights in ways that do not commonly elicit protest from most members of society.

Expanding upon the theories of exclusion to include a moralist framework, Opotow, Gerson, and Woodside (2005) posit the notion of ‘moral exclusion’ to discuss what they view as the psychological process of deeming some people, but not others, as deserving of fair treatment. They argue that we have a *scope of justice* and draw lines between those who are included in that scope (and so, deserve fair treatment) and those who lie beyond the boundary, who are “*morally excluded*, beyond our moral concerns, and eligible for deprivation, exploitation, and other harms that might be ignored or considered as normal, inevitable, and deserved” (Opotow et al. 2005:305). Moral exclusion is characterized by viewing the excluded as unconnected to and psychologically distant from oneself, lacking a sense of moral obligation to the excluded, distinguishing the excluded as “nonentities, expendable, and undeserving of fair treatment” or resources, and supporting practices and living conditions for the excluded that would be
unacceptable for the included (Opotow et al. 2005:305-6).

An interesting theoretical point to consider when thinking about exclusion and notions of belonging is Kearon’s (2005) invitation to place the concepts of punishment and the Other into the historical context of Western societies. He argues that the history of the prison, and much of the history of criminology, is bound up with Western Liberalism. He claims that liberal sensibilities have always been paternalistic and interventionist, and embedded within an assimilationist project that “was (and is) fundamentally dependent on the continued existence of a stereotypically marginalized, socially excluded, and deviant other” (Kearon 2005:7). In fact, the very idea of having a liberal identity rests on the notion that there is some Other, some underprivileged or marginalized group, to defend and help. Therefore, the constant need to maintain the liberal identity reinforces the notion of the criminalized other as something to define oneself against.

While these theories of exclusion apply to punishment and incarceration more broadly, I will use them here to examine the practice of censorship in prisons. The justifications given to legitimize censorship in the prison library are based on definitions of prisoners as a homogeneous (criminal, dangerous, etc.) class of excluded people. These justifications naturalize the violence, gang membership, drug use, and various ‘criminal’ activities that occur in prisons as behaviors that inhere in this outcast population and the ‘criminal lifestyle’ that people choose to lead. They also presuppose the “need” for rehabilitation (or at least some form of interventionist approach, now commonly labeled ‘reentry programs’). The administrators and staff who embrace these justifications fail to examine the prison environment as one that inherently produces anger, aggression, and violence because of extreme power inequalities, lack
of autonomy, deprivation of dignity, and so on. Rather than focus on the ways that changing the structure of the organization could reduce the need to censor certain materials, the assumption is that it is the prisoners who are pathological (and not the institution), and their status as prisoners justifies the deprivation of the same rights accorded to other (included) members of society.

Using a framework based on the concept of citizenship, Bosworth (2010) argues that prisoners are excluded from the full rights and protections of citizenship due to their status as lawbreakers and ‘criminals’. Whereas most Americans would expect the state to protect and defend citizens’ rights (particularly those written in the Constitution), this same expectation does not apply to prisoners, and abuses of their rights are considered an acceptable outcome that is ultimately justifiable, since the prisoner broke the law (or, really, was convicted of breaking the law). Though this is done in overt ways, such as denying voting rights to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people (Manza and Uggen 2006), it is also done through more subtle and less visible processes like prison censorship. This framework can be applied to the current study. Because prisoners are not considered full citizens, the type of censorship that happens in prison libraries is socially acceptable, but was it to occur in a public library, it would elicit reactions alleging violations of First Amendment rights. However, the ambiguous standing of the prisoner in relation to citizenship works to justify infringements upon rights that would be difficult to legitimize for the population of citizens on the “outside.”

Stuntz (2011) argues that the routinization of procedural punishment in the U.S., which emphasizes the process or procedure over any sort of moral or ethical considerations about what

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6 The large number of incarcerated unauthorized migrants in the U.S. certainly complicates this issue, but for the purposes of this argument, I refer to documented American citizens, since they are the only people living in this country who have legally and constitutionally protected ‘rights’.
happens to the condemned once the process has ended (at sentencing), has created a social context in which the punishment inflicted upon individuals becomes justifiable and invisible so long as the proper procedures were followed. This applies to ordinary incarceration as well as the most extreme circumstances under which people are confined in solitary cells in supermax prisons. This idea of locking people up and forgetting about them evokes the famous words of Charles Dickens ([1842] 2008, American Notes, Ch. 7) in response to his visit to 19th century prisons in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh:

> I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers….I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body: and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay.

Though Dickens clearly refers to the Eastern State Penitentiary’s extreme conditions of forced isolation, it is no great stretch to apply the underlying sentiments of his comments to the invisible pains of imprisonment felt by millions today.

*The Prison as a Total Institution*

I will also draw upon two classic theoretical traditions in the sociological and criminological literature (as well as the more contemporary writings that are built upon these foundations): the concept of the prison as a ‘total institution’, originally conceived by Goffman (1961a), and the theory of the ‘pains of imprisonment’, as put forth by Sykes ([1958] 2007). I will use these two different, but complementary, frameworks to explore the ways in which both workers and inmates in prisons are subjected to an extraordinary routine in which deprivation of autonomy is common yet also contested.
According to Goffman, the prison, along with the asylum (now psychiatric hospital), military organizations, and sequestered religious orders are different kinds of what he calls a ‘total institution’: “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (1961a:xii). These institutions aim to sequester and reform their inhabitants, teaching them the exigencies of the well-ordered life. In the prison, one of the primary ways in which those in positions of power attempt to impose a certain social and moral order on the inmates is through deprivation of autonomy and abrogation of dignity. Goffman (1961a:18) says the prison initiate undergoes “a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified.” As Singer (1971:715) puts it, “Our prisons are institutions which strive to dehumanize….We expose the inmate to indignities and invasions of privacy which, if they occurred in the ‘outside’ world, would bring immediate howls of protest.” While inmates are ritually deprived of autonomy and dignity, the staff is introduced to a particular “institutional perspective” that “rationalizes activity, provides a subtle means of maintaining social distance from inmates and a stereotyped view of them, and justifies the treatment accorded them” (Goffman 1961a:87).

Although Goffman’s work, along with much of interactionist research, has been criticized for its ‘narrow’ focus on micro-level interactions, with a disregard for more macro-level analyses of ‘power’ and structure, Dennis and Martin (2005) argue that the interactionist tradition actually has been concerned with power, and much of the ethnographic work that has been done illustrates the ways in which structural and organizational forces impose upon and influence the
actions, interactions, and identities of real people in everyday situations. They claim that, “far from neglecting the phenomena of power, much interactionist work [including Goffman’s] is actually about power relations and their enactment’” (Dennis and Martin 2005:197-98). Thus, what may at first appear to be two incompatible traditions (that of Foucault, discussed above, and that of Goffman) are, in fact, complementary, particularly when one examines the exercise of power at the institutional or organizational (meso) level. Much of the work on deviance in the interactionist tradition has been concerned with demonstrating the “often routine ways in which the formal processes of institutions ensure the authoritative categorization of individuals, or whole groups, as subordinate or morally unacceptable in some way” (Dennis and Martin 2005:200).

Like Goffman, Sykes ([1958] 2007) argues that attempts to erode or destroy the prisoners’ sense of dignity and worth are integral to the prison system. He developed a typology of what he terms the ‘pains of imprisonment’ that inhere in the modern prison system; these include the deprivations of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. These are not the physical pains of a bygone era of corporal punishment, but Sykes ([1958] 2007:64) argues that these psychological pains “can be just as painful as the physical maltreatment which they have replaced.” More recent scholarship has found that prisoners still refer to these pains, speaking of ‘trampled emotional existences’ (Jewkes 2005) and using terms such as “unremitting loneliness” (Johnson and McGunigall-Smith 2008:337) when describing their prison experiences.

In a series of studies of prisons in the U.K., Crewe (2007, 2011a, 2011b) found that the organizational policies and practices of controlling inmates has changed significantly in the past
few decades, so that new types of ‘pains of imprisonment’ have developed and exist alongside the ones outlined by Sykes. One new type of pain, which he calls the pain of “uncertainty and indeterminacy” is an ontological insecurity which is felt particularly by those serving indeterminate sentences, wherein all of their behaviors can potentially harm or help their chances of being granted parole (Crewe 2011a:513). The second pain that he adds to Sykes’ original five is the pain of psychological assessment, which “forces prisoners to address, if not accept, meanings that may be at odds with their self perceptions” (Crewe 2011a:515). Third, there is the pain of “self-government,” wherein prisoners are increasingly expected “to be active and enthusiastic, rather than passive and resigned, in the process of one’s own penal management….In effect, they become consumers of their own punishment” (Crewe 2011a:520). These new pains may be felt more sharply in British, rather than American, prisons, as the move toward more cognitive-behavioral programming has emerged in the U.K.; however, the managerial techniques of risk-management that produce this sort of individualization of responsibilities (particularly for those who hope to get an early release) affect American prisoners as well.

Drawing upon these theories of the pains of imprisonment, then, I argue that reading is one private act that inmates can engage in which allows for an (albeit temporary and cerebral) escape from the everyday humiliations and assaults to their very humanity that they must endure.\footnote{This assumes the literacy skills necessary to engage in reading, which, given the low literacy rates of inmates in the U.S., is an assumption that cannot be made across the board. However, the argument that reading provides respite and is a possible tool for mental emancipation underlines the importance of increasing access to education and literacy skills (not merely within the prison, but as a fundamental part of our society).} Thus, reading may ameliorate the pains of imprisonment. In the ‘lifeworld’ of inmates,
there are few (but always some) ways and spaces in which one may attempt to be autonomous and live with dignity. Thus, to control access to reading materials through censorship is to control the possibilities of what happens in these internalized worlds of the mind. The rules about and practices of censorship colonize prisoners’ minds, limiting what they can do in these stolen, hidden moments. In cases where inmates are denied access to the library (or cannot read), this amounts to an added pain—or at the very least makes alleviating some of the aforementioned pains more difficult (i.e., it structures the field of possible actions).

The Prison as an Organization

In her study of prison workers at San Quentin, Barbara Owen (1988) suggests that the majority of prison studies (up to that point, but arguably since then as well) provide either a structural analysis of the prison system or a micro-level account of the prison subculture. She argues for more research that approaches the prison as “an active, living institution of social control” and analyzes the “social order and the ways in which it is produced and maintained through the actions of its members” (Owen 1988:5). In this vein, then, I will approach the prison as an institution—an organization—that reproduces social control.

Organizational goals

According to organizational theorists, organizations have defining features—namely, they have membership criteria (and those who belong to the organization are distinguished from those who do not), and they exist for a particular purpose and have defined goals (though goals are flexible and can change over time) (Hornqvist 2010). If we take Foucault’s (2009:14) assertion
that the two primary functions that the prison has claimed for itself are to “ensure the secure and unbroken detention of individuals” and to encourage the rehabilitation of inmates, we see that, although the emphasis on which function should take priority has changed over time, these remain the two primary stated goals of the prison.\(^8\)

The prison library is in one way a vestige of the past, a product of the rehabilitative ideal, but it has also become redefined by some administrators as a control tool (though this was always part of rehabilitative ideology—the notion that reading produces docility was never far from Wardens’ minds). The difference now is that administrators tend to pay lip service to the goal of rehabilitation, while they simultaneously create more repressive and controlling environments devoid of programs that might mitigate the difficulties prisoners face while incarcerated (good health care, education, etc.) and after release (job training, education, housing, etc.). And, regarding the library, they still use the officially stated goal of rehabilitation as a justification for censorship.

Although much of the recent literature on the “new punitiveness” suggests an abandonment of the rehabilitative ideal (see Brown 2005; Hallsworth 2005; Simon and Feeley 2003, among others), rehabilitation does remain an official \textit{stated} goal of the prison system in the U.S., and, despite the often punitive rhetoric employed by prison administrators and the lack of funding for educational or other rehabilitation programs, there are individuals working within the prison who still believe in, and attempt to actualize, the goal of rehabilitation (including the

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\(^8\) Of course, Foucault does not take these assertions at face value; he claims (and I agree) that the “the penal system, in spite of the orders it assigns to itself, is not really an apparatus for suppressing crime but is in fact a mechanism for the management, the differential intensification, the dispersal of illegalisms—a mechanism for the control and distribution of different illegalities” (2009:19). However, it is the \textit{stated} goals of the organization that I am most concerned with here, as they are used to justify and legitimize the various types of censorship that occur in prison libraries.
majority of the librarians who participated in the current research project). Therefore, this study will examine both how the stated goals of the prison as an organization are used to justify specific actions, as well as the ways that individuals working within the organization espouse their own beliefs about what the goals of the prison are or should be, and how these beliefs translate into action.

*Individuals within the organization*

Because organizations are made up of individual actors, not everyone agrees with the stated organizational goals or the recent changes in penal philosophy espoused by many administrators and politicians (the move away from rehabilitation and towards incapacitation and increased punitiveness), and so, some individuals (particularly librarians and other non-custody staff) hold onto or espouse the notion of rehabilitation as a legitimate and practicable goal of the prison. Thus, these people attempt to fulfill the goal of rehabilitation even if they oftentimes do so in a context that does not support their efforts. Differences in perspectives about the goals of the prison often cause conflict among prison workers who inhabit different roles. As Owen (1998:5) puts it:

> Social control is a product of relations among human beings, acting and reacting within the institutional context of the prison. This context is shaped by power and the expression of interests specific to the prison community. These interests flow from the prison administration and the central administration of the state and may not be identical to the interests of the line workers in the prison.

When it comes to censorship, librarians have quite varied experiences with, attitudes about, and behaviors related to it. I will analyze these differences using a framework that combines several important schools of thought. The philosopher Ian Hacking (2004) demonstrates the complementary nature of Foucault, Goffman, and existentialist philosophy,
particularly that of Sartre, stating that “all three are addressing questions of how some of a person’s possibilities grow into their very being, while others are excluded” (p. 288). However, Hacking argues that both Foucault and Goffman are missing something from their analyses; the former fails to address how macro-level phenomena like discourses make their way into the everyday lives of people, and the latter does not adequately explore or explain how the institutions in which people live out their lives have come into being. Thus, he argues, we need both. The lynchpin that is required to hold the two together is Sartre’s existentialism. Though it may be unpopular in certain circles today to talk about choice (a word arguably ‘ruined’ by rational choice theorists), one of the key elements of Sartre’s (1956) concept of human existence is that our essence is the result of the choices we make in life (rather than being predetermined). However—and this is essential to understanding both Sartre and Hacking—those choices are not made in a context free of constraint. The choices possible to us are a result of both our local, immediate setting, as well as the historical context in which that setting came to be. At any given time and place, there are a limited number of possibilities that are intelligible. Those who would dismiss Sartre’s work (and/or existentialist philosophy altogether) as a perspective blind to structural, historical, or genetic constraints fundamentally misunderstand Sartre’s concept of choice—it is something that is always already constrained from the moment of birth. This does not mean that we do not make choices within these constraints. As Hacking (2004:282-83) so eloquently puts it:

There are endless blind or meaningless limitations on your activities….We push our lives through a thicket in which the stern trunks of determinism are entangled in the twisting vines of chance. Still, you can choose what you do, under the circumstances….The chances of birth, of family, of war, of hunger, of social station, of the supports and the oppression that can result from religion or caste—the chances of wanton cruelty or high rates of unemployment—once you start listing everything there does not seem to be much room for choice at all. But of course there is. All that stuff is the framework within which we can decide who to be.
The point here is that people exist within these constraints, and these constraints are often imposed by the organizations in which they live out their lives. Individuals—both prisoners and staff—operate within the constraints of the prison and make choices within certain limitations. They may have extraordinarily limited choices, but they can choose (and here we can see similarities with Foucault’s notion of the always-present possibility for resistance). It is within this framework of power, the total institution, and the existentialist concept of choice within constraints that I will analyze prison librarians’ attitudes and behaviors surrounding censorship. As prisons are organizations comprised of individuals, these individuals make choices about censorship—about whether to comply, look away, rationalize, resist, and so on.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

The terms by which we refer to both those who are incarcerated and those who work in prisons are burdened with political and ideological meaning, and have changed over time. Those who were once ‘jailors’, ‘turnkeys’, or ‘guards’ have now become ‘correctional officers’, and those who were once ‘convicts’ are now ‘inmates’ or ‘offenders’ (though the term ‘prisoner’ has remained somewhat consistent in its usage). Although much of the contemporary criminological and sociological literature uses the terms ‘offender’ and ‘correctional officer’ (or ‘C.O.’), I have chose to use other words to name the individuals who inhabit and work inside the prison (excepting, of course, when I provide a direct quote that uses other terminology). Rather than ‘offender’, I use one of several term interchangeably: prisoner, inmate, or incarcerated person/individual, and instead of ‘correctional officer’, I use the term ‘custody staff’, or where grammatically appropriate or convenient, ‘custody officer’.
There are several reasons for this. First, these are the terms most frequently used by the librarians I interviewed. Though a few librarians used the terms ‘offender’, most of them used the word ‘inmate’ or ‘prisoner’, and several used the term ‘C.O.’, but the majority used the language of ‘custody’ or ‘security’ (sometimes adding the word ‘staff’, but other times just using the singular word to describe all custody staff members). (I also use the terms ‘Warden’ and ‘Assistant Warden’ rather than ‘Superintendent’, for the sake of simplicity, since the actual title varies by institution and ‘Warden’ was used most frequently.) So, I have decided to use the librarians’ words rather than those more commonly used by academics, policy makers, and prison administrators.

Secondly, I have also tried to use the term ‘incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individual/person’ as much as possible, in a deliberate attempt to humanize people who are locked away in prisons and jails (though, admittedly, I do not do this as much as I would like due to the length of these terms). In “An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language,” The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions at Medgar Evers College, a group comprised of people who have formerly been incarcerated and other activists and scholars, (2004) states:

One of our first initiatives is to respond to the negative public perception about our population as expressed in the language and concepts used to describe us. When we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons. All terms devoid of humanness which identify us as “things” rather than as people. These terms are accepted as the “official” language of the media, law enforcement, the prison industrial complex and public policy agencies. However, they are no longer acceptable for us and we are asking people to stop using them. In an effort to assist our transition from prison to our communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves, we are asking everyone to stop using these negative terms and to simply refer to us as PEOPLE. People currently or formerly incarcerated, PEOPLE on parole, PEOPLE recently released from prison, PEOPLE in prison, PEOPLE with criminal convictions, but PEOPLE.

(This echoes the assertion made by so many that we should no longer use the term ‘slave’ but rather ‘enslaved African’ or ‘enslaved person’—it constitutes a reinstallation of humanity in the
language used to speak about ‘groups’ of people who were/are autonomous human beings, rather than passive subjects.) It is my position that words like ‘offender’ and ‘correctional officer’ depoliticize the context of mass incarceration that exists in our society, and they redirect our attention away from the extreme power differentials present in prisons and jails. (‘Offender’ also implies that someone has caused some sort of harm or offense, which is not necessarily true of everyone who is incarcerated, and ‘correctional officer’ implies both that there is some sort of ‘correcting’ of inmates that needs doing and that this person actually performs this ‘corrective’ role, which is also an unfounded supposition.) Therefore, my use of language—though divergent from that of most mainstream contemporary academic literature—results from both an attempt to allow the words of the interview respondents to come through in my representation of them and their lived worlds, as well as my own ideological position that situates the normalization of mass incarceration as one of the great tragedies of our era.
CHAPTER 4: PURPOSES OF THE LIBRARY

“What societal interest is served by prisoners who remain illiterate? What social benefit is there in ignorance? How are people corrected while imprisoned if their education is outlawed? Who profits (other than the prison establishment itself) from stupid prisoners?”

As the prison and the penal philosophies that shape it have changed over time, so have ideas about the role the library should play within the organization. Recurring debates about rehabilitation and social control have dominated the discourse about prison libraries since their inception, and many of the fundamental arguments about what the purpose(s) of the library should be are as unresolved today as they were over a century ago. Differences of opinion about the prison library reflect larger debates about penal philosophy, particularly about the meaning and relevance of rehabilitation in contemporary modes of punishment. Larry Sullivan (2000:56) claims that “[l]ibrary service to prisoners operates on premises that revert to ideas of punishment, confinement, control, atavistic vengeance, and even exclusion. When we speak in terms of prisons today, we speak in terms of retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation, not freedom to read or surf the Web.”

Although professional organizations like the American Library Association (ALA) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) have created their own sets of standards for prison libraries, these act merely as suggestions to prison administrators and tools for librarians, as they are not legally binding documents. The ALA and the IFLA both define reading as a right and assert that a prison library should emulate the public library model, while simultaneously providing services that aid in ‘rehabilitation’ and ‘reentry’
(Lehmann and Locke 2005; Office for Intellectual Freedom 2010). The IFLA’s guidelines for prison libraries also include a discussion of the multiple purposes of the prison library, which are nearly identical to the ones mentioned by the interview respondents (which will be discussed in detail below):

With a qualified staff, a collection of materials that meets the education, recreation, and rehabilitation needs of the prisoners, as well as an inviting physical space, the prison library can be an important part of prison life and offender programs. The library also represents an important “lifeline” to the outside world. It can be an effective management tool for the administration by reducing idleness and encouraging constructive use of time. Lastly, the prison library can be the vital information resource that makes the difference of whether or not a newly released ex-offender fails or succeeds on the outside. (Lehmann and Locke 2005:5)

While these are surely lofty goals, the authors are careful to begin this statement by emphasizing the requisite of having qualified staff and adequate space and resources for the library (i.e., institutional support).

At present, the library exists as a contested space within the prison, and beliefs about its purpose(s) vary widely and tend to be linked to the role an individual inhabits within the organization (administrator, custody staff, inmate, librarian, etc.). Lehmann (2000:8) argues that the “prison environment is an untraditional and inhospitable territory with priorities that challenge ‘traditional’ librarianship and philosophy.” Though the data here only allow for an analysis of librarians’ perceptions of the beliefs of others within the institution, prison librarians generally feel that administrators, custody staff, and inmates understand the purpose of the library in ways quite different from most librarians. This notion of difference in opinion about prison libraries is nothing new; Barratt Wilkins (1977:120), a prison librarian, stated over three decades ago that one barrier to the development of prison library programs was the “perceived dichotomy between correctional administrators and librarians of the goals of correctional
programs.” Though I draw upon the extant literature about administrators, custody staff, and prisoners, I will discuss the four perspectives—those of librarians, administrators, custody staff, and prisoner—with explicit understanding that the librarian participants in this study cannot speak for, but only about, the other groups based on both their readings of official DOC policies and documents, and their own daily interactions with others inside the prison.

Of course, variation exists among each of these categories (including the librarians), and the diverse ways that individuals think about the library have concrete effects on the library as a space within the prison, as a workplace for librarians, and as a resource for prisoners. As James, a librarian interviewee from a Southern prison, asserted, “If you break it down to other staff members, every staff member has a different opinion on what the library should and shouldn’t be doing.” However, if we view one’s role in an organization as something that in some ways defines (or at least influences) the knowledge one has access to and the socialization process one undergoes, we can see how one’s position within an organization “serves as a sort of interpretive lens” through which members make sense of the world and assign meaning to things (Anspach 1987:217). Owen (1998:11) argues that each worker, in accordance with her or his position within the prison, “becomes socialized into the prison community” and “learns the culture of social control and its surrounding meaning-systems,” so that each individual “develops a worldview which serves as the motive force of his or her actions.” Similarly, Stearns (2004:70), a longtime prison librarian, claims that disagreements about the prison library’s purpose or usefulness happen because the “limited scope of each viewpoint inhibits the ability to see things

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9 In order to protect anonymity, all names used in this document are pseudonyms, and the states in which librarians work are not mentioned. Their locations are only referred to by one of the four major Census regions of the U.S.: Northeast, South, Midwest, and West.
from a wider perspective, and false assumptions result…” Thus, it is not surprising that definitions of the purpose(s) of the prison library are connected to the various roles people inhabit. Additionally, Rubin and Souza (1989:47) claim that the prison itself has contradictory goals, and as such, the library’s purpose is further obscured: “Defining the role of the library…within such an ill-defined establishment is in itself a problem.”

This chapter will thus situate the prison library as a disputed and ambiguous space within the larger organization and discuss the ways that librarians define the purposes of the library (typically as a place for learning, rehabilitation, and recreation), as well as the ways they perceive administrators’ and custody staff’s definitions of it (often as a superfluous and expendable part of the prison or as a mechanism of social control). Given the overall decline in prison educational programs in the past few decades, along with the increasing emphasis on ‘reentry’ programming (Phelps 2011), the prison library’s purpose, and its role in supplying or supplementing the classes and activities defined as reentry programs, is sure to increase the already present contention.

THE LIBRARY AS LOW ADMINISTRATIVE PRIORITY

One of the most common themes that interview respondents brought up when we discussed the library’s role in the prison is the idea that the library is a very low priority for the administration, something that deserves little attention and very few resources. This devaluation of the library results in numerous problems for librarians and inmates, including a lack of funding for the purchase of new and relevant materials, chronic understaffing, workplace tensions for librarians (some of whom must continually justify the presence of the library to staff and/or administrators)
and, at times, the use of the library as a means of control over prisoners by custody and/or administration (Vogel 2009).

Prison libraries differ widely in the amount of space and resources they are allocated by the administration. In order to get a broad overview of this variation, I asked survey respondents to report the number of books, magazine subscriptions, and DVDs contained in their libraries. Twenty-four percent of respondents said their libraries contain fewer than 5000 books; 36 percent work at libraries that have between 5,000 and 10,000 books; 27 percent have 10,000 to 15,000 books in their collections; and 12 percent have more than 15,000 books in their libraries. The majority (60 percent) of libraries have between one and twenty-five paid subscriptions to magazines, while 23 percent have more than 25 subscriptions, and 18 percent have no paid subscriptions to magazines (though they may have donated magazines, which are generally older issues). Most libraries (56 percent) do not have DVDs in their collections. Twenty-eight percent of libraries carry between one and 100 DVDs, and 16 percent have more than 100 DVDs in their collections. I also asked how many people are employed as library staff (not including inmate staff). The majority (67 percent) of respondents reported that they work as the only non-inmate staff at the library, while 21 percent work with a staff of two, and 12 percent with a staff of more than two. One librarian who works in the Midwest, Oscar, discussed how he has been able to build a large, diverse collection over the many years he has worked in his library; however, he has engaged in many struggles with administrators in order to achieve this goal and considers his library the exception to the rule in his state: “On the other extreme, you have [a large state prison]…that doesn’t even have a library at all. All they do is just provide a law library, and then
they have what they call a library, which is *The Shawshank Redemption* library with just a bunch of donated books.”

The majority of the librarians I interviewed believe that most administrators and custody staff place little value on the library and oftentimes regard it as an expendable (or at least unproblematically neglected) recreational privilege or frill. This struggle over recognition and resources has been ongoing for decades. Reviewing the *Survey of Library and Information Problems in Correctional Institutions* report of 1972 (conducted by UC Berkeley), LeDonne (1977:57) found that, even in the 1970s, before the ‘punitive turn’, libraries were undermined by “[p]oor building design, inadequate funds, insufficient staff and clerical help, isolation of libraries, lack of training opportunities for staff, and poor administrative support…” More recently, Stearns (2004:62) has argued that “prison authorities appear to have relegated their libraries to a status of minor importance.” Illustrating this point, Anna, a librarian in the West, stated, “I think the library has been one of the last things that anybody was concerned with providing….We are a pretty low priority here. If the librarians didn’t try as hard as we do, it would be even worse than what it is.” Similarly, Charlotte, a librarian in the Northeast who is in charge of several different facilities, said the administrators in her state do very little to support or even acknowledge the librarians: “We’re just invisible….They’ve been known to move the entire library collection from one room to another without telling us.” The extreme disregard illustrated in Charlotte’s statement exemplifies one end on a spectrum of attitudes about the importance of the prison library and the librarians who work there.

Several librarians acknowledged the role that individual Wardens or other high-ranking administrators play in how library services are supported and how the library functions within
the institution. While some Wardens may subscribe to a penal philosophy that does not incorporate the goal of rehabilitation or the importance of providing quality programming in the prison, others believe that prisons should be a place for rehabilitation and preparation for reentry into society, and thus value and support libraries as spaces that can aid in achieving these aims. Harper, a Midwestern librarian, explained that administrators in her institution “couldn’t care less about library services.” Along with other librarians, she believes the Warden plays a fundamental role in shaping the library:

It’s really an individual thing. The Warden that we had when I came to my present position, I don’t think could have cared less about library services, whether they [inmates] got anything at all that resembled library service. I think there are other Wardens, and I know at least in [my state], there are other institutions where they really make an effort to have a good quality library. They make an effort to find ways to secure materials and make them available. So, a lot of it depends on the Warden.

Thus, even if most of the interviewed librarians believe their own libraries are not a priority for administrators, they recognize that there is variation among facilities. Stearns (2004) claims that staff are often frustrated by administrative decision-making that happens without their input, yet hampers their ability to perform their work. As Bonta (1997) explains, “Many agencies and correctional managers verbalize their desire to promote rehabilitation but often their actions fail to support their works” (quoted in Stearns 2004:61). Echoing this sentiment, Harper said that the library is a “political issue. You’ll hear administrators say they support it…and every time they tour anybody to the building, ‘This is our great library.’ The next minute, they turn around and basically treat you like, ‘We don’t need a library…and if you don’t shut up, you won’t be here.” Vogel (2009) argues that these types of conflicts are endemic to the prison, and librarians must learn to accept them, as they are
unresolvable in an organization in which power is so unequally distributed and goals are highly contested.

For those who work in institutions where the library is a low priority, tensions often arise, and, in some cases, administrators even ignore the laws protecting prisoners’ access to information. In one instance, the South Carolina DOC fired its entire library staff and closed all but one of its libraries after a former member of the custody staff who had been fired complained to the media about the inappropriateness of inmate reading materials, specifically novels by Donald Goines (who will be discussed later as one of the most frequently censored authors in prison libraries) (Chepesiuk 1995). Another example of the administration’s failure to adhere to legal mandates came from Jennifer’s Western prison:

I think [for] most administrators…the library is the least of their concerns. I have to constantly, constantly, in my position, make them aware of our legal mandates, which is so many hours that inmates are allowed to be in here. Sometimes they’ll do a lockdown and that will be that, and they don’t understand that they can’t do that. They have to allow us to have these guys escorted in there—maybe additional security if they’re under lockdown—but there’s only so many days that we can be closed completely before we can be sued, because there is the law that says that inmates are allowed to have so much time in the law library. And then there are other [law]suits about recreation.

Though most librarians reported that the law section of the library (which is legally mandated to meet certain standards) generally receives adequate recognition and resources, they said that the ‘recreational’ part of the library (which contains everything other than legal materials) is woefully underfunded and/or understaffed. The difference was explained by James: “Recently, for the first time in three years, I was provided some money. But for the most part I’ve relied on donations, although there…always seems to be some money at headquarters for certain legal materials, because we do have…the Supreme Court mandate for certain materials.” A survey respondent described a “sinister…attack on our budget” and stated that “[p]rison
libraries in [my state] are placed at the bottom of the priority list, as reading and access to books is viewed as a luxury.” Leo, who works in the West, said the only money he gets for the library comes from the “inmate welfare fund,” which is generated through inmate purchases at the canteen, so he “did have some money, but it wasn’t budgeted money. It’s very difficult.” The problem of underfunding varies by state but exists throughout the country. In the Northeast, Simone faces similar problems: “We haven’t had a budget for two years….I do get a lot of men that use the library, that if they buy books from the outside, they’ll donate them, which is nice.” In fact, many librarians must rely solely on donations of used books to stock their shelves.

Though Simone’s institution allows inmates to donate their personal items to the library, other prisons have policies that forbid such donations. The lack of funding to purchase materials prompts some librarians take it upon themselves to procure library materials in a variety of ways. A survey respondent whose budget for book purchases has been eliminated, stated that she “now beg[s] for discards from the local public libraries, garage sales in my neighborhood, and we are trying to get Warden approval to have a book drop off for any free staff person.” This notion of ‘begging’ or scavenging for materials arose throughout the data. Madeline, who works in the West, said that she and her colleague “also sell our aluminum cans that we collect from the inmates, and with that money, I put it into a media fund and we purchased DVDs, music, games, sometimes books…” One librarian who is particularly innovative and invests a significant amount of time and energy into getting donations is Jennifer, who works in a different Western state. She explained the various ways she obtains items for her library:

We get really creative here because we have to, and so, I instilled a huge donation campaign within our community, and we get hundreds and hundreds of books a year donated....The other thing I started doing, because I wasn’t able to purchase any newspaper subscriptions this year because my budget got cut, I went to the local hotels and arranged where they just throw out their extra USA Today and things like that, and
so I swing by two or three of them. Then our local paper, they give me the week-old, unused newspapers. And it’s free, and it just takes a little bit of my time off work.

While these librarians do provide some reading and entertainment materials for prisoners through their resourcefulness, the items that are donated are often old and of poor quality. As Anna, another Western librarian, explained, “…a lot of the donations that we get from places are junk. If nobody wants to read it in your library, probably these guys don’t want to read it here. It’s so hard to make people understand that.” Not only are these items often less than desirable, but acquiring them also takes time and energy, something many librarians lack, given that their libraries are understaffed.

As budget cuts affect funds for book purchases, they also affect staffing (Vogel 2009). Several librarians discussed the burdens they face because they do not have enough library staff to cover the amount of work that needs to be done. For example, Emma, who works in the Northeast, stated, “We had one position cut that has not been refunded, so we’re down manpower.” She said the lack of staff significantly impacts her and her fellow librarian’s ability to provide adequate services in their facilities:

Well, I think we definitely are providing them with educational materials. We’re definitely providing them with recreational materials, and we’re definitely providing them with access to the courts. Are we doing it as well as we would like to? Absolutely not, because we would need a staff of 30 to do it as well as we would like to. We’re doing the bare minimum.

Similarly, Herman, who works in the West, stated: “We are down two or three librarians in our [state prison] system and we’ve been there for a couple of years. Maybe next year they’ll allow us to hire.” And Margaret, who works in a different Western state, used comedy to relieve the tension she experiences due to understaffing: “I work extra hours all the time. I could live here. I
joke about that with everybody all the time, ‘I could just live here! I think I’m going to move in for a few weeks!’ There’s just not enough time. It doesn’t matter how many hours I work, I can’t get everything done.” Thus, prison librarians describe situations of neglect, in which they perceive that they and their libraries are very low priorities for administrators. Because of this position, they must often justify the existence of the library to prison staff and authorities. In doing so, they must negotiate their own beliefs about the purposes of a prison library with the often opposing beliefs of prison administrators and custody staff. Most of the librarians I interviewed believe that the majority of custody staff and administrators view the library in one of two ways: as an unnecessary and expendable privilege (as reflected in the above statements), or as a means of social control.

READING AS SOCIAL CONTROL

When librarians discussed their beliefs about the numerous functions the library serves, they almost always mentioned the idea that it serves some a type of “security function” or provides a “control tool” for prison staff. Many librarians said they believe this is the primary way that most administrators and custody staff view the library. Given that administrators’ positions within the organization place them at a vantage point from which their ‘interpretive lens’ lends to the prioritization of “safety and security” above all else, and since these perspectives are “grounded in bureaucratic demands” (Owen 1988:23), it is not surprising that they view the library in this light. Cohen (1985:168) argues that “correctional bureaucrats” are concerned above all with maintaining and presenting a controlled and orderly prison, stating that “[p]restige goes to the manager who can boast of a secure prison…” This outlook can lead to a certain type of myopia,
in which order and control are prioritized above all else, and the value of various aspects of the prison are measured merely by their ability to serve as a mechanism of control. Cullen et al. (2009:113) critique this sort of myopic control ideology, epitomized by the work of David Farabee, which reduces all ‘programs’ in prisons to mere tools “to manage offenders during their incarceration. By reducing ‘tedium’ and presumably keeping inmates busy, these programs will ‘help wardens run their institutions more smoothly’” (quoting Farabee 2005:65).

An example of this kind of perception of administrators comes from Agatha, a Southern librarian, who said, “…I think that most Wardens and people in DOC understand that it [the library] serves a security function. When they [inmates] have books to read…., they’re not stirring up trouble. So it serves a security function. It gives them something to do. I think they know that it has that value.” Thus, when librarians feel they must justify the library’s existence within the organization, they use this rationale to convince others that it serves a ‘useful’ function.

Given the recent trend toward increased managerialism and threatened budgets in prisons, librarians are likely to be most successful in convincing Wardens (who must ultimately answer to the DOC and the state) of their relevance when they do so in terms that emphasize the library’s ‘usefulness’. Foucault argues that contemporary ‘technologies of performance’, which include things like performance indicators and budget cuts, operate “from above, as an indirect means of regulating agencies, of transforming professionals into ‘calculating individuals’ within ‘calculable spaces’, subject to particular ‘calculative regimes’” (Dean 1999:169, as quoted in Munro 2011). (In fact, one librarian I interviewed told me that she is compiling statistics about
book circulation with the hope that she can eventually show the administration in her state that increased book circulation leads to fewer disturbances within the prison.)

In a similar vein, this perspective—understanding the library primarily as a means of social control—aligns with the goals and knowledge of those who inhabit the position of custody staff, many of whom are principally concerned with “keeping the peace, avoiding violence, and smooth operation of the daily routine…” (Owen 1998:21). Suvak (1995:18) notes: “The block officer’s job is much easier if prisoners have purposeful activities, including reading materials from a well-stocked library.” Knowing this, many librarians make a concerted effort to promote the control function of the library to others within the institution.

Several librarians described hostile work environments in which they have antagonistic relationships with some custody staff and administrators, who see them as mere “civilians” who lack any power or, worse yet, as advocates for inmates. (This notion of power differentials will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 7.) In order to avoid these kinds of situations, librarians actively try to advance the idea to custody staff and administrators that the library—and the act of reading itself—is an effective form of social control. For example, Margaret, who works in the West, stated, “They [administrators] see—and I try to emphasize this, especially for the people that can’t see why they have to have a library—that this is a control tool. If people aren’t busy and they’re sitting in cells or in their units, they can get into all kinds of mischief…” Similarly, Oscar said he does a training session once per year for new custody staff, during which he employs this tactic:

Corrections officers, until they get trained by me, if you ask them what the purpose of a library is in a correctional facility, they will tell you it’s pretty much to coddle the inmates. Or they’ll say to get access to law books. Because with corrections officers, there’s a slightly militaristic type of environment, and so they have a tendency of looking at any type of program as a waste of taxpayers’ money or a waste of time, or,
“They don’t deserve it.” So, when I do a training…I tell them that, actually, the number one reason for library services in a correctional facility is security. [and] then, all of a sudden, they freeze and look at me and perk up. I say, “Yeah, this inmate is so busy reading, he doesn’t have time to think about stabbing you in the back!” And then, all of a sudden, it’s like, “Oh!”

So, rather than promote any number of reasons they believe the library is an important part of the prison, such as serving as a resource for education or rehabilitation, librarians use the notion of control because they believe it is the most effective way to convince custody staff and the administration of the library’s (and the librarian’s) value. As Herman explained, “Sometimes it’s hard to get the staff to see what value it has, but once they start buying into the fact that, you know, if the inmates have the books and are reading them, and the books are taken care of, then those inmates tend to be a little calmer.” Though they laud this particular version of the prison library’s value, librarians believe the library has multiple purposes, and many espoused the belief that a prison library should serve the same functions, and be run using the same model, as a public library.

PUBLIC LIBRARY MODEL: EDUCATION AND RECREATION

While most administrators and custody staff may be unaware of, and/or unconcerned with, the standards of the ALA, many prison librarians—particularly those who have degrees in Library Science—consider these standards a goal to aim for in their prison libraries. Shirley (2003:73) states: “Philosophically, most prison librarians aspire to operate on the same model as public libraries…” The ALA’s Prisoners’ Right to Read defines reading as a “right” for all human beings, and while recognizing that prison librarians must follow the laws of the state and the regulations of their institutions, they maintain that librarians should uphold the standards of the profession to the greatest extent possible within the constraints of the institution (ALA 2010). In
fact, when I asked librarians what a prison library should ideally be like, about half of them mentioned the public or school library as an ideal model. For example, Toni, a Midwestern librarian, said that a prison library is “an information source. A prison library functions the same as a public library…as an educational source both for legal and non-legal materials, and an entertainment source.” A similar response came from Emma; she said, “…I don’t think it should be any different from a public library, and so in that sense, I believe it should be both a place for recreation…but also a place for self-education, if that’s your aim.” Librarians discussed several different ways they apply the public library model to the prison setting.

Harper, a Midwestern librarian, tries to run her prison library as similarly as possible to the public one in which she previously worked, and, in particular ways, she has not found the transition as difficult as she initially thought it might be:

I really didn’t find when I went to the prison that people’s interests were terribly different than in a public library. Some people just love animals. Some people love adventure stories. Some people never read fiction. Some people only want fiction….My feeling is, for the most part, I’d like to offer people a variety of opportunities to have a way to grow and to expand on their literary experiences.

In a public or school library, one of the tasks of a librarian is to teach patrons how to navigate the library so they learn how to search for and find the kinds of information they desire. Several of the prison librarians said they believe this is a vital skill, and they work to teach research skills to people in prison, so that they can successfully utilize a library, not only while incarcerated, but also once they are released. Virginia, a librarian in the West, told a story to illustrate the way she believes this knowledge can be empowering:

…I want to teach them how to use a library. I want to teach them how to use a reference book. I want to empower them. I want them to empower themselves….And, you know, sometimes it’s amazing. An inmate who we might think may not be running on full capacity, he came up and he asked for the address of
something. And I said, “Have you looked in this directory?” And we’ll get it out, and I’ll show him how to use it. I’ll show him how almost every book, at the beginning, will show you how to use it. And, by god, he found what he was looking for. He just – his face brightened up and he said, “I found it! I found it!” And I said, “Yeah, see there!” So, that’s really what it’s all about.

As a way to connect this knowledge acquired in prison to the outside world, Charlotte said she has “a long-term goal of becoming part of the…State Libraries Consortium, and to do that, inmates would need library cards. And so, our goal is that eventually they will be able to get a card here that will transfer to the outside.”

Other librarians discussed not only the goals of providing information and recreational material, and teaching patrons to use the library successfully, but also the notion that they can teach inmates lifelong skills through improving literacy. Pollock (2013) reports that majority of prison inmates are either functionally illiterate or have not attained a high school diploma or its equivalent, the GED. Recent data suggest that only about a quarter of all state prison inmates participate in an education program (Cullen and Johnson 2011), and these are primarily Adult Basic Education classes, designed for those who do not have a high school diploma or GED (Pollack 2013). Stearns (2004:65) claims that prison libraries are “a badly needed resource for inmates struggling with literacy, not a mere indulgence.” The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) data show that, overall, both female and male prisoners have lower average prose, document, and quantitative literacy skills than those of the same gender living in households (Greenberg, Dunleavy, and Kutner 2007). In each domain of literacy tested, at least 50 percent of prisoners scored at the Below Basic (“no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills”) or Basic (“the skills necessary to perform simple and everyday literacy activities”) level of literacy: for prose literacy, 56 percent had scores at these levels (as compared to 43 percent of the household population); for document literacy, 50 percent fall into these
categories (compared to 34 percent of the household population); and for quantitative literacy, a staggering 78 percent of prisoners scored at these low levels (compared to 54 percent of the household population) (Greenberg et al. 2007:29). Thus, the problems that incarcerated individuals face due to limited literacy are disproportionate to those living in households.

The NAAL also reports that 75 percent of inmates say they use the library at least once or twice per year (though those with lower literacy skills use it less frequently); in fact, a higher percentage of prisoners than adults living in households read books daily (50 percent versus 32 percent) (Greenberg et al. 2007:66). Literacy and library use are interconnected, in that “adults who have higher literacy levels may be more likely to want to access the library and find things to read, and adults who use the library and read more frequently may improve their literacy levels” (Greenberg et al. 2007:62). Prison librarians are acutely aware of the limited literacy levels among their patrons, and some attempt to address this issue by encouraging reading or implementing programs that attempt to make the library appealing to those with lower literacy skills.

Barbara, a librarian in the West, believes that if she helps her patrons improve their literacy skills (whether in a prison or public library) she provides them with a tool (reading) that not only opens up opportunities for education and employment, but also increases one’s ability to interact successfully with others. She said “[t]he number one purpose [of the library] is literacy. That literacy is not just the ability to read, but the kind of social literacy that comes with reading.” Another librarian, Jane, who works in the Midwest, expressed a similar sentiment:

…I run it like a small public library because I want to give them some semblance of normalcy, of what it’s like to come into a library and get books or sit down and read a newspaper….A lot of the guys—I would say 90 percent of the guys here—never used a library before they went to prison. I’ve had guys tell me that they did not know how to read, but they learned how to read in prison.
These discussions about the prison library as an extension or version of a public library allude to one of the other primary functions that librarians believe a prison library should serve—aiding in prisoners’ rehabilitation and preparation for reentry into society.

REHABILITATION AND REENTRY

As mentioned above, the vast majority of prison librarians who talked about the concept of rehabilitation believe that it should be an essential component of penal philosophy (even if they do not see it supported by administrators), and they believe the library can serve as a source of information about and programs for rehabilitation and reentry. For example, a survey respondent wrote: “The atmosphere has become more controlling and repressive [over time]. It now leans more toward punishment than rehabilitation,” and Oscar, a librarian who has worked in a Midwestern prison for over 30 years, said, “…there’s always this pendulum point between punishment and rehabilitation, and I’ve seen it swing back and forth, but I’ve never seen it swing this far toward punishment and never swing back.” Librarians also often spoke of the incongruence between what administrators say (promoting the idea of rehabilitation and/or reentry) and what they do (failing to implement or adequately support these kinds of programs).

The penological debate about rehabilitation is as old as the penitentiary itself, just as the nature of the role that reading and libraries play in rehabilitation remains unresolved. Sullivan (1998:114) argues that rehabilitation “is by definition aimed at persuading—to coerce someone to do something, to change behavior…to internalize value changes.” The notion of rehabilitation presupposes both a need for a fundamental change in individuals’ very ways of being in the
world and the state’s right to be the arbiter of such change. When I asked Zora, a librarian in the West, what the purpose of a prison library should be, she said, “I think that it should be to change offenders’ lives.” However, the prison’s stated goal of rehabilitation also assumes that the prison itself is designed and operated in such a way that it supports this sort of transformational process—a supposition debated by scholars, prison workers, and prisoners alike. Singer (1971:715) articulated several decades ago a sentiment that has been expressed repeatedly throughout the prison’s existence: “It is impossible to rehabilitate a man when everything around him tells him, repeatedly, that he is not a man, that he has no humanity.”

Nonetheless, the ideal of rehabilitation guided penal practices until the mid-twentieth century. However, in the 1960s, a “destructuring impulse” arose that attacked the ideological and institutional foundations of the control system and advocated a move away from the state, the expert, the institution, and the mind (Cohen1985:31). Over the next two decades, new diversionary schemes labeled ‘community’, ‘neighborhood’, or ‘reintegration’ programs were developed to avoid institutionalizing deviants. During this period, in 1976, Foucault gave a largely overlooked lecture at the University of Montreal entitled “Alternatives to Prison: Dissemination or Decline of Social Control?” in which he argued that the new ‘alternatives’ never really strayed far from the ideological roots of the prison. Though they may not have physically locked people into traditional prisons, they were “quite simply attempts to ensure through different kinds of mechanisms and set-ups the functions that up to then have been those of prisons themselves” (Foucault 2009:15). These new schemes, as well as the prison, centered on three primary principles: work as something that fundamentally transforms people; family (or ‘refamilialization’) as the essential instrument for the prevention of deviance and correction of
criminality; and self-culpability, the notion that the individual should accept and take responsibility for her/his own punishment. Though he did not foresee the oncoming development of mass incarceration that lay around the corner (thinking, as many did at the time, that the prison would fade away and these other mechanisms of social control would largely replace it), Foucault’s argument here is important because it shows how the same type of coercive power can take different forms. And it is relevant today, even when much of the rhetoric surrounding criminal justice policy has abandoned the use of the word ‘rehabilitation’, since what was once labeled ‘rehabilitation’ and then later ‘community programming’, is now relabeled ‘reentry’.

The rhetoric of reentry is centered on the same fundamental notions that Foucault outlined in the mid 1970s (work, family, self-culpability), and many of the ‘reentry’ programs in prisons focus on securing jobs upon release, maintaining family ties, and actively participating in ‘life skills’, ‘anger management’, or parenting classes that promote the notion of ‘personal responsibility’. The programs may differ slightly from those used as part of the traditional rehabilitation model, but they are built upon similar moral and philosophical assumptions. In fact, Western (2006:197) argues that “the prisoner reentry movement is, in many ways, rehabilitation for the mass imprisonment era.” Thus, when prison librarians talk about rehabilitation and reentry, they are essentially speaking about the same fundamental notion using two different words.

Despite (and perhaps partially because of) the administrative devaluation of traditional rehabilitative services such as education and vocation programs, librarians often make an effort to provide rehabilitative and reentry materials in the library. As Diane Walden, coordinator of institutional library development for the Colorado State Library system, which runs the state’s
prison libraries, states, “It’s all about reentry, reentry, reentry—that’s why we do what we do” (Lilienthal 2013). In addition to supplying current and accurate resources about job placement, housing, and other issues inmates face as they prepare to leave prison, librarians also believe that providing inmates with access to educational opportunities is an essential part of rehabilitation and reentry.

One of the ways that the concept of reentry has been successfully adopted in a culture that largely eschews discussions of rehabilitation is to highlight the benefits that reentry programs can have for ‘public safety’ (Western 2006). So the focus shifts, then, from what is good for the prisoner (rehabilitation) to what is good for the public (reentry). Jennifer discussed her beliefs about the ways that education and reading not only improve the experiences of incarcerated people, but also have an effect on society. She said the purpose of the library is:

…to give them something to expand their minds and to educate them. I mean, I truly feel that an educated inmate is going to be better, because basically they’re all getting out someday….So I feel it’s our duty to educate and inform and entertain….When you take away every resource from an inmate—you can’t just lock them up and throw away the key. It just doesn’t work. I know that society wants people to do that, but again, they’re all getting out someday, and that’s the mentality we need to have as a society. So educate them.

Although this sentiment was shared by the vast majority of the interviewed librarians, they expressed some ambiguity about how their own goals align with those of administrators.

Isaac, a Southern librarian who considers himself “loyal to the system,” stated that the DOC in his state has “come to grips with the idea that recidivism or returning to prison is directly related to their reading level and educational level, so there’s a big stress on that.” Though Isaac believes the emphasis on reentry and recidivism constitutes a genuine shift in penal philosophy
that translates into practice, other librarians were more skeptical. For example, Alexander, who works in the Midwest, stated:

…[P]art of the problem is that there’s no real philosophy about what we do in many prisons, including those in [my state]. There is a stress on reentry. A lot of people, they have to go along with it, but they don’t believe it. But they have to [say they] believe it because they like their payday and they like their jobs.

The evidence many librarians provide to support their claims that administrators tout rehabilitation and/or reentry as goals, but fail to truly incorporate them into their policies, is the recent elimination of education and vocational training programs in their own institutions and in prisons throughout the country. Librarians repeatedly bemoaned these cuts and discussed the detrimental effects they believe the cuts will have. Simone said the purpose of a prison library:

…should be for rehabilitation. There are a lot of men here who read self-help books….And actually, I feel like the prison should be rehabilitative, and it bothers me that they cut the educational programs…We used to do college classes here. We have no budget for that. We used to have vocational programs. We have no budget for that. If people retire, they’re not filling the positions. It’s sad….And we’ll hear from the commissioner, “We think education is important.” …What they say and what they do doesn’t always match up.

Along with their stories of budget cuts and the harmful effects they believe these actions will have on both inmates and society, some librarians discussed the ways they try to compensate for the lack of opportunities within the prison. Thomas, a Midwestern librarian, stated:

Our educational services are really, really, really limited. The only thing that we provide educationally is GED and ESL, and so the notion of the Department is, when this inmate gets released, we give him a check for a hundred dollars and a ride to the bus station. What we’ve tried to do from our library standpoint is say, “Okay. We’re going to provide materials as much as possible to try and help you get a plan for when you get out.”…We know that their chances of success increase greatly if they have a social structure in place and if they have employment. If we can maybe identify that for them or help them in that regard, I think that’s something that would ultimately reduce recidivism.
Another librarian, Oscar, said he has tried incredibly hard to stock his shelves with educational and self-help materials that inmates have lost access to as programs have been cut. He believes that many people in prison need and want these kinds of services and information:

If you build it, they will come. And yes, they come in and read the latest Steven King book, but they are checking out all these other [educational and self-help] things. And as the Department has continued to cut all these programs, they’re checking out even more of them. So imagine in the other prisons, where they don’t even have [adequate library services]. So, what are the inmates supposed to do?

The dismay expressed by numerous librarians about the lack of adequate educational opportunities, as well as administrators’ failure to prioritize library services, stems from their belief that literacy and reading matter.

WHY READING MATTERS
All of the librarians I spoke with said they believe that literacy and reading are important, and they discussed the low literacy rates among incarcerated individuals and the role the library can play in improving literacy skills for those who need help. Proficient literacy skills are a necessary component of the type of critical reading that librarians also promote. They also expressed various views about how the librarian (with a well-stocked library) can help inmates develop a love of reading that they can take with them when they leave prison. According to librarians, literacy and reading matter not only for practical reasons, such as obtaining a job, but also for more abstract or existential reasons, in that reading can increase empathy, expose individuals to new ways of thinking and being, and generally enhance the experience of being human. In fact, recent studies in the field of neuroscience confirm librarians’ assertions about the relationship between reading and increased empathy. Zak (2012), a psychologist and researcher, recently
showed, using brain images, that reading narrative stories produces increased levels of cortisol and oxytocin, which are known to be associated with empathy and generosity. Additionally, Stevens and Usherwood (1995) reviewed several studies that show a relationship between reading literature and self-reflexivity, increased self-esteem, and positive attitudinal changes to issues such as race relations. Some of the librarians discussed the steps they have taken to try to increase reading and writing among inmates, including implementing programs aimed at improving literacy skills among those who need help, as well as initiatives oriented toward inmates with higher literacy skills that use reading literature or writing essays as a means of self-exploration.

General Literacy as Essential

As for the low literacy rates among prisoners, some librarians expressed the surprise and/or dismay they felt when they learned how many of their potential patrons struggled with limited literacy. For example, Anna, a librarian in the West, stated: “I honestly did not know until 10 years ago that grown adults really don’t know how to read….But coming here—and I hear from some of the teachers, my goodness, [about] 50 and 60-year-old men finally learning to read and reading second-grade books.” Although most DOCs require inmates to be tested upon arrival and mandate Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes for those who score below a certain reading level or do not have the equivalent of a high school education (Pollack 2013), some librarians reported that these programs are not well-funded and lack a sufficient number of teachers. Several librarians also noted that inmates may resent, be apathetic about, or feel stigmatized by being placed in these courses, which can result in a lack of active participation.
Virginia noted, “…in [my state], we’re under the [literacy] bill, which mandates that any inmate to be released is supposed to be able to read. Not that that’s true. I’ve seen them put inmates in classes, and if these inmates don’t want to learn, they’re not going to learn.” Several librarians complained that literacy and educational opportunities are limited and often poorly implemented, and thus, they have attempted to advocate for various ways the prison library could serve a space and a resource to improve literacy. Margaret, another Western librarian, described the connection she sees between limited literacy skills and incarceration:

I think that a lot of the reason that people fall into gangs or wind up in prison is because way back, they never learned to read. And I know that there is some of that in here, and I really, really would like to do something with some type of reading program. It would make me feel like my mission would be more accomplished than what I am feeling now.

Because they believe that low literacy is a complex issue that prison staff must be sensitive to, some librarians implement practices they believe will either alleviate some of the stigma associated with low literacy or increase inmates’ desire to engage in reading and/or writing. A number of librarians said they believe that one of the difficulties faced by prisoners who struggle with low literacy and want to improve their skills is the stigma associated with limited literacy and with reading “kids’ books.” For example, Julia, a Southern librarian, said that “about 50 percent [of inmates] don’t read at the middle school level. Most of them don’t come in [the library]. We have Easy Read books, and they have a little sticker on them, but it’s kind of like a stigma.” Several other librarians described the measures they have taken to attempt to destigmatize individuals who attempt to improve their reading skills through reading books written at an elementary or middle school level. Margaret explained the situation in her
institution, providing a classic example of the use of “disidentifiers,” or tactics used to disguise one’s stigma, by the stigmatized (Goffman [1963] 1986):

I was also trying to figure out—we were calling materials in the library ‘Easy Materials’—and I was saying the other day that we’ve got to come up with a better term…so we can get these guys to use them. Because they [the books] will just sit and sit and sit, because they won’t get them because they think they’re for kids: “I’m an adult and I don’t read that stuff.” But yet, they can’t read….[W]hat’s interesting is all the people who come in and want to read Plato and Aristotle….

I think they want to sometimes carry the books around because they think that shows that you look smart. But I also get the guys that get the fat books, and I think they think that the fatter [the book], the smarter they are, so they’re trying to impress people by the size of the book.

Jane described a similar situation. She said she buys a lot of low-level reading materials, but inmates “won’t come and check them out, so the teachers usually have books in their classrooms that they give those guys to read…” She also said that she tries to reduce the stigma associated with checking out these books by incorporating them into their appropriate genre, so that the low-level books “are on the shelf with the other stuff, so that, whether it’s fantasy or science fiction, I just have the fiction arranged basically by author…” Along with these librarians’ recognition of and attempts to mediate stigma, other librarians have designed programs or activities to promote reading and writing among all inmates.

Several librarians discussed the importance of expanding efforts to improve literacy, so that some programs are inclusive of the entire population, rather than focused solely on inmates who are mandated to take ABE classes. For instance, Jennifer conveyed a story about an essay contest she and some colleagues created in order to get more prisoners interested in writing:

…[W]e actually have started some quarterly essay contests….What we do is, we give sodas as prizes….We pick two winners from each yard so it’s fairly distributed. And it works out really great. We’re starting to get—at first I think they thought it was kind of dorky, you know, “I’m a big tough guy.”…Now it has kind of become like a competition amongst yards—who can get the most entries. Like, you know, “B yard, they got 75 entries,” and that kind of thing. They like that kind of stuff because it’s fun for them. Even if they
Another librarian, Thomas, from the Midwest, suggested librarians expand their definition of literacy to include what he called “twenty-first century literacies.” He said that “a lot of the guys here have a fourth, fifth, sixth grade education, and if we can improve basic literacy and move on to those other literacies—health literacy, computer literacy, all sorts of things—I think we can improve their chances of success once they are released.” Of course, “successful” reentry is a complex issue, and what promotes or impedes success (however that is defined) is not completely understood. Some prison librarians argue that, while adequate literacy skills are certainly an integral part of securing employment, housing, and other necessities, reading provides more abstract benefits to inmates as well. It not only relieves the boredom, stress, and psychological/emotional burden of incarceration; it also increases knowledge, expands the mind, and can greatly improve the quality of life.

_Literature as a Means of Escape and a Way to Gain Knowledge_

Beyond fulfilling the task of keeping inmates ‘busy’ or ‘out of trouble’, a purpose many administrators and custody staff value, some librarians understand access to reading materials as a fundamental right and a vital part of human existence. Emma, who works in the Northeast, believes the prison library serves this function for those who are incarcerated:

I don’t think it should matter where you are. I think that reading is vital to a lot of people and lifestyles, and so whether you’re in prison, or in the Army, or living in the regular world, reading should be available always. And I don’t really care what you did. If you killed my mom—I don’t want you to kill my mom—but if you killed my mom, I would still say you should be allowed to read.
The distinction between coercive programming and agentive change through exposure to literature is not straightforward, nor is there any consensus about what constitutes an attempt to inculcate inmates with dominant norms and behaviors, as opposed to what involves a prisoner choosing to read for her/himself in order to experience enjoyment, gain knowledge, and/or develop critical thinking skills. Rotman (1990:9) calls the former “authoritarian rehabilitation,” which he claims is designed to mold prisoners in accordance with a “predetermined constellation of behavioral patterns.” While Sullivan (2000:57) claims that “[p]rison libraries and reading programs are instruments of cultural hegemony, designed to instill a desire to emulate certain behavior and morality,” Malcolm X once (in)famously stated: “A prisoner has time he can put to good use. I’d put prison second to college as the best place for a man to go, if he needs to do some thinking. If he’s motivated, in prison he can change his life” (Haley and X [1964] 1999:398-9). (We must keep in mind, of course, that he was writing in a very different penal era.) More recently, a woman incarcerated at Utah State Prison told a journalist that she had barely read an entire book prior to her incarceration, but now she is an avid reader and enjoys the solace of the library and the process of learning; she stated, “It’s like being in therapy here [the library]—it’s just so nice and quiet. There’s just so much to learn about” (quoted in McFarland 2010).

It seems, then, that there are two different questions that can be asked about the relationship between prisoners and reading, each of which has a different philosophical foundation and provides a different answer. The first question is, Why does reading matter?, and the second is, Why does reading matter to prisoners? If we answer those questions differently (as many would), we are either making assumptions about who prisoners are as a class of people (as
the Other who needs reforming), or we are contextualizing the question within the prison as a specific type of environment. If our answers are based upon the contextualization of the question, rather than the essentialization of the prisoner, we find that, although there are specific reasons the prison as a context shapes the experience of reading, we also recognize that we can answer the first question—why reading matters at all to anyone—with reference to those who are incarcerated without essentialization.

The realities of everyday life for many prisoners are often unpleasant, harsh, or even brutal, but they can also be incredibly boring and filled with ontological insecurities (the “pains of imprisonment”) (Crewe 2007, 2011a; Sykes [1958] 2007). Although various individuals subjectively experience punishment quite differently (Sexton 2012), the structure of the prison tends to produce particular types of pains. As Crewe (2011a:522) puts it, the type of power that operates within the prison is “all-encompassing and invasive, in that it promotes the self-regulation of all aspects of conduct, addressing both the psyche and the body. There are few zones of autonomy, either special or psychological, where the reach of power can be escaped.” Sullivan (1998:119) argues that prisoners, who lack “the means to escape,” can find “a release from and adaptation to the carceral world through literature.” Reading, according to many of the librarians I interviewed, provides one possible ‘zone of autonomy’.

Many of the librarians discussed the positive effects that reading can have on an individual’s daily life in prison, where there are precious few (licit) activities with which to fill one’s time. And incarceration is very much about time. Matthews (2009:38) states that, “although imprisonment is in essence about time, it is experienced as a form of timelessness, with prison terms often being described as ‘doing’ or ‘killing’ time.” As Zora, who works in a
Western prison, put it, “even if you’re just reading popular fiction, you get a chance to escape from the reality of being in prison for a while.” Similarly, Toni, a Midwestern librarian, believes that “[m]any prisoners find reading as their biggest solace,” and Barbara, who works in the West, explained her ideas about the comfort that certain types of escapist literature can provide:

My collection development plan is built on the survey that I gave [to inmates]. Now, I found out that the guys really love horror, and I was surprised….One of the things I found out was that in an environment where you don’t have the luxury to be able to express your fears, it is really therapeutic to be able to read a book that just scares you to death and focus your fear on the thing you just read…and be really worried and preoccupied with that, instead of the really fearful things that you’re having to live with—a “What am I going to do with my life?” type fear.

Several librarians discussed the way that reading can alleviate the psychological and emotional burdens that this type of existential question places upon many people as they navigate their way through the prison system, and (for most) back out into a society that is structured in ways that make that transition difficult.

Librarians who so highly value literacy, reading, and access to materials often contextualize their beliefs by discussing the prison environment. Harper, a Midwestern librarian, is troubled by the attitude she perceives among prison administrators, which she described as the prevailing opinion that “…everybody eats the same, everybody wears the same, everybody moves the same, so if you’re all one big mass of humanity, then you can all read the same.” In an environment such as this, she believes that “reading, and learning to read, and learning to express yourself, is a way out of that…” This conception of reading as a “way out,” and the prison library as a conduit to a sort of (mental, rather than physical) emancipation, was shared by other librarians, as well.
Agatha, a librarian from the South, remarked that “there have certainly been many memoirs written by ex-offenders who talked about how prison libraries changed their lives….They can just gain so much from the library.” (For examples of this kind of writing, see Abbot 1981; Franklin 1998; Haley and X [1964] 1999; Jackson 1970, among others.) Likewise, Virginia, also from the West, said that her personal interactions with inmates have taught her how much of a difference a prison library can make in an individual’s life. She said there are inmates “who are really interested in turning themselves around. You know, I had one clerk that had never been exposed to Shakespeare, and during the time he was working for me, he read everything that Shakespeare wrote. Phenomenal!”

Despite these ‘success’ stories, librarians also discussed the challenges they face in finding materials that are able to initially “draw in” potential readers. Several librarians discussed their attitudes about using urban fiction as a way to do this, since many inmates come from the kinds of impoverished urban neighborhoods in which these stories take place, and the genre is typically written at a level that is accessible to those with a sixth to eight grade reading ability. These challenges could be significant, as urban fiction—despite its bad reputation among many prison administrators, custody staff, and even some librarians—can be used as a way to get inmates reading. Emily, who also works in the South, said librarians can use the inmates’ interest

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10 Urban fiction is a literary genre whose subject matter deals primarily with the lived experiences of racial/ethnic minorities who live in urban high-poverty neighborhoods, and these stories often include episodes of both the characters’ involvement in illegal or illicit activities and their eventual incarceration. The books are typically written by authors who have lived in ‘ghetto’ neighborhoods and/or served time in jail or prison, and are oftentimes semi-autobiographical. A more detailed discussion of urban fiction and the arguments used to discredit and censor it will occur in Chapter 6.
in reading urban fiction to steer them toward other materials that are written at a higher reading level, which may gradually challenge them to improve their reading skills:

But what I have found is that they love…the urban literature. And people complain about it. I’ve heard other librarians complain about it and all this kind of stuff, but it gets them to read, because they relate to it because it’s where they come from. Time and time and time again, once they start reading, they’ll keep reading. And they’ll branch out….And then you can kind of point them to some of the better established African-American authors, other authors, bestsellers, that kind of thing, because they have become readers. I think that’s the most important thing for them. They have become a lifelong reader….That’s a whole new world to them. That’s a real key, is getting them to learn to read and love it. If you have to use the urban novels to do it, so be it.

Additionally, some librarians mentioned that urban fiction can be used in book groups or bibliotherapy sessions. Many urban novels deal with both ethical and structural issues that people living in high poverty neighborhoods regularly encounter, and thus, can serve as a means to open discussions about issues such as violence, poverty, sexual assault, police brutality, and so on. (Again, the line between coercion and imposition of norms, and choice and critical thinking, blurs.) Sweeney (2010:257), who works as a book discussion facilitator in a women’s prison and uses primarily urban fiction books in her program, argues that “it is crucial to recognize the ways in which some women prisoners ‘habilitate’—meaning empower and enable—themselves through reading.” She claims that reading can reduce the pains of imprisonment, improve literacy and education, and lead to self-reflection and desistance from crime. Agatha said she would like to see this type of bibliotherapy embraced by the administration at the women’s prison where she works: “[T]hese books are so in demand; if this is what they’re reading, how could the therapeutic community within prisons use these books to open the women up? I mean…opening them up to the choices these characters had made and what that led to.” Agatha was not the only librarian to discuss the concept of providing a space for some type of
therapeutic community within the prison. In fact, many librarians described the library as a sort of ‘safe space’ or ‘retreat’ from an otherwise chaotic and oppressive prison environment. However, as mentioned above, the library is a contested space, and there are multiple perspectives on just exactly what kind of space it is, how it should be used, and who should or should not have access to it.

THE LIBRARY AS A DIFFERENT KIND OF SPACE IN THE PRISON: FROM SANCTUARY TO SKILL SHARING TO SUBVERSION

As physical spaces, prison libraries look and feel very different from one another depending on their size, décor, lighting, temperature, arrangement of materials, and so on. They also differ in the sort of atmosphere they provide, which is reliant upon the amount of access inmates have, the attitudes of librarians, custody staff, and administrators toward the library, and the various ways that inmates and staff use the space. These differences can have a very real impact on the kinds of experiences that prisoners have with reading. Armstrong and McAra (2006:23) speak of the need to think about “the importance of space, on the way in which objects and things are arranged to achieve control” in studies of penology. Many librarians discussed the importance of thinking about the library as a physical space and the impact that the built environment can have on human experience. For example, Charlotte, who works in the Northeast and is responsible for maintaining the libraries in several facilities, discussed the differences between these prisons:

And space. Because of a lot of the buildings have—they [the libraries] are in a glorified closet. Max[imum security] has a pretty decent space, although it would be nice if it was bigger, but at least they have their reading library and their law library separate, so you have room to sit or browse or whatever. Whereas, in the two women’s facilities, it’s just these tiny, tiny rooms that are hot as hell. They don’t have enough room for the books. They don’t have enough room for people, and even if people wanted to be in there, it’s a really unpleasant place to be.
Along with other librarians, Charlotte emphasized the notion that the library should be a space that is separate or different from the rest of the prison. In fact, this definition of the library as a sort of refuge was the most common way that librarians described their ideas about the ideal prison library.\(^\text{11}\)

Maya, a librarian in the West, said the library is a place where inmates “can come and it’s quiet, and they can relax a little here….Just a kind of a sanctuary,” and Agatha described the library as “a little refuge.” In an effort to convey what it is that inmates are escaping from, Emily described the contrast between the dorm-style prison environment, in which prisoners spend most of their time, and the library:

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\text{Ours is in a dormitory style. Each side of the building holds 98 people in bunk beds, and there’s like two feet between the beds, so they are literally one on top of the other….The noise in there sometimes can get really terrible, so the library provides, kind of, a semi-quiet, relaxing place for them to come, with comfortable chairs. They can look for their books, and nobody is yelling, and nobody is screaming, and there’s nobody causing a problem. And so, I think it’s kind of a haven for some of them. They really enjoy coming to the library because it’s like a quiet time for them. It’s like a release kind of thing for them.}
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Recognizing the impact that the physical environment can have on one’s psychological or emotional state, Oscar, a Midwestern librarian who works in a women’s prison, used his own time and resources to create a soothing and supportive environment for the women, which the administration initially decried but eventually supported:

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\text{I painted the walls of my library a dark burgundy red, and then there are some pillars in the library, and so, I marbleized them with paint. And I have wingback chairs, and I have a rocking chair for the pregnant}
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\(^\text{11}\) It is important to note that not all prisons have a browsing library. Some prisons merely have shelves of books within each pod or unit, and prisoners in solitary confinement do not have access to the library (they must rely on the librarian or a custody officer to deliver materials to them occasionally).
inmates. I wanted it to be the one place on campus where they could get away. I wanted it to look like a real library, too. So here, in the rest of the facility, everything is painted cream with brown trim, and I’m not.

Not all librarians have the ability to create this type of environment, and many discussed the constraints they face, both architecturally and financially. For those who have sufficient space, the library often serves as a meeting place for inmates to socialize.

Though some librarians discussed the nefarious purposes for which some inmates meet in the library, most expressed the view that the library is a positive environment and most prisoners who use the space do so in a respectful and “pro-social” manner. For example, Julia, a Southern librarian, said she provides various entertainment activities in the library and sees it as “a meeting place. We watch videos occasionally. It’s kind of a place to relax and get away from the stress of the dorms and officers yelling at them.” Beyond meeting for the sake of relaxation or entertainment, the library is also used by inmates as a place to discuss political issues and organize ways to take legal actions to protect their rights. Barbara, who works in the West, recalled a time during which Pagan inmates gathered in the library to organize a case about religious freedom:

Pagans…have been insistent about their rights….They wanted wands, and they [the DOC] said it’s a security risk. So they said, “Are pencils a security risk?” This would be like a pencil without lead in it….So they got the dowels cut the same length as a pencil. They’ve used my library to make their case, and I was actually quite proud of them. I thought it was extremely pro-social, because they went about it in a very methodical way.

This particular incident involved a legal case that resulted from repeated meetings of an organized group; however, inmates regularly use the library individually, or with the help of a colleague or two, to work on their own legal cases.
In some facilities, the law library and the recreational library are housed in separate rooms or buildings, but in others, both legal and non-legal materials are held in the same space. If this is the case, many of the inmates who use the library do so in order to do legal work. James, who works in the South, said many of the individuals who use his library are there to access legal information so they can determine:

...if there’s any way they can get out of here, if there’s any way they can try to change their circumstances, whether it’s what they feel is poor medical treatment, or maybe they feel they were wrongly convicted, or maybe they feel their counsel didn’t represent him properly. The legal thing is huge.

Some librarians said their libraries contain computerized legal references and stand-alone computers (without internet access) at which prisoners can work, while others complained of bulky print materials and outdated technology, such as typewriters, that take up space and can make access to the courts more cumbersome. For example, Virginia, a librarian in the West, described the situation in her library: “And the typewriters, which I wish I could get rid of, but the inmates just love the typewriters… [TA: What do they use them for?] Writs. They’re only for legal work….And we have no one to repair the typewriters and we have trouble getting ribbons…” So, something that may seem like a minor detail, like access to computers or typewriters, can create a burden for both librarians and inmates. In addition to providing a space for recreation and legal work, in some prisons, the library also serves as a space to conduct various types of educational classes.

Though many prisons limit educational options to ABE and GED courses, some institutions offer additional programming, including a few that offer college correspondence courses, though the elimination of Pell Grants for prisoners in the 1990s has made it virtually
impossible to receive a college degree for all but the most privileged of inmates (Pollock 2013). Several librarians mentioned educational and job placement programs they have initiated in their libraries. For example, Alexander, who works in the Midwest, said he has implemented new education programs: “I run a lot of programs. In fact, we were the first prison in the country to do AP exams last year.” He also described a peer-led educational program he designed and implemented with no official funding or support from the administration: “I look for prisoners with skills, and I hire them as clerks, and then they teach these classes and study groups and seminars.” In addition to these kinds of educational classes, many prisons offer a variety of programs, such religious meetings, drug/alcohol treatment, and self-help groups. The library often provides a space for these kinds of meetings. These groups are run informally by the librarians, without official support from the administration, and therefore would be unlikely to show up on a list of “programs offered” by the prison. This calls into question official statistics about the number and types of programs being offered in prisons. Additionally, several librarians said religious volunteers run informal programs in the library or other spaces in the prison.

Though most librarians are generally supportive of these kinds of programs, there are limits to the number of hours the library can be open and the number of people it can hold, which can sometimes lead to tension. Simone, a librarian in the Northeast, explained the frustration she experiences because of competing demands on the library space:

I have two buildings that I have to do the library for, so I’m only open two days a week in each building, and the one library is a big space. We have 40 seats in there, and so, the programs want to use it. Religious services want to use it. Everybody wants to use it, so people will come in, like professors from an outside facility will come in, and they don’t know to watch the inmates. So I’ll lose books all the time when I have other programs in here. It’s a constant battle. I’ll say, please don’t have a program in there, or watch them, or send an officer or something.
Simone’s concern about ‘losing books’ refers to a common problem faced by prison librarians—book theft by inmates and custody staff. Stealing books is just one of a number of subversive activities that librarians claim both prisoners and custody staff perform in the library.

As discussed above, most librarians consider the library a sort of ‘sanctuary’ within the prison. A common perception of inmates’ attitudes toward the library is exemplified by a quote from Toni, a Midwestern librarian, who said “the libraries that I supervise are…quiet. The prisoners are fairly respectful in the libraries.” However, several librarians discussed some of the illicit activities that they have heard about or witnessed prisoners and custody staff enacting in the library. These activities can be considered part of the ‘underlife’ of the institution, in which an inmate or staff member engages in ‘secondary adjustments’ and employs “unauthorized means, or obtains unauthorized ends, or both, thus getting around the organization’s assumptions as to what he should do or get and hence what he should be” (Goffman 1961a:189). By far, the most commonly mentioned illicit acts were stealing and damaging books. One story that illustrates an incident of book theft and the reactions to it came from Margaret, a librarian in the West:

I had one young kid about three months ago; he wanted more books than he was supposed to have. A lot of it is urban fiction. We had those more restricted just so that we could keep them under control and not have them so destroyed all the time….He was waiting until people’s backs were turned and he was reaching over the counter and grabbing brand-new ones. We had to do a little investigation [and] write it up. I just get mad because, you know, they know that there are only so many books in the library and that there are well over 900 people here. Most of the guys want to make sure that the books are okay and everybody can get a hold of them because they know that this is something that gives them something to do. They like to read and they like to at least come to the library and sit. But when people start stealing materials, that’s bad for everybody because that’s that many less people that get to read those items.

Similarly, Simone described her frustration about inmates who damage books. She said some inmates check out or take books and “just destroy them. I’ve gotten books with no covers, or all
the pictures ripped out. Normally, they’re pretty good, but there are those that just have to have that book, and it’s like, really? Come on; think of your fellow man!”

Additionally, librarians mentioned a number of other illicit activities that inmates carry out in the library, such as gambling and passing messages or contraband to fellow gang members. For example, Barbara explained why most inmates only have access to book carts in their dormitories in her state:

“The inmates are in dormitories, so they don’t have a browsing library, and all the browsing libraries have been deactivated in [my state] except for one…and the reason is because of all the contraband that was being passed in the library. People would go in the library and they would put the notes in the book and tell somebody that it’s in the book, and then they go in the library and get the book out. Sometimes it’s fantasy football. Sometimes it’s gambling…. [T]he book has been cut out to be a compartment for storing things.

These unauthorized uses of the library space and the materials therein are generally understood by librarians to be the exception to rule, and, according to librarians, it is not only inmates who steal books and misuse the library; some custody officers engage in similar activities.

Numerous librarians reported incidents of theft and misuse committed by custody staff. In fact, one survey respondent wrote: “Custody officers steal more reference books than inmates do.” Custody officers’ attitudes toward the library, and their behaviors in or surrounding it, are shaped by their role in the paramilitary organizational structure of the prison. Additionally, several studies have shown that work stress can cause custody staff to develop attitudes that essentialize, and behave in ways that are at times disrespectful to, inmates as well as non-custody staff (Owen 1988; Riley 2000; Tewksbury and Higgins 2006). Librarians reported disrespectful attitudes and illicit behaviors among some (but not all) custody staff. All staff members have access to the library and can check out materials for free, just as inmates can. However, according to librarians, not all custody officers respect the library or the rules about checking out
materials. Jane, a Midwestern librarian, said if officers want to read a book “they are supposed to check it out. They can have accounts. The rumor is that—one third shift the library is closed—but there are people [staff] that come up here and take things out of the library.” Simone, who is responsible for several facilities in the Northeast, described a similar situation with the custody staff at the institutions she serves:

> They’ll come in and they’ll—I’ll go to look for a book and it’ll be gone, and I’ll know. The library hasn’t been open. There hasn’t been any programming in the library, so it has to be a staff member that “borrowed” it. Sometimes I get them back, and sometimes I don’t….In the other library, it’s kind of secluded, so I find that officers go in there and “borrow” the books and don’t return them all the time, because they can go in there on break or something and just not be bothered. I always find trash in there, or chairs go missing. Things happen when we’re not here.

In what was perhaps the most egregious case of disrespect and theft committed by custody staff in the library, Julia, a Southern librarian, discussed what officers do while she is gone for the night and the way this affects her library and her work life:

> They just sabotage the library. I’ve come in, you know, I’ll leave one night and everything was clean and all the chairs are up, and then I’ll come in the next morning and the chairs are down. And I have puzzles out, and they’ll take the puzzles and throw the pieces all over the floor. They’ll throw candy around. It’s gotten to be just a few doing it, because only a few have keys to the building. I came in yesterday and the mouse was missing from one of our law computers….And they know that the inmates enjoy being in here, so it’s the only way that they can get at them.

This idea mentioned by Julia—that prison staff and administrators use access to the library as a way to control or threaten inmates—emerged in several ways.

> Inmates face both formal (structural or policy-level) and informal (individual staff) barriers to library access. Some prisons severely restrict inmates’ access to books through policies such as disallowing a browsing library and limiting the hours that inmates can go to the library. For example, in Leo’s Western maximum security prison, inmates have to choose books
from a list and hope that their choices are available. I asked Leo if inmates can go into the library to browse the book selection, to which he replied:

No, we have a list of books they can look at, and they can see the books from the other side of the counter. You don’t understand the people we’re dealing with….As far as recreational reading goes, the circulation of it is difficult. The inmates in any yard that has open yard time can easily get to the library window. They circulate a reasonable number of books, but in the yards where they don’t have much yard time and they can’t get to the window, well, they’re pretty much out of luck.

Another example of how structural barriers affect library access comes from James. He believes that certain policies put in place by the administration violate prisoners’ rights (through neglect rather than overt abuse), since his library contains both legal and non-legal materials:

A lot of politics come into play with regard to making these places accessible. And it’s not just politics, you have very real limitations….A lot of these guys get no access to the library. That’s not the way it’s supposed to be, but in practical terms, how do you make that happen for them? Well, clearly it can happen, but it requires additional effort and communication on the part of multiple people. It [the policy] says that the library is open to the general population, but really what that means is that, each day it’s scheduled for a certain housing unit. So you might not have to work on Fridays, but Fridays might not be your day [scheduled to be in the library].

These types of policies that restrict access could be addressed by administrators at an organizational level. However, the acts of individual custody officers may be more difficult to prevent.

Julia, who discussed the way custody officers destroy and steal from her library, also said these officers both impede inmates’ access to the library and destroy their books:

We have a few officers who don’t believe that the inmates should have a library because it’s a privilege they don’t deserve, and they make it real hard for them to get down here….They just make snide remarks to the inmates. If they lock somebody up in confinement, they’ll take library books and throw them in the trash. I sent many e-mails to the Assistant Warden about it, and she’s had meetings with them, but they still do it.
Since, in this case, the administration is aware of these officers’ behaviors, actions could be taken against the offending staff. In other cases, these types of behaviors happen without the knowledge of prison authorities. The tensions caused by such attitudes and behaviors can sometimes create a hostile or unpleasant work environment for prison librarians. The role of the prison librarian and her place within the institution will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

CONCLUSION

The prison library is a contested space; various individuals within the institution understand and define its purpose in different, and sometimes contradictory, ways. The multiple meanings assigned to the library by those who work in the prison are often correlated with the positions they inhabit in the prison hierarchy, and thus, the priorities and imperatives associated with their roles. Administrators and custody staff tend to view the library in one of two ways: as an expendable privilege or ‘frill’ not worthy of attention or resources, an attitude which rests on the notion that the purpose of the prison is to punish inmates rather than provide any sort of educational or rehabilitative programs; or as a mechanism of social control, in that the library—and the act of reading itself—serves a security function (the top priority of the institution), since individuals who spend their time reading are less likely to engage in illicit, disruptive, or violent activities.

Librarians, however, tend to see the library in more nuanced and complex ways, and they believe it serves multiple purposes. First, the library is a source for recreational and educational reading materials, as well as a means through which inmates can learn about doing research or using reference materials (much the same as a public or school library). Second, librarians
believe the library should provide both materials and programs related to rehabilitation and reentry, such as self-help books, information about job seeking and housing, drug use support groups, and so on. Third, the library can be a valuable tool to improve literacy skills among those who have limited literacy, a widespread phenomenon among incarcerated individuals. Fourth, reading allows individuals to learn, grow, think critically, and temporarily ‘exist’ in a ‘different world’—it provides a sort of existential escape from the confines of the prison in which the pains of imprisonment are ameliorated. And finally, the library often provides a physical space that allows for a respite from the loud, crowded, and sometimes violent atmosphere of the prison. However, both inmates and custody staff sometimes use the library as a space to engage in illicit activities (such as stealing books or damaging equipment), which presents a challenge for librarians who work to maintain a particular kind of atmosphere in the library.

Though these may be the ‘ideal’ purposes of the library, many prison librarians believe that the library is a low priority for administrators, and therefore, they struggle to provide the kind of library and services they would like to make available. Most librarians work in conditions with limited (or no) budgets for library materials, chronic understaffing, insufficient space, and/or a lack of support from high-ranking administrators and the DOC. Thus, providing the ideal library within the constraints of the institution is challenging, or even impossible, for many librarians.
CHAPTER 5: PROCESSES OF CENSORSHIP

“…[A]fter five months at Sing Sing, I understood…it took time (and confrontations) to decide (or to discover) what kind of person was going to be wearing your uniform…The job was full of discretionary power and the decisions about how to use it were often moral.”

– Ted Conover (2000:249), in Newjack, on working as a custody officer

Recalling the definition of censorship introduced earlier—a “variety of processes…formal and informal, overt and covert, conscious and unconscious, by which restrictions are imposed on the collection, display, dissemination, and exchange of information, opinions, ideas, and imaginative expression” (Jones 2001:xii)—this chapter explores the ways in which these various processes transpire in prison libraries. Probably the most salient finding that the data reveal about the processes of censorship that occur in prisons is the lack of consistency from one prison to the next in both the materials and the means of censorship. While we should reasonably expect differences between states in their approaches to and policies about censorship, as penal policies are significantly more punitive in some states than others (Frost 2008), the data reveal that considerable variation exists even within states. Censorship occurs at different levels and in assorted ways within the prison. It can take place through what I call formal processes, wherein the state produces legally binding administrative regulations, prison administrators create guidelines for their institutions, or prison librarians develop collection development policies that outline what kinds of materials they will and will not have in their libraries. Censorship also happens in what I term informal ways, when librarians engage in self-censorship or prison employees remove items without following regulatory procedures (although, depending how
power is exercised, what begins as an informal act of censorship may eventually result in a change to official policy or procedure).

Although court rulings have determined that prisons “must observe procedural safeguards” and “cannot simply establish an ‘excluded list’ of publications or ban broad categories of materials without regard to their actual content” (Boston and Manville 2010:203), the data show that, in practice, these mandates are often ignored. The processes of censorship that occur in prison libraries differ by state and by institution. There is no uniformity among various states in what they censor, and in some cases, there is variation from one prison to the next within the same state. There also seems to be no direct correlation between the security level of the prison and what is restricted or how censorship takes place. Some prisons have guidelines made at the state level, including policies for publication review, which determine how materials are restricted. In other institutions, decisions are made at the level of the individual Warden or staff member. Some prisons have ‘Disapproved Reading/Inadmissible Materials Lists’ (the exact name of varies), while others do not. Again, these lists can be statewide or specific to a particular prison. Additionally, sometimes the librarian has a great deal of autonomy in building her collection, and other times she merely follows the regulations of the administrators.

Unlike many organizations in late modern society, the prison is structured as a strict hierarchy. Though some scholars argue that penal policies “are increasingly based on and shaped by performance targets and resource management” and the “language of managerialism” (Bosworth and Palmer 2012:493), at present, public sector prisons remain a sort of bureaucratic, paramilitary organization. Though the highest ranking members of the hierarchy may be encouraged by the state to adopt ‘business’ tactics, prisons are essentially bureaucracies that
attempt to maintain order, sameness, and conformity, rather than encourage innovation, flexibility, and creativity from employees, as many neoliberal corporations do (Vallas and Hill 2012). Of course, the strict hierarchy and the bureaucratic nature of the prison do not automatically produce compliance among employees, so Wardens and other administrators must “seek to maintain existing power relations through a number of official and informal ways” (Owen 1988:15). Nonetheless, as Weber (1968) pointed out long ago, bureaucracies are designed to run smoothly while simultaneously permitting some amount of resistance or noncompliance amongst the workers. This is accomplished “thanks to both the implementation of channels of appeal that could marshal internal dissent into legitimate directions and a regulatory and ethical apparatus that include[s] a morality of compliance as well as organizational practices that supposedly prevent conflicting tensions from emerging” (Courpasson, Golsorkhi, and Sallaz 2012:13). While prison employees practice informal censorship with some frequency (thus, disobeying or disregarding official rules and causing or heightening tension among various staff members), both moral/ethical frameworks to encourage rule adherence and formal channels to challenge books and other materials do exist. Additionally, the bureaucratic nature of the prison system can produce illogical rules and inconsistency in censorship.

While the prison, as an organization, has as set of prescribed goals and ideologies which are produced through various discourses and codified in rules and regulations, like any other organization, its rules and power relations are never fully realized or complete, and thus, there is space for multiple perspectives, interpretations of rules, and resistance. Because organizations are comprised of human beings with agency, unanimity is virtually unattainable. Clegg (1994:170) states that “…organizational power, rules and domination never get irrevocably and
automatically classified and framed in and by authority and authoritative relations. A certain indeterminacy, a certain openness, is always possible.” It is in these spaces of indeterminacy and openness that various kinds of informal censorship occur.

To get a sense of how formal or informal the methods of censorship are at various prisons, the survey asked: “When books are banned and removed from the library, how often is this process a formal administrative procedure versus an informal action of individual prison staff?” Using a Likert scale of one through seven, where one represents a totally informal procedure, and seven means a completely formal one, 56 percent of librarians chose either ‘1’ or ‘2’, while 29 percent picked ‘6’ or ‘7’, and the remaining 15 percent chose either ‘3’, ‘4’, or ‘5’, suggesting that a significant amount of censorship results from the acts of individuals within the organization, despite, or perhaps in reaction to, a lack of official rules and regulations about justifiable censorship. Glennor Shirley (2007), a prison librarian in the state of Maryland, reports that a small survey of her colleagues in her own and other states revealed that many censorship attempts encountered by librarians “are arbitrary, based on the bias or punitive attitude of individual security officers or other personnel within the institution.” The interviewees echoed this sentiment.

Many librarians said that, even when there are formal rules and regulations in place, censorship occurs in a variable manner. Rules exist as part of the organization, but since ruling is an “activity,” the rules must be interpreted by individuals (Clegg 1994:162). Owen (1988:15) argues that “prisons are fundamentally contradictory institutions,” and although “rules and regulations are codified in written form…rules must be applied subjectively.” Whether or not a book or magazine is restricted often depends on the decision of an individual and how he or she
perceives a specific item and/or interprets the rules. This is often tied to the individual’s attitudes, values, and beliefs, which are partially shaped by one’s position within the organization and partially brought to the job from one’s other professional positions (e.g., professional librarian, military personnel, etc.), as well as one’s cultural, religious, social, political, and/or philosophical orientations. An analysis of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice’s (TDCJ) banned book list by the Texas Civil Rights Project revealed that, “…while the TDCJ rules are reasonable, the problems lay in the application of these rules,” and the inconsistency with which rules are interpreted to determine an item’s admissibility “indicate a lack of the contextual consideration that state procedure is obviously attempting to promote by providing rules for review…” (TCRP 2011:51).

In many prisons, the Warden and Assistant Warden have an incredible amount of power to shape the institution, and this affects how censorship happens in various places. Some Wardens have little to no involvement with the librarian or the book selection process, while others exercise significant control over the library. For example, Leo, a librarian in a Western prison, explained that he must submit a list of titles to the administration before he can purchase books. He explained the process of submitting his list for review:

> Whatever the Warden or the Associate Warden said, I said, “Okay, scratch that one.” This is an individual decision on the part of these men. Another Associate Warden may not—he wouldn’t think anything of it. So it’s just a question of who it is, because they’ve got the power to do whatever they want to do.

As power is distributed throughout the organization, lower-ranking custody officers also interpret rules and regulations about the admissibility of materials, making decisions that are less definitive but still difficult to challenge.

> Though challenges to materials and censorship occur in other kinds of libraries as well

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(school, public, etc.), the means through which these processes happen are different in prison libraries, as prisons are total institutions in which Wardens and other high-ranking officials in the hierarchical structure often have the authority to make decisions that circumvent or redefine rules and regulations about censorship (in a way that particular individuals at school or public libraries do not). Additionally, as prisoners have no right to privacy and few property rights, custody staff often exercises their power (in ways that may not be officially sanctioned but are nonetheless tolerated) by removing reading materials from inmates. As Singer (1971:715) puts it, “We expose the inmate to indignities and invasions of privacy which, if they occurred in the ‘outside’ world, would bring immediate howls of protest.” Thus, the type of censorship that occurs in these other kinds of libraries is likely to be more formalized and subject to review from external sources (rather than something that emerges from power relations within the institution).

**FORMAL PROCESSES**

There are several formal processes that primarily determine what will and will not be allowed in prison libraries. These do not each exist in every prison library, but most libraries have one form or another of at least one of the following: ‘incoming publications’ rules and regulations, which outline the criteria for admissible publications for the mailroom;\(^{12}\) a ‘publications review committee’ that meets and decides whether or not to restrict specific items; a ‘disapproved reading list’ comprised of the names of specific works that are restricted from the prison; and the library’s collection development policy, which provides guidelines for what kinds of materials

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\(^{12}\) The “mailroom” refers to the receiving area in the prison where mail (including books and magazines) is sent to inmates from someone outside the prison. These materials must be screened for admissibility by custody staff.
will and will not be held in the collection (which is usually developed in relation to the incoming publications guidelines).

As mentioned above, rules and regulations are interpretable, and the data show that who does the interpreting often determines which materials are admitted and rejected. When asked who interprets the various regulations to decide if a specific book or other item meets the criteria for restriction (they could check more than one source if applicable), 58 percent of survey respondents said they interpret the rules alone or with other library staff at the institution, while the remainder reported that the rules are at least in part interpreted by the DOC (43 percent), the Warden (19 percent), the Department of Education (DOE) (8 percent), or some other agency or person (30 percent), typically custody staff, a regional/state supervisor, or a publications review committee. Most surveyed librarians (62 percent) reported that when their libraries accept donated materials, those items must be screened by custody staff or administrators for admissibility, while 36 percent said they are not required to have donations screened before placing them in the library. Three percent of respondents do not accept donated materials at their facilities.

Incoming Publications Regulations

As mentioned in Chapter 2, prisons have guidelines for admissible materials. These guidelines apply to any materials sent to a prisoner through the mail, and the custody staff that works in the mailroom apply the regulations. These policies vary by state and are made by DOCs. Though certain criteria for rejection are common among these policies, such as ‘materials deemed a threat to the safety and security of the institution’, particularities in definitions of
things like ‘nudity’ or ‘sexually explicit materials’ and the procedures for determining an item’s admissibility differ from one state to the next. (Many of these policies can be viewed online at DOC websites.) For example, while many states simply outline a definition of a ‘sex act’ or ‘sexually explicit material’ and ban items meeting these criteria outright, in Arizona, according to regulation DO 914, all materials excluded for reasons relating to sexuality must pass through a review committee, which is required to evaluate the item according the three-part obscenity (aka SLAP) test outlined by the Supreme Court (Paxton 2008). Reviewers are instructed to “look at the publication as a whole. A couple [of] ‘obscene’ pictures or descriptions would not make a publication excluded” (Arizona Department of Corrections 2010).

While these official policies exist for incoming mail in every state prison, the way they affect the library varies by state and/or institution. Some librarians are required to use the mailroom guidelines for building their library collections, while others operate somewhat independently from the official mailroom policies, using other administrative regulations or criteria such as library collection development policies to choose materials (though these are generally influenced by the official rules and regulations). Still other librarians lack official guidelines and have little to no oversight in their choice of library materials.

Those who said they were beholden to the mailroom policies directly were in the minority of interviewees. Julia works in a Southern prison and provides an example of a library that is tightly controlled by the mailroom custody staff. When asked if she is required to follow mailroom regulations when placing materials into her collection, she replied, “Yes. As a matter of fact, they control what comes in here.” Similarly, a librarian from a Midwestern state explained that “the same policy rules us that rules the mailroom, and we have the same criteria.” In
contrast, the majority of librarians spoke about the ambiguous relationship between the mailroom
and library policies at their institutions. James, a librarian from a Southern prison, explained:

I can’t say I’ve really had the mailroom contact me and say, “You can’t have this book.” On the contrary,
I’ve had people in the mailroom and various housing units contact me and say, “I found this book with an
inmate. Are we allowed to have this book?” With that said, some of the stuff that comes to the library
doesn’t go through the mailroom.

When asked who decides which materials will enter the library, he spoke about autonomy and the
highly interpretable nature of the policies: “For the most part, if we’re talking about book
material, like something that is going to sit on the shelf for someone to grab, for the most part it’s
left up to me. Now of course, there are written policy guidelines for that material, but they’re
pretty simplistic.”

The variability in policy and lack of oversight that some librarians experience vividly
emerged from a conversation with Harper, a Midwestern librarian. Asked if she had to follow the
same rules as the mailroom, she said: “To tell you the truth, I don’t know what the mailroom
rules are. I do have some guidelines that I use, but each institution, although there have been
some efforts to standardize things, kind of makes it up as they go, I think.” Likewise, a librarian
from the West said mailroom policies officially apply to the library, but her supervisors do not
check to see how she implements them: “I am expected to follow the mail rules. There’s, I guess,
an honor code about that because there’s no checkup. I mean, it’s not like—well, it’s really
loose.” This ‘looseness’ speaks to what Gilbert (1997:49) refers to as the “discretionary power”
of prison staff, which “often determines whether…programs or policies are implemented
faithfully or subverted.” Though Gilbert is concerned with ‘line officers’ (custody staff), the data
show that the same kind of discretionary power is exercised by librarians whose collections are
not directly supervised by custody staff. Thus, some librarians act as the interpreters of official policies while others are not permitted this discretion ary power.

Prisons also differ in the way official regulations are implemented. Though the official regulations may contain similar language about, for example, sexually explicit materials, the way these rules are interpreted and implemented by employees in different prisons has consequences for inmates. Some librarians reported that if a book or magazine is found to contain an offending passage or image, the entire item must be rejected, while others said the offending part is removed or covered before the item is allowed to enter the prison. This hearkens the 1932 *Ulysses* ruling about censorship in the U.S. in which the Supreme Court ruled that a work must be considered in its entirety, and therefore, cannot be censored based on a sole passage that may be considered obscene when taken alone (Paxton 2008). Unlike the *Ulysses* ruling, which applies to censorship more broadly in American society, the courts have ruled that it is acceptable for prison officials to ban an entire publication based on one offending part (Boston and Manville 2010).

A striking comparison between the ways in which prisons differ in their treatment of materials with objectionable sections emerged from two librarians who interestingly both referred to the use of black markers in covering the offending portion of the work. An example of the practice of admitting a book after altering a small detail came from Madeline, who works in a Western prison. She spoke about the way custody staff treat certain issues of *Maxim* magazine,¹³ which often contains photographs of nearly nude women: “…[S]ometimes the people in the

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¹³ *Maxim* is a magazine that is very popular in most prisons. It contains stories about hip-hop artists and popular culture, as well as images and photographs of scantily clad women.
mailroom take a black marker and cover over some areas because...as long as the certain areas are covered, even if it’s with a tiny bit of material, like a thong for example, it’s fine. As long as that little piece goes down the middle, then they say it’s fine.” In contrast, Anna, a librarian in a Western prison in a different state, must remove an entire item if even one page contains an objectionable part. She told me about an incident of censorship involving Eric Larson’s *In the Garden of Beasts*, a critically acclaimed and award-winning history of Hitler’s rise in Berlin. The book was censored because of nudity. It contains reproductions of several black and white photographs from the 1930s, one of which depicts “a person’s bed in his bedroom and it shows that there is a painting above the bed of a woman with her breasts exposed.” Anna explained the process that transpired when this book was censored:

Now, I can tell you that it’s less than a quarter of an inch, the size of the woman’s breast area, and this book is excluded because of that. I’ve talked to the supervisor out of Central Office and told him, “Now look, here’s this book. This is crazy. All I have to do is take a Sharpie [black marker] and draw a little bikini top, and it would be perfect.” And what’s funny is that the publications reviewer told me that it’s silly that we have to do it, but he says that, specifically, that the inmates aren’t allowed to have pictures of any kind of nudity, especially women. And like he said, he said, “The rest of the book is great and I’d like to be able to put it out, but we can’t because of that.”

As illustrated here, when a staff member challenges an item’s admissibility, it often produces tension among workers in different positions within the prison. As a means to ease this tension and allow the organization to run smoothly (Weber 1968), some prisons and states, like Anna’s, have established a formal system in which challenged items are sent to a publications review committee and undergo a formal procedure to determine whether or not they will enter or remain in the prison.

*Publications Review Committees*
Some state prisons have established committees (or alternatively, an individual) who review specific publications that a staff member believes should be excluded from the prison. (All employees can challenge an item, whether they see it in an inmate’s possession or in the library, mailroom, or education program.) These committees generally deal with incoming publications, but their decisions affect libraries in many prisons. They meet to review items against the admissible materials guidelines set forth by the state, and then decide whether or not to accept the items. The purpose of the committees is to standardize the admittance of materials and protect against arbitrary and informal censorship (though some librarians would argue whether this protection actually exists in practice, as the regulations are always interpreted by specific individuals). The committees differ in the number and types of employees who comprise them, but most committees make decisions at the state level, which are then applied to all prisons within the state, regardless of security level or gender composition. Where such formal procedures are in place, a disapproved reading list also usually exists. If the committee decides to ban an item, it will be placed on the list, and, depending on the state, the mailroom staff and/or the librarians will be notified or given an updated version of the list. Isaac, a librarian in a Southern prison, explained the typical procedure of a review committee:

We have a staff of three people in [the capitol city] for our entire prison system. Those three people make up the Literature Review Committee. All items referred to that committee by anybody in any prison in our state is put on an agenda, something like a court, and then they look at it and review it and make a decision twice a month. We then get a printout of what they reject and what they accept and the reason they reject it or the reason they have chosen to accept it. That is distributed to all librarians electronically, of which I receive a copy. It’s also distributed to the mailroom and to property. I get it the same second they do. If I notice the title of a book, which I did this past month, that was banned or rejected, I go to my shelf, pull that book, and destroy it.

A Midwestern librarian, Oscar, described a similar process of publications review in his institution but illustrated the way that mailroom policies and the library can sometimes be
disconnected. He said that the list of banned items was regularly sent to the mailroom at each facility, but:

…they didn’t even think about including the librarian for a while, then we got on the email string. So, you get this email that comes from Central Office saying, “The following books have been submitted for censorship—if you have it, pull it off your shelves pending further notice.” Then later on you’ll get another email telling you it’s now censored. Once in a blue moon it’ll be allowed.

Most of the librarians who discussed the review committees believe that both inmates and staff benefit from the formal process, and some librarians praised the publications review committee as a protection against individual or regional biases in censorship. For example, Toni, who works in a prison in the Midwest, shared her thoughts on the positive function of the committee:

Actually, the Department of Corrections in [my state] does a good job because we do not put items on the restricted list unless it has been determined by both local authorities—a mailroom person puts it on, a hearing is held with the prisoner with supervisory staff, and then the Warden reviews that hearing, and if the Warden agrees with what the mailroom or supervising staff recommended, then it’s sent to our Central Office where it’s reviewed both by an attorney who is well-versed in corrections law and an administrative staff so that local prejudice and local opinions don’t influence. So, say somebody is in the hinterlands versus in downtown [large city], that there isn’t that kind of local prejudice or individual prejudice, because this isn’t reviewed at only a facility level, but at a statewide level.

However, as illustrated above by Anna’s description of the publication reviewer’s refusal to allow her to use the black Sharpie on the photo of the woman’s breasts, several librarians mentioned that the bureaucratic nature of the review committees as an impediment to both librarian autonomy and prisoner access to information. Isaac provided a telling example of the way that bureaucracy can defy logic:

We are starting to see some security people sending in materials for evaluation that deal with trades, such as electrical trades…and if those books are not reviewed, then they are allowed. But if one or two are sent in, then they are disallowed….When I called to find out the reasons why, they said, “Well, they sent it in and we saw what they were talking about. We rejected that one.” I said, “What about others on the same topic?”
They said, “Don’t ask.”

Some librarians reported that the committees are comprised solely of custody personnel rather than educational or library staff and recognized that one’s ‘interpretive lens’ can affect the way decisions are made. Simone, a prison librarian from the Northeast, provides an example of a publications review committee comprised solely of custody staff, as well as the way that blanket policies affect all prisons, regardless of security level:

We have a publications review committee that oversees all the facilities. And so, if it’s on the Publications Review List, it’s not allowed, even though we’re a level two [minimum security], we can’t have it….It’s [the committee] custody staff, so it’s Captains. I think it’s mostly Captains, but there’s no librarians or teachers on it. It’s all custody staff.

Anna discussed her frustrations with a review ‘committee’ comprised solely of one person who is disconnected from what goes on in the prisons:

We have up in Central Office…publications review. This person, actually, he sits up there…[and] it [an item] gets reviewed, it gets sent back down, and then publications review, once he gets done with it and makes a decision, then he puts out a list for us monthly…. And there’s a bit of an issue going on right now because those of us who actually work the job down here, it’s our opinion, and we’re hoping that they’ll agree with us at some point, that when we are told we can’t give an inmate a book for a specific reason, it’s our belief that if we could just take out the offending picture or—and then be able to provide it in the library….By way of saying, we are not inmates, we are staff and we are providing something that we’ve made sure is appropriate….It’s ridiculous….[L]ibrarians should actually be doing the publications review, not some person that they hired off the street who’s never been in a prison before. That’s pretty much who they have up there.

Disapproved Reading Lists

The majority (59 percent) of survey respondents reported that their institutions have lists of specific items that are restricted from the library, while 36 percent said they do not have such a list, and five percent were unsure about whether or not such a list exists. The interview data revealed, upon deeper examination of the ways the lists work in practice, that (as with the other
policies examined here) there is a considerable amount of variation in how the lists are made and distributed. Some of the librarians who participated in interviews stated that the disapproved reading lists they use for their libraries are the same lists that are made for the state prison system as a whole (stemming from incoming materials restrictions and publications review), while others said their institutions or libraries have their own lists that are separate from the statewide or mailroom lists. The length and composition of the lists vary greatly from state to state, the details of which are discussed in Chapter 6.

Several interviewees said they do not have, or are unaware of, a specific list of banned books. For example, James, a librarian in a Southern state, said, “There is not—at least not known to me—there is no banned book list, although there are some titles that are very commonly rejected.” However, a more common derivation from a statewide DOC disapproved reading list involves some local or interpretable variation on the list. Margaret, a librarian in a Western prison, said the state library system, which is partially responsible for maintaining prison libraries in her state, sends a list to all prison librarians, but unlike many states where the disapproved reading list is incontestable, her list is more of “an informal list of things that are not acceptable, more so we don’t have to keep going through it to figure it out over time.” Another variation comes from Barbara, who works in a Western prison. Unlike many other states, rather than create its own list, her state has “a list that comes out of [the capitol city] that says, ‘These are books to watch that have been objected to in other institutions’. Like, Arizona has a pretty thorough list. And so, they’ll check different lists from other states.”

Though most librarians with official disapproved reading lists were given these lists by the DOC, Harper, a Midwestern librarian, said that when she began working at her institution
several years ago, she was not provided a list of inadmissible materials, and so she:

…tracked down some lists that some of the various institutions [in my state] had just so I had an idea about what people were denying, and it was real haphazard. Some institutions, some things were fine. Other institutions, other things were fine. Some institutions would say, “Oh, officer so-and-so rejects this material,” or “So-and-so says this is unacceptable.”

Interestingly, another librarian in the same state commented that she receives a disapproved reading list from the DOC, which is “generated through property [custody staff]” and applies “statewide….When books are submitted for review, and if there’s a number of books that have been reviewed and decisions made on, they just send us an updated list.” These contradictory experiences suggest that DOC-level policies are not always adopted or enforced by each individual institution in the state.

Several librarians noted that their institutions do not make disapproved reading lists available to prisoners, which is problematic, since, as Oscar, who works in a different Midwestern state, explained, “There’s no way for the inmates to know what’s on this list. So, another inmate at another prison can turn right around and spend their own money, or their family’s spending money, to have this book mailed in, and be told, ‘Oh, this is censored’. ” A similar concern was raised by Alexander, who works in a Midwestern prison. He said the state recently had begun to computerize the disapproved reading list, but this had the effect of making it more difficult for both employees and inmates to access, since they have limited or no access to the internet: “It’s on the computer now, and because of the security controls about who can get what and who can do this, nobody gets it anymore. The mailroom has a copy, and I look at it once in a while. I sometimes print it out for prisoners. But it’s a big jumbled list.” He also spoke to what he perceived to be the illogical manner in which the list is made:
...[A] book might come in, and almost anybody can put it on the restricted list. Here’s a historical book on the Civil War that talks about the great escape where the prisoners went through a tunnel. They restrict it. Completely nuts! First of all, a lot of books that come into the library all the time—whether they’re coming in through inter-library loan—are books that nobody looks at. There’s hardly any sense to it.

Some librarians attempt to alleviate these various forms of inconsistency and establish some level autonomy by creating their own library collection development policies, which they often formalize with the Warden or the DOC.

*Library Collection Development Policies*

The vast majority (74 percent) of survey respondents said they have a formal collection development policy for the library. Of those librarians who have a formal policy, 47 percent make the policy alone or solely with other library staff at their institution. The other librarians follow collection development policies made by, or with input from, the DOC (36 percent), the DOE (8 percent), and the Warden (3 percent). One librarian did not know who makes the formal collection development policy, and 21 percent answered that some ‘other’ person or agency helps make the policy. The majority of those who wrote in answers to this question said that some form of regional supervisor or coordinator of prison libraries contributes to the policy.

Even though the librarians tend to be the ones who make these policies, that does not mean that they necessarily do so without supervision or that they are free to develop their collections without consulting any other prison regulations, such as mailroom policies, about restricted materials. For librarians who make the collection development policies themselves or with other library staff at their institution, 46 percent must have the policy approved by the Warden or Assistant Warden, 36 percent by the DOC, and 14 percent by the DOE. Thirteen
percent do not need to seek approval from anyone, 14 percent must have the policy approved by someone other than those mentioned, such as a regional or state library or education supervisor, and four percent of respondents did not know who is required to approve the policy. (Some librarians must seek approval from more than one source.)

Collection development policies act as a means of controlling both what should be contained in and what should be excluded from the library. For example, a policy may state that the library should contain educational, recreational, and legal materials, or it may suggest that the librarian is responsible for providing incarcerated people of color with materials written by authors who are racially/ethnically similar to themselves. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) suggests that materials for prison libraries “should be selected according to a collection management policy/plan that is based on the demographic composition of the prison population” (Lehmann and Locke 2005:12). Jennifer, a librarian in the West, said that her prison has regulations that “stipulate the ratio of inmates versus the number of recreation books. There is a whole formula in there about we are supposed to have.” One survey respondent mentioned the way in which her policy was created to incorporate the needs of other programs in the prison by stating that her “collection development policy is shaped by supporting the drug & alcohol program and the mental health program and the GED program, as any academic or specialized library should.” Similarly, Agatha, who works at a women’s prison in the South, stated:

…[M]y book selection process is that most of the books I buy are going to be general fiction, mysteries, romances, current bestsellers—inmates tend to like what is new and hot. They’re crazy about vampire books. I just got them what they wanted, plus always making sure there were plenty of books there to meet rehabilitative needs: lots of books on self-esteem, psychology, relationships, plenty of spiritual books.
Barbara, a librarian in a Western prison, said that when she arrived at her position, she had some 
trouble convincing her supervisors of the benefits of a collection development policy, but she was 
eventually able to create one based on a survey she conducted of inmates. She found that:

People [administrators and staff] have such resistance to a collection development plan, even. I was
surprised at that because that’s what a librarian does. You find out who is in your community and who’s
coming to the library and who needs to come to the library that’s not coming, and then you create your
collection development plan based on your clientele and based on your patron base….And so, my attitude is
that a collection development plan is professional and it enhances the freedom that’s available to the
inmates…

The IFLA suggests that collection policies “should state clearly that no censorship will be
applied in the selection of materials, except in such circumstances where an individual title/item
is known to cause a threat to prison security” (Lehmann and Locke 2005:12). However, as many
librarians must follow the incoming publications guidelines, they may include language in the
collection plan that aligns with that of the DOC and restricts certain materials based on such
criteria as sexual or violent content. So, although most librarians create collection development
policies with an aim to increase access and promote diversity in their libraries, the policies can
simultaneously limit access to or exclude certain types of materials. For those librarians who
have budgets to purchase books, these various regulations influence book selection.

When asked who selects the books for the library, 89 percent of librarians said they select
the materials alone or with the other library staff at their facility. The remaining 11 percent either
have input from others in the selection process (including the chaplain, the Warden, regional or
state librarians, education departments, and inmates), or they do not have a budget to purchase
reading materials and thus rely solely on donations. Toni, a librarian in the Midwest, explained
the process of choosing books: “I’m a book selector, so if the book is not on the restricted list,
I’m certainly aware of what our policy requires, and I don’t obtain material that should or would be restricted based on the policy.” The distinction between selection and censorship is not always clear, whether in the prison context or in any other library. The ambiguity about what constitutes ‘selection’ vs. ‘censorship’ can lead librarians to practice self-censorship (i.e., choice within constraints), which is one of the ways that censorship occurs as an informal process in the prison library. This and other informal methods of censorship are discussed below.

INFORMAL PROCESSES

Informal censorship occurs when staff members decide to exclude or remove an item based on either a personal belief that the item is inappropriate for prisoners or on the assumption that it would somehow later be challenged or removed by someone else in the system (whether formally or informally). As opposed to the kind of censorship that results from the formal rules and regulations discussed above, these processes happen in unofficial ways, often in the backstage, where policies are absent, circumvented, or ignored (Goffman 1961a). At times, these practices amount to normative practices, even if they are not authorized by official policy. Britton (2003:223) notes that the prison structure “includes the distribution of power through hierarchical lines of authority, as well as institutional policies that have written form and unwritten rules that mandate normative practices” (emphasis added). Since “[a]ll prison systems are isolated from the broader society to some degree,” prison staff often believes they can, to a certain degree, mistreat prisoners or refuse to implement policies designed for prisoners’ protections with impunity (Eckland-Olson and Martin 1988:377). In their study of prison staff’s compliance with court-ordered reforms, Eckland-Olson and Martin (1988:378) claim that, “To the extent that
administrators and staff perceive that changes have been imposed, such changes will be resisted
and morale among staff will be lowered. This is true not only for court-ordered reforms but also
changes imposed contrary to staff wishes by reform-minded correctional administrators.” Thus,
prison staff may be reluctant to follow rules (such as policies that aim to protect against arbitrary
censorship, which have historically been the product of prisoner lawsuits) that they feel have
been imposed upon them whether or not they agree with the policies, and, assuming they can
“get away with” breaking or bending these rules, may practice informal or unsanctioned
censorship.

Even though they often simultaneously criticized the bureaucratic nature of formal
policies, librarians repeatedly spoke about the dangers of informal censorship and the importance
of having formal rules like publications review in place so as to minimize individually-motivated
censorship. Margaret expressed a commonly shared sentiment: “I mean, if you don’t have any
formal policies, you’re going to be in real trouble because there’s nothing for you to fall back
on…because everybody’s going to have their opinion and try to get their opinion exercised.”
Likewise, a survey respondent wrote: “In general, our policy works well. When complaints are
not handled by policy & our handbooks, censorship becomes arbitrary, based on a few people’s
views.” When asked how formal policy and individuals’ actions affect censorship, Charlotte, a
librarian from the Northeast, explained that “it’s always different from building to building,
individual to individual. It’s hard to say. It does matter. While we may have written policies,
sometimes policies are not adhered to. Sometimes they are.”

The two primary ways in which informal censorship occurs in prisons are self-censorship
by librarians and the removal of materials by other prison staff who attempt to get rid of an item
once it has already entered the prison (and therefore has likely already passed some formal test of admissibility). I refer to this latter process as ‘spot and seize’, meaning that an individual staff member spots an item, either in the library or in an inmate’s possession, and takes it upon her/himself to seize and attempt to remove that item by one of a variety of mechanisms. Though librarians themselves occasionally admitted to engaging in this behavior, such as the Western librarian who said, “If I find a book that we [the librarians] feel is inappropriate, we just destroy it,” it was far more common for librarians to report incidents of spot and seize being committed by administrators or custody staff. This kind of action, which prioritizes security over prisoners’ rights and even institutional regulations, is likely due at least in part to the ways that custody staff is “socialized to value the order and security dimensions of their work more than the rehabilitative parts” (Crewe 2011b:463).

Self-censorship by Librarians

Self-censorship occurs at several levels. First, librarians may choose not to purchase items or order books through interlibrary loan if they believe the items may potentially be interpreted as violating some regulation or be objected to by another staff member, even if they have not formally put the book through an administrative procedure to determine its admissibility. Anna, a librarian in a Western prison, discussed the way she chooses and excludes books:

I order the books myself here at the complex…and I review the books….I will go through them and if I think something is a little too, you know, the opposite [of what the policy deems admissible], I don’t order it. I think that we are just as capable of making these decisions as someone else, and I think that probably those of us who’ve been here a while understand what’s going on.
Similarly concerned that a book might cause controversy, Toni sometimes restricts items on her own that she believes someone may consider a violation of the admissible materials guidelines, even if they are not on the disapproved reading list:

Well, there are materials that I restrict that aren’t on the restricted list. I look at them, you know, How to Find Anyone Anywhere provides lots of information, home security books, and the individual books haven’t been reviewed or restricted, but I see those kinds of requests for books to borrow from a public library and I say no. Very detailed medical texts, because prisoners can turn around and make that into books about how and where to stab people. And I’ve seen those homemade books that prisoners have made. So those kinds of things…

Several librarians claimed that their small or nonexistent budgets prompt them to practice a form of informal censorship when choosing books. As one survey respondent wrote, “In our situation, we are a small facility with a small book budget. We always run out of money before we run out of requests. So, I purchase less controversial books that are highly requested.”

Second, librarians may use their own biases to remove or exclude particular items they believe are inappropriate for prisoners. They can do this either by choosing not to acquire or include certain types of items at all, or by choosing more ‘appropriate’ categories of materials over those that may be more controversial. Oscar explained how some public and prison librarians use specific tactics to impose their own ideas about what people should read:

So, although librarians say that they don’t practice censorship, we do. We call it ‘bait and switch’, where we try to encourage a teenager or whatever, “Have you ever tried to read this? This is just as good as Twilight.” And it’s like, “OK, I’ll read it.” So, yes, you can read crap, but a librarian will try to get you to read something better…and, so, what’s an inmate supposed to do when he doesn’t have [direct access to] a library and he wants something to read, and he’s sitting in his cell?

An example of a personal belief directly motivating an act of informal censorship comes from Maya, a librarian in a Western prison. She came across a book that a prisoner had donated to the library from his personal property (meaning it had likely been approved by the mailroom staff)
and deemed it inappropriate based on the subject matter. She said the item was “a book on homosexuality. He donated it to the library. When I found out what it was, I didn’t put it on the shelf.” Similarly, Madeline, who works in a different Western prison, has a great deal of autonomy in deciding what enters and stays in the prison library, and she admits that she uses her personal judgment as a measure for an item’s admissibility:

> It’s one of those gray areas where I just try to use my discretion. I usually err on the side of openness, but on some obvious things where I think it would help people to develop ideas that were not good, or planning something, then I wouldn’t want them in there. I might also try to not have tattoo design books, because we don’t want to encourage that.

An additional illustration of personal bias comes from another Western librarian, Barbara, who chooses to exclude true crime books even though there is not an official policy forbidding them. She stated, “I do not use the library shelves for true crime. Now, that’s my choice has a librarian…and the reason it can be justified in this state is because Ann Rule is a very famous true crime author and she often writes about the Northwest.” So, even though this singular true crime author has written about several incidents that occurred in the librarian’s region of the country, she nonetheless chooses to exclude true crime as a genre.

Lastly, some librarians may decide not to spend limited funds on items, such as urban or erotic novels, that they believe will be widely popular and therefore, eventually damaged or stolen. James, a Southern librarian, said his concern about a book’s popularity leading to its eventual demise causes him to censor certain items of a sexual nature: “I won’t put in the collection a book of erotic literature or a book of outright pornography…I won’t knowingly approve it and will yank it if I see it. One of the reasons I do that is because it will just be stolen anyway, so rather than waste time and resources on it and having it stolen, I just don’t put it in.”
Likewise, a survey respondent stated that “[g]raphic novels with pictures are censored because they are often destroyed (pages ripped out), rather than because of content.” Margaret had a similar stance on purchasing urban fiction books (which are not officially banned at her facility): “We had those more restricted just so that we could keep them under control and not have them so destroyed all the time. It’s the only way that we could do that. I still have responsibility here and we only have so much money to purchase books.” These processes of self-censorship by librarians occur with regularity and affect prisoners’ access to materials. However, they are arguably less capricious than the informal censorship that occurs as a result of spot and seize incidents committed by other prison staff.

Spot and Seize by Staff

Librarians reported incidents of spot and seize perpetrated by a variety of prison staff, including Wardens, civilian staff such as educators and mental health professionals, and, most commonly, custody officers. These occurrences generally involve an individual’s passing through the library, a common area, or an inmate’s cell and seeing someone reading a particular work that s/he finds objectionable based on the title, author, or cover. Rarely does the staff member have detailed knowledge of the book’s content.

All members of the prison staff have the right to formally challenge a book by filing paperwork and submitting it through the appropriate channels, generally to the Warden, Assistant Warden, or publications review committee (if one exists in the employee’s state). Margaret said that her institution is generally successful at combating attempts at spot and seize in the library due to its strictly enforced formal policies: “If a staff member comes in and goes to the shelf and
pulls out a book and says they don’t think it’s acceptable, we have a procedure outlined in our administrative regulations for appealing any type of materials in the library. But they have to follow the procedure.”

Most librarians reported that staff are unlikely to assume the burden of this formal procedure; rather, they either give up their quest, take the book to the librarian and ask her to get rid of it (thus leaving her with the responsibility of filing the paperwork), or simply remove or destroy the item themselves without the permission of superiors. For example, Barbara said some members of the custody staff “take books, and sometimes they’ll give me books and say, ‘This was on the unit and they really shouldn’t have it.’ …They put the book in my box and leave it up to me, and I usually concede to their viewpoint.” She said she prefers that they at least hand the books over to her rather than simply destroy them, which also happens. She spoke of a particular officer who had repeatedly attempted to seize books he did not approve of: “Now, if that guy is running the [book] cart in segregation,¹⁴ my concern is that he’s just going to pull the books off and throw them away, because there’s no accountability when it comes to the books.” An incident in which a staff member chose to act on her own without consulting the librarian or any other staff member came from a survey respondent who said a teacher violated formal policy by committing a spot and seize based on her personal belief that inmates should not have access to sexually suggestive materials (despite the fact that this was not the formal policy): “Easy Rider magazine [a motorcycle publication] was once intercepted by one teacher who fed it to a shredder. She was only verbally reprimanded by the principal. She did not like the nude pictures

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¹⁴ Inmates who are locked in solitary confinement units are not permitted to leave their cells to visit the library. They must rely on a staff member to bring a cart of books to the unit, from which they can then choose a certain number of items.
in it.”

Some librarians provided examples of instances in which they were able to intervene during an attempted spot and seize. One survey respondent recalled a time when librarians successfully stopped a civilian staff member who attempted to remove a book by demanding the staff member adhere to the formal policy:

_Invisible Man_ by Ralph Ellison was removed from our mental health facility by a staff member of that facility. The staff member thought the book was inappropriate for inmates to read. Library staff were told about it afterwards, and we shared with the staff member our procedure to challenge any book in our collection. The book was put back in the library and the matter was dropped.

An additional instance of a thwarted attempt at informal censorship occurred when a survey respondent reported a custody officer’s actions to the administration: “I had an officer tell an inmate not to read certain books because ‘it is of the devil’. I complained about that to the Associate Warden, and that was stopped. We still have those fantasy books on our shelves.” Yet another librarian reported in the survey a more difficult, but ultimately successful, process of intervention when she said that an officer “kept snatching inter-library loan books off the cart, sending them up to security without even asking me! Fought hard to stop this—finally won.”

It seems that when most staff members who attempt a spot and seize are confronted by a librarian and faced with the bureaucratic procedure required to officially challenge the item, they acquiesce. However, Harper, who works in the Midwest, said librarians’ efforts to interfere with an officer’s attempt at informal censorship at her institution would be unlikely to proceed to a formal level and would ultimately be futile: “If the security officers or security director or anybody in that capacity said, ‘I don’t want that in my facility,’ there’s no question—I mean, the librarian would be overruled immediately.” Similarly, a survey respondent said he could not stop
custody staff from arbitrarily destroying items they disapprove of: “During cell and library searches, custody trashes everything that they deem inappropriate.” This notion of custody officers having the ability to enter prisoners’ cells and “trash” everything provokes a sense of insecurity among inmates, which Crewe (2011a) describes as one of the many ‘pains of imprisonment’ and Liebling (2011) considers ‘inhuman and degrading treatment’. This sense of impending loss was described by Gabriel, a former prisoner and current public librarian, whom I interviewed:

…[I]t’s the fear, the constant fear of the loss of that expression or of that material. It’s constant. You don’t want to get on the wrong side of the C.O., who can take everything you have instantly….It is so arbitrary and capricious that you never, never know. And at a certain point, you just, one becomes so frustrated that I think you start closing off, start shutting down. And any time you start shutting down, it starts inhibiting your restoration to society. It takes longer to get back the further away you get, if that makes any sense to you….You don’t know from day to day what it’s going to be.

One of the central targets of spot and seize incidents is urban fiction, which many staff members disapprove of for various reasons (to be discussed in Chapter 6). One example of flagrant disregard for policy comes from Virginia, a librarian who works in a Western prison and relies solely on donated materials, as she has no budget to purchase books. She told of a custody officer who went through a box of donated books and removed all of the urban fiction: “The S and I [security] people—well, this one woman in particular—pulled out everything that was an urban novel and would not let us have it….Well, she didn’t feel that it was appropriate reading material….That’s the kind of censorship—we can’t do anything about it, you know.” A Southern librarian, Julia, perceives intentional malice in the actions of custody officers who seize prisoners’ books. She said the officers:

…make snide remarks to the inmates….If they lock somebody up in confinement, they’ll take library books and throw them in the trash. I sent many e-mails to the Assistant Warden about it, and she’s had meetings
with them, but they still do it….I think they’re just angry at the world and they just take it out on any little privilege they think the inmates have.

Similarly, James, a librarian in a different Southern state, was distressed by the actions of some custody staff who informally censor materials:

“I’ve certainly had many a staff member—not necessarily the administration—say, “Well, I don’t think inmates should have access to that information.” And I have no doubt that plenty of staff members take it upon themselves to confiscate material and discard it or take it home. That type of censorship can be applied at every single level here, and you almost never can trace it or stop it.

Thus, many librarians are aware of the various types of informal censorship that occur in their prisons, yet they feel powerless to do anything about it.

It is not only custody and civilian staff who spot and seize materials. Librarians also reported incidents of high-ranking administrators, such as Wardens and Assistant Wardens, doing the same thing, even though they are clearly aware of formal procedures. However, as mentioned above, many prisons operate with local rules, and the Warden has a great deal of control over how rules and regulations are written, interpreted, and enforced. A survey respondent wrote about the difficulty she faces due to the randomness with which her Warden and security Captain sometimes spot and seize items:

It can be difficult to make library purchases when you are unsure if the item you want to buy may be removed by the Captain or Warden….We don’t want to waste funds on books that will not be accessed. At the same time, you want to find things that the inmates will want to read. It’s frustrating and disheartening to have to tell an inmate that the book s/he wants to read is unavailable or had been available but was removed by the Captain/Warden.

Perhaps the most egregious case of a Warden exercising her power to practice censorship comes from a Southern prison, where Agatha explained her long and tumultuous relationship with the Warden, who disapproves of inmates reading urban fiction because of her own religious and
moral values. What began as an informal process (the Warden walking through the prison and reacting to what she saw by seizing books) became codified into the prison’s regulations and organizational structure when the Warden exercised power to impose new formal policies:

I have had more problems with the book banning at the smaller institution that I serve, and it began with that Warden….I can tell you what [the Warden] told me: “Just wandering through the units, I have seen women with material I don’t think they should have.” And it might have been an urban book. It might have been one by the author Zane, who writes pretty hot material….And that’s when she basically told me, “I am appointing [a supervisor] who works at that prison to look at your books. From now on they can’t come in without going through him.”…I guess she sees herself as a good Christian lady and she just doesn’t think it’s good for the women, and so, she is the one who made the issue.

However, Agatha went on to state that her situation with this particular Warden does not match that of other librarians she has spoken with in her state, and that “there are prisons where the Warden trusts the librarian and doesn’t want to be involved in it and doesn’t care, whatever.” So, as with the formal policies discussed above, there is a significant amount of variation in how and to what extent informal censorship occurs in prisons throughout the country.

CONCLUSION

This chapter shows that, while prisons have official policies and procedures for censoring inmate access to books, magazines, and other materials, these are inconsistent from one institution to the next. Moreover, where formal rules and regulations exist, it is the individuals working in the prison who interpret these rules, and thus, the application of codified guidelines varies depending upon who is engaging in the activity of interpreting the rules. While the prison has official policies that legitimize certain kinds censorship (of particular materials through particular means), these policies are not applied with consistency, so that what appears on paper in the form of official policy often differs considerably from what happens in practice. For example, two
prisons in the same state, which are both officially subject to identical regulations produced by
the DOC, may in fact carry out censorship in significantly dissimilar ways, since the rules may
be interpreted and applied quite differently by the people who work in these prisons.

In addition to the variation in application of official rules, censorship also occurs in
unofficial or informal ways. The ‘looseness’ of the organization allows for varying degrees of
adherence to regulations, and some prison staff disregard or blatantly disobey official policies
about censorship, evidently assuming that they can “get away with” committing these violations.
For low-ranking custody staff and civilian staff, this often means attempting to physically seize
and remove books or magazines in a way that will be either unseen or overlooked by other
employees. When caught in the act by librarians who confront them, these staff will often
acquiesce rather than follow the legitimate channels of challenging an item. However, other staff
members may either remove books without the librarians’ knowledge or exercise power to
overrule the librarians, who occupy a subordinate position in the prison hierarchy. In cases where
administrators engage in this type of spot and seize censorship, an act that begins as an informal
or unofficial kind of censorship can lead to changes in policy, due to the position of authority
these individuals inhabit. Because the relations of power are rather well-defined within the
hierarchical structure of the prison, Wardens and other high-ranking administrators can often
impose their will upon others, producing tension and a sense of powerlessness among many
librarians. These processes simultaneously result from and produce the nature of the interactions
and relationships that prison staff and inmates have with one another, and the variation in the
ways censorship occurs has a very real effect on the availability of reading materials to people in
prison.
“There was a time…when it was illegal to teach slaves to read. The fear was that ideas could turn anger often directed inward into action against those with their boots on black necks. It is perhaps the most fitting tribute to Jackie Robinson and Jack Johnson that their stories still strike fear into the hearts of those wearing the boots.”


“The previous chapter addressed how censorship occurs in prison libraries. The current chapter examines what is censored, as well as the justifications that are used to legitimate the exclusion of these items. The Supreme Court has set mandates about what can ‘justifiably’ be censored in prisons, though these rules are vague and interpreted rather freely in practice. According to *Turner v. Safley* (1987), anything that is “reasonably related to legitimate penological concerns” can be banned from prisons. Building upon this decision, *Thornburgh v. Abbot* (1989) further states that it is “appropriate” for prison administrators to use “broad discretion” in determining whether or not an item could “be detrimental to the security, good order, or discipline of the institution or if it might facilitate criminal activity,” and thus, they may justifiably use this discretion to censor any item they deem to meet these qualifications. Specific kinds of materials recur in a long string of court cases challenging the constitutionality of prison censorship, including racist (sometimes also deemed religious) publications, items said to contain gang signs or symbols, materials produced by African American nationalist groups, material that expresses hostility towards particular religious groups or prison employees, Satanist literature, information
that could aid or encourage actions that pose a security risk, items considered an impediment to rehabilitation, and sexually explicit materials (Boston and Manville 2010:198-200). While prisoners have won some lawsuits when these types of items have been banned, the courts have more often upheld the administration’s right to censor where they can show (with little burden of proof) that the items pose a “reasonable” threat to “penological concerns.”

A recent analysis of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice’s (TDCJ) list of banned books, which contains nearly 12,000 titles, shows that censorship has increased independently of the prison population in the TDJC since 2005 (TCRP 2011). The most commonly cited reasons for censoring items are that they either allegedly “encourage deviant criminal sexual behavior” or were written “solely for the purpose of…achieving the breakdown of prisons through strikes, riots or gang activity,” but the Texas Civil Rights Project (TCRP) argues that “many of these titles actually discuss prison conditions, race relations, and civil rights and are only ‘dangerous’ because they inform prisoners about their constitutional rights” (TCRP 2011:13). Among the items on the list are five books whose censorship was recently, and unsuccessfully, challenged in a Texas court: Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis, Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson, Women Behind Bars: The Crisis of Women in the U.S. Prison System, Prison Masculinities, and The Perpetual Prisoner Machine: How America Profits from Crime (Barron 2012). These books, which are all critical accounts of the criminal justice system that would frequently be found on the syllabi of Criminal Justice and Sociology courses throughout the country, were ostensibly censored due to their ‘deviant sexual content’. These items, along with books about civil rights (by writers such as Sojourner Truth, Noam Chomsky, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Studs Terkel) and numerous works of classical literature (including
works by Shakespeare, Alice Walker, George Orwell, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Joyce Carol Oates, among many others), which “address serious, recurring sociological themes like race and sex,” have all been banned by the TDCJ in what the Texas Civil Rights Project calls “pretextual censorship” (TCRP 2011:31). In other words, the very vague guidelines about what constitutes legitimate censorship are interpreted in ways that the TDCJ (or specific employees within the system) find suitable to their purposes. Justice Stevens discussed this concept of ‘pretextual censorship’ in his dissent on the *Turner* decision when he argued that “the standard set forth was meaningless, would legitimize imaginary security concerns, and would allow for ‘far reaching anticipatory restrictions’” (Varner 2009:809). As we will see below, the kinds of materials that are censored in prison libraries are very much subject to wide variation in the interpretation of written guidelines that seem to be intentionally vague.

To determine the nature of the materials being censored in prison libraries, I asked survey respondents to report which categories of materials might be excluded from their prisons and to provide examples of specific incidents of censorship, including details about the items that were banned and the reason(s) given for the actions, which they did in their open-ended responses. Librarians reported censorship of items similar to those described above, as well as others, and interview respondents provided in-depth discussions of how they understand various actors’ justifications for the kinds of censorship that occur in the prison more broadly and in the library specifically, thus expanding our knowledge of the ways in which the notion of “penological concern” is used to practice and legitimize censorship.

**FREQUENTLY CENSORED ITEMS AND PRIMARY JUSTIFICATIONS FOR CENSORSHIP**
Using examples culled from existing formal and informal reports about censorship in prisons, I asked surveyed librarians whether or not specific categories of items would be restricted, for any reason, from their libraries. The vast majority (88 percent) of librarians said that certain types or categories of materials are restricted from their libraries; only nine percent answered that none of the given types or categories are restricted, while four percent were unsure. The following percentages represent those librarians who said materials about these subjects are restricted at their facilities: Instructional manuals depicting weapons, escape, etc.: 85 percent, Violence: 63 percent, Sex: 60 percent, Gangs: 53 percent, Terrorism: 38 percent, True crime: 22 percent, Subversive politics: 19 percent, Race: 13 percent, Urban fiction: nine percent, Books written by prisoners: nine percent, Graphic novels: eight percent, and Religion: five percent. Roughly one third of respondents said some ‘other’ type of material is restricted, providing examples such as materials about computers, electronics, locksmithing, security procedures and training, violence against prison staff or police officers, explosives, drugs, how to make alcohol and poisons, chemistry, martial arts, manipulation, survival information, maps, phone books, tattooing, child porn, erotica, anything anti-government, items inciting hatred or intolerance, white supremacy, sexual assault, tarot cards, “witchcraft, voodoo, etc.,” and books written in foreign languages other than Spanish. Interestingly, a survey of a small sample of 34 prison librarians published in 1980, prior to the *Turner* and *Thornburgh* cases, found results similar to the ones from the current study; the most frequently censored items were those said to pose a threat to security and ‘pornographic materials’ (though the definition of pornography varied), and decisions were made at the discretion of prison staff and administrators (Roberts 1980).

I also chose a select number of specific books and authors that have been placed on a
disapproved reading list in at least one prison and asked the surveyed librarians if these items
would be restricted from their libraries. The following numbers represent the percentage of
librarians who said ‘yes’, the item would be banned: Bruce Lee’s Fighting Method: 60 percent,
The Anarchist Cookbook: 57 percent, 33 Strategies of War by Robert Greene: 40 percent, 48
Laws of Power by Robert Greene: 39 percent, Dungeons & Dragons materials: 38 percent,
Maxim magazine: 32 percent, Blood in My Eye by George Jackson: 19 percent, In Cold Blood
by Truman Capote: 12 percent, Prison Legal News: nine percent, books by James Patterson: six
percent, The Slocum Westerns: six percent, The Shawshank Redemption by Steven King: six
percent, and books by Noam Chomsky: four percent.

The interviewees added more nuanced descriptions of these types of incidents and
engaged in in-depth discussions about their understandings of the various justifications employed
by the Department of Corrections and/or its employees to practice or support censorship. Some
librarians also provided me with a copy of their institution’s disapproved reading list. To provide
an example of the wide-ranging titles that are banned at just one institution, Anna, a librarian
from the West, prepared for our interview by retrieving her most recent communication from the
administration regarding restricted materials. She receives a weekly list that contains the names
of books and magazines that have been deemed inadmissible within the past week, for which she
must then search her collection:

Just for fun, I pulled out my list that I got last week. Excluded—these are books that are excluded so we
can’t have them: Anatomy of Hatha Yoga: A Manual for Students, Teachers and Practitioners; Back Draft:
Firemen Erotica; Best Gay Bondage Erotica; Cannibal Serial Killers; The Complete Human Body: The
Definitive Visual Guide; The Complete Illustrated Guide to Catholicism; more gay erotica; How to Hustle
and Win: A Survival Guide to the Ghetto; The Human Past – I’m not familiar with this one, but it does have
an ISBN if I need to look it up; Organic Chemistry Demystified: A Self-teaching Guide; Playboy Book of
True Crime; Rolling Stone—they won’t let us have the Rolling Stone with the True Blood people on the
front because you have all the tattoos on them—no tattoo art. And, you know, they just banned World War
The data from the open-ended survey responses, interviews, and disapproved reading lists reveal certain patterns and conceptual categories that are useful in discussing both what gets censored and why. It is important to note, however, that there is wide variation in what prisoners are allowed to access at any given institution. The same books that are banned in one facility are permitted in another. As with the variations discussed in the previous chapter regarding policies and practices, these differences are not merely a function of a prison’s security level or a particular state’s formal policy, though these do matter in some cases. Much of the variation rests on the decisions made by a number of individuals at the local, institutional level. Despite the wide deviation between institutions in the specifics of which materials are banned, certain themes emerged from the data.

I argue that there are two broad categories into which most censored items fall: (1) materials considered a threat to the safety and security of the institution; and (2) items containing subject matter that is deemed to conflict with the institution’s stated goal of rehabilitation. The former category includes, among others, such items as books that promote racial, ethnic or religious intolerance, which could arguably intensify existing animosities between various inmates or inmate groups, and manuals about topics such as locksmithing or survival skills that might aid in escape. The latter category includes items such as urban fiction and true crime novels, which some administrators and staff claim promote a ‘criminal lifestyle’ and are therefore counter to the goal of rehabilitating the prisoner. The justifications for banning these items are tied to the two primary organizational goals of the prison, which are grounded in
definitions of the prison as a specific kind of institution that must: (1) contain and control inmates (while providing some degree of security for both employees and inmates); and (2) encourage the rehabilitation of prisoners (Foucault 2009). The goal of rehabilitation is an organizational goal set by the state (whether or not the state actually provides services or an environment that would facilitate this goal is highly questionable), yet it differs from the goal of creating a safe and secure prison in that it assumes something about the nature of the prisoner him/herself (which is distinct from suppositions about the nature of the prison itself). Thus, the justification for banning the second category of items rests on moral and political assumptions about the nature of prisoners as a class of people who need ‘rehabilitating’ by the state.

It is also important to note that another (perhaps obvious) assumption underlying the justifications for censorship is the idea that words and images have the power to influence people’s behavior. Though it can certainly be argued that this notion is commonplace and could be applied to anyone, it is crucial to note that, embedded in the assumption about the influence of books and other printed material on prisoners is the idea that prisoners as a group or class of people are more susceptible to being influenced to commit acts of violence than non-incarcerated people, even though the vast majority (92 percent) of federal prisoners and nearly half (47 percent) of state prisoners in the U.S. are serving sentences for nonviolent offenses (Carson and Sabol 2012:10). As Jane, a prison librarian in the Midwest, stated:

…[T]hese guys could read something and totally take it out of context and take that information, distort it,

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15 Arguably, the prison context does create an environment in which individuals are more likely to commit acts of violence. However, this kind of violence—a response to one’s environment—does not seem to be the idea underlying the justifications provided by prison staff for censoring specific types of materials. Rather, the justifications seem primarily to rest on notions of what kind of people prisoners are independent of their environment.
This statement illustrates the way that ‘prisoners’ are often considered an undifferentiated mass (the criminalized Other) set apart from the “average person” and thus, subject to a different kind of treatment than would be acceptable for those who are “included” in society (Bauman 2000).

While the two broad categories created here provide a useful conceptual tool, some of the most frequently censored items are those containing nudity or sexually explicit material, and the justifications for banning these items include ones based on notions of how to ensure the safety and security of inmates and staff in an expressly defined space, as well as ones grounded in ideological assumptions about incarcerated people and their sexualities. The frequency and contentiousness of censoring sexual materials, and the diverse array of justifications given for doing so, are profoundly important both practically and theoretically. Therefore, I will consider sexual materials in a separate section, following discussions of the aforementioned conceptual categories. In these discussions, I will outline the types of materials most frequently banned within each broad category and provide examples of specific incidents of censorship that typify the occurrences reported by librarians, meanwhile addressing the various justifications associated with each category.

THREATS TO THE SAFETY AND SECURITY OF THE INSTITUTION

When asked how prison authorities justify censorship, the majority of the interviewees said the primary concern that authorities cite is the ‘safety and security of the institution’. For example, when asked how the administration legitimates censorship in her prison, Emma, a librarian in the
Northeast, stated:

I’d say it’s mostly related to the running of the institution. They do not want to incite violence. They don’t want to see violence glorified or people to read about violence being glorified because then it will incite behavior in the inmates that, you know, could lead to disruptions.

Within the broad category of items deemed a threat to the safety and security of the institution, I have created several subcategories defined by the type of threat the materials potentially pose to the institution. First, and most frequently censored, are those materials that are banned because they purportedly have the potential to incite prisoners to enact some type of violence, whether directed at fellow prisoners or staff members. Second, authorities ban certain items they believe could aid prisoners in escape attempts. And finally, other materials are censored because they contain information allegedly relating to activities that are illegal or illicit (and presumed to be dangerous) in prisons, such as tattooing, gambling, and making or consuming intoxicants.

**Materials That Could Promote Violence**

The violence that occurs in prisons (perpetuated by both staff and inmates) is serious, damaging, and at times even lethal. Levan (2012:1-2), in her comprehensive study of prison violence, shows that “victims who experience both physical and sexual violence while incarcerated report personal damages, such as injuries, suicidal tendencies, persistent nightmares, anger and contraction of sexually transmitted diseases.” She argues that the “prison environment is one that creates feelings of fear (of violence), humiliation (through routinized activities, such

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16 In addition the categories discussed here, many prisons also ban hardcover books (regardless of subject matter), which can be used as vessels for contraband (e.g., holing out a compartment to smuggle tobacco, drugs, weapons, etc.) (Bouchard and Winnicki 2000). The Supreme Court has ruled that the prohibition of hardcover books is constitutional, so long as paperbacks are available in their stead (Boston and Manville 2010:204).
as strip searches or a lack of privacy), guilt (or feelings of family abandonment), and helplessness (by being held captive),” and people who are violently victimized in prisons have a high risk of experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), both while they are incarcerated and after they are released (Levan 2012:68). Although rates of violence traditionally have been understood to be significantly higher in men’s than women’s prisons, recent research has shown that, not only are incarcerated women exposed to physical violence more often than previously thought, but also, women’s victimization may take forms other than physical violence, such as coercive victimization (Wolff, Blitz, Shi, Siegel, and Bachman 2007).

Prison authorities claim that they aim to control violence through censorship, yet they seem either to fail to recognize or explicitly deny that the very nature of the prison as a particular kind of total institution—one in which prison staff regularly exercise power over subordinate inmates, who lack autonomy and suffer assaults to their dignity and security (at the hands of both staff and other inmates) on a regular basis (Crewe 2011a; Goffman 1961a; Sykes [1958] 2007)—actually promotes violence. In his research on the radicalization of Muslim prisoners, Hamm (2009:682) argues that the type of radicalization that leads to violence is often the result of prison conditions rather than recruitment by external organizations like al-Qaeda; he states that “…the root causes of radicalization—overcrowded maximum security prisons with few rehabilitation programs and a shortage of chaplains to provide religious guidance to spiritual searchers—are ignored.” Though he focuses on a particular kind of violence perpetuated by ‘radicalized’ Muslim prisoners against staff or other inmates, his argument that certain conditions are prone to produce violence (rather than violence being merely the acts of individuals operating within a vacuum) contrasts with the type of logic used by administrators and staff who censor particular
reading materials. Accordingly, they deny access to information rather than provide an environment that discourages violence.

Various institutions and individuals define a broad array of subject matter as containing the capacity to incite or encourage incarcerated people to commit acts of violence. Prison authorities use this justification to censor materials about such disparate topics as anatomy, psychology, politics, spirituality/religion, and, of course, gangs (or ‘security threat groups’, as they are often referred to by prison staff). Concern about gang violence is used to legitimize the banning of myriad items that directly or allegedly reference gangs or gang symbols, such as urban novels, or magazines and books written in languages other than English or Spanish. (Examples of each of these will be discussed below.)

Many librarians mentioned the banning of books and magazines that contain information about or images of weapons and/or fighting techniques or, as one survey respondent put it, items that are “obvious security risks like guides to martial arts and making weapons.” The way this censorship occurs, or what fits into this category, is, however, inconsistent across institutions. A commonly banned item throughout the country, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* was mentioned repeatedly by librarians as a target for censorship, though in at least one prison, officials differentiate between illustrated and non-illustrated editions of the book. According to one survey respondent:

> Recently, *The Art of War* was restricted by DOC staff. It has been in the libraries and owned by inmates for years before some DOC staff member somewhere saw it and decide it needed to be restricted. The item was restricted for martial art moves in the book. However, there is not pictures in all of the versions of the book, so some versions we can have. Others we cannot.

Concerning images of and information about weapons, Daphne, a Southern librarian, said,
“Certain magazines—*Guns and Ammo* comes to mind—are not allowed at all,” while a survey respondent stated, “Occasionally there are magazine articles depicting weapons or firearms which we have to remove before putting them on the shelf.” Perhaps more bizarrely, another survey respondent wrote about a recently implemented policy concerning the cover art on library books: “I had to pull all these books that had pictures of weapons on them.” Similarly, a recent article on the website for *The Atlantic* discusses how an issue of the magazine was banned at a women’s prison in California because the cover included a photograph of a member of the Taliban holding a gun. According to the letter received by the magazine editor from the prison, the cover art was in “violation of the California Code of Regulations, Section 3134.1 (d, e), which states in part, ‘no warefare [sic] or weaponry’. Your publication contained material on the front cover that contained a picture depicting a male carrying an assault rifle [sic]’” (Goldberg 2012). These examples suggest that, according to some prison administrators and custody staff, merely viewing images of weapons can incite prisoners to commit violence.

Another allegedly dangerous type of visual information that is commonly banned is the kind contained in books about human anatomy. Toni, a Midwestern librarian, said that her institution bans “very detailed medical texts, because prisoners can turn around and make that into books about how and where to stab people,” and a survey respondent claimed that “Gray’s [A]natomy is also mandatory reading for gang members.” So, in the prison context, the knowledge potentially gained from these medical texts is assumed to generate effective killers rather than educated individuals.

Numerous librarians also discussed materials that are banned due to the ideologies expressed by their authors. Most frequently mentioned were items that allegedly promote
racial/ethnic superiority or intolerance, particularly white supremacist works, which are thought to have the potential to increase membership in racial gangs or provoke prisoners to commit hate crimes. A survey respondent explained: “I have denied Inter-library loan requests for white supremacist materials and that causes some tension, but policy backs that decision up.” Similarly, Charlotte, a librarian in the Northeast, explained that someone donated an anti-Islamist text to the library, and she and her coworker “decided not to put it in….It was like a revision of what happened after 9/11, and it was really, really negative against Muslims….We feared it might incite some violence.” However, the TCRP report discussed above found that prisoners in Texas (though denied access to numerous books about civil rights history) are allowed to read such works as Hitler’s Mein Kampf and David Duke’s Jewish Supremacism or My Awakening, all of which clearly and unapologetically advocate racial supremacy and intolerance (TCRP 2011).

The majority of librarians claimed that their institutions officially forbid the banning of religious or spiritual materials based on constitutional grounds. However, a fear of radicalization (at the time relating to Islam) was the impetus behind the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Standardized Chapel Library Project discussed earlier. This fear, it turns out, was unfounded and based on reactionary attitudes. Hamm (2009:681) states that, in their assessment of over 2000 correctional facilities in the U.S., “the FBI could find no pattern of terrorist recruitment whatsoever…because terrorist recruitment is a problem so atypical of everyday prison life that it defies prediction.” Nevertheless, these reactionary policies affected prison staff and inmates around the country. Oscar, a librarian in the Midwest, explained the way the BOP’s attempt to restrict religious materials affected him:

Well, all of the sudden I had the administration rushing up to me and our chaplain, because our chaplain
had her own religious library, but she actually supervised it, checking in and checking out. They told her to get rid of it and to dump all of the books onto me….And there wasn’t anything in it that was inflammatory anyway.

The BOP was ultimately unsuccessful in its attempt to limit the number of admissible religious texts, and the Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled in favor of prisoners’ rights to religious freedoms, which are protected under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, both of which “protect persons against ‘substantial burdens’ on their religious practice” (Boston and Manville 2010:201). However, some librarians said that, in practice, overzealous administrators or custody staff at times threaten these rights. For example, a survey respondent stated that “there have been the occasional times [when] one of the prisons submits a censorship request for a religious book, for Wicca, Islam, Witchcraft, and I have reminded them [that] all of those are approved religions in the Department.” In fact, several librarians mentioned Wiccan texts or items relating to magic as highly contested in their institutions. Herman, a Western librarian, recalled a time when “one of the places [a state prison] said, ‘Oh no, you can’t have that.’ It was on, I think, Wiccan….We took care of the problem by giving most of our religious texts to the chapel.” A survey respondent said staff “censored a book that showed how to cast spells/hexes,” while another one reported that a staff member had removed a “Ouija board…because of the ill effects on prison morale.” Ironically, the justifications for banning these items seem to rest simultaneously on the notion that some of these are not ‘legitimate religions’ and the idea that knowledge of the practices associated with these spiritual traditions can actually be utilized in some effective and maleficent way.

Certain administrators and staff also fear that prisoners will read books that teach them
how to psychologically influence others, which could ultimately disrupt the prison in a number of ways, whether by increasing gang activity or manipulating staff. Thus, they ban books such as Robert Greene’s “self-help” manuals, which are incredibly popular among inmates and provide guidelines for committing ‘psychological warfare’ and obtaining the ‘keys to power’. Two of his books, *The 48 Laws of Power* and *The 33 Strategies of War*, were commonly mentioned, along with Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* and *The Prince* by Machiavelli, as being officially or unofficially banned in prisons throughout the country. A survey respondent noted: “Robert Greene’s book ‘48 Laws of Power’ was challenged by our security officer. Our Warden went so far as to convince the AG’s [Attorney General] office that ALL Greene’s books should (& have been) banned in our facility.” Several librarians said these books had been challenged by custody staff or administrators but later deemed permissible by a publications review committee. Margaret, a librarian in the West, explained that her facility does not ban Greene’s books, but they are on reserve status in the library:

> Everybody thinks they’re going to come in and read it and suddenly be able to control everybody. A lot of it is common sense, but if that’s what you want to school yourself in….They can use it for sales too….Actually, I have *48 Laws of Power* sitting on my desk. “Law 13: When asking for help, appeal to people’s self-interest, never to their mercy or gratitude. Judgment: if you need to turn to an ally for help, do not bother to remind him of your past assistance in good deeds. He will find a way to ignore you. Instead, uncover something in your request or in your alliance with him that will benefit him and emphasize that out of all proportion. He will respond enthusiastically when he sees something to be gained for himself.” That kind of stuff.

This type of ‘psychological’ information (whether or not it is scientifically accurate) is deemed a threat when given to inmates, particularly those who are involved in gangs.

Though gang membership varies greatly by institution, one study estimates that about one-fourth of all prisoners belong to some sort of gang (Knox 2005). Apprehension about gang
violence within the prison prompts staff to ban assorted types of materials they believe might allude to, depict, glamorize, or provide useful knowledge for gangs. Books that feature true stories about gangs and biographies of gang members are frequently censored. Several librarians mentioned a book called *The Black Hand*, which is the biography of Rene Enriquez, a former member of the Mexican Mafia (aka La Familia Mexicana), which operates both inside and outside of prisons. Jennifer, a Western librarian, said she received orders from the DOC’s Central Office about this book: “*The Black Hand*, for instance, that’s a book about gangs, and so they sent us down an e-mail alert that says, ‘This book is barred from any facility libraries. Make sure you do a search and determine if you have it and please destroy it. And don’t allow it in.’”

Authorities in some institutions also ban any items that purportedly contain depictions of gang signs. For example, a surveyed librarian reported that she had to remove a “biography of Tupac Shakur that was not allowed because of a gang sign in it.” Alexander, a Midwestern librarian, said he is required to send each issue of his magazine subscriptions to the mailroom custody staff for approval, and he has seen “these kinds of trends” in censorship, one of which recently focused on “so-called gang signs.” He felt that custody staff had vaguely defined notions of what constitutes a gang sign and often made decisions about an issue’s admissibility based on racial prejudice: “I always used to say to the mailroom people, ‘Well, if it’s a white guy, he’s waving to you. If it’s a black guy, it’s a gang sign.’”

A striking example of the inconsistency with which rules about references to gangs and gang signs are interpreted and applied comes from two librarians who separately mentioned the same issue of a magazine. A survey respondent said custody officers at her institution denied a copy of *Rolling Stone* “due to the cover, which was the rapper Little [sic] Wayne. He is known to
be gang affiliated. His body was full of tattoos which had references to gang activity.” In contrast, Agatha, a librarian in the South, said the very same issue of *Rolling Stone* was admitted in her facility: “A few months back a *Rolling Stone* [that] featured the rapper, Lil Wayne, on the cover—pants down to his pubic line, chest and torso covered with gang-related tattoos even I, gray-haired and pushing sixty, could recognize—got in. You just never know!”

Beyond censoring ‘references to’ gangs, many prison staff and administrators are also concerned with limiting access to information they claim could be used by gang members to communicate with one another in code. This rationale is commonly, though not universally, used to justify banning items that contain images of hieroglyphs and books written in a foreign language or about sign language. Herman said the DOC bans materials containing possible “codes,” so several librarians in his state got together and created a list, which they sent to all librarians statewide, containing “examples of what you may want to watch out for with certain sign language or hieroglyph-type writing systems.” In a similar vein, Anna stated that she received some “Mayan spiritual books,” which she was told to restrict, since “inside these books are all these symbols of different Mayan symbols for words and animals and things….We’re talking gang issues.” In other states, inmates have successfully challenged this kind of restriction as a violation of religious freedom. Another incident that blurs the line between religious freedoms and institutional imperatives comes from a survey respondent who wrote: “*Masonic & Occult Symbols Illustrated* was just denied by our treatment director & gang unit. Contained symbols where code could be made for communicating where staff aren’t aware of its meaning.”

The same underlying principle used to ban these visual or written potential “codes” is employed to limit many librarians’ collections to English, and generally also Spanish, books,
magazines, and newspapers. Although some librarians said they do not have any language restrictions, other librarians, such as Alexander, do not have formal, written policies about language restrictions, but they try to avoid acquiring foreign language books. He explained the ambiguity about languages at his institution: “Now, the language—the whole thing becomes—that’s another restricted area. There’s no rules—it’s kind of one of those gray areas.” Similarly, Zora, who works in the West, said that librarians in her institution “just get titles that have been translated so we know that they are not on the Materials Incompatible list.” Still others reported all-out bans on some languages, particularly a number of Asian ones. Administrators and custody staff contend that gang members can learn to speak or create a code from these languages, so as to communicate in a way that custody cannot readily understand. One particularly restrictive prison is the one in which Herman works; he laid out the regulations regarding languages in his library:

We’re not allowed to have German because they train our dogs in German, so that one’s out. We have Italian and French….We can’t have Chinese or Japanese because of the characters. That’s related to gangs. Same as we don’t have anything on Aztec or Mayan hieroglyphs, or Egyptian hieroglyphs. We had a beautiful dictionary and a workbook on Hawaiian, and I did run that through our gang unit and they said, “No, that’s probably not something they should have,” so they kept it.

Some facilities also ban books about sign language. For example, Charlotte, who works in the Northeast, said that one of the:

…[inmate library] clerks at medium [security] said, “We have a guy here who is deaf and we’d like some books on sign language so we can communicate with him.” And then one of the C.O.s apparently said, “Oh, we don’t want them having sign language because then they could be signaling to each other and talking to each other without us knowing.”

17 The same types of books are sometimes banned because they are thought to provide images for tattoos (to be discussed later).
Several librarians mentioned that this type of censorship (unlike most other types) is correlated with the security level of the prison. For example, Alexander stated that “[s]ign language has been an issue at some places….I think it’s less of an issue in the lower-level prisons. And again, I think it depends a lot on the Warden,” and Maya, who works in a facility in the West, said, “We have an American Sign Language book here. We are a minimum security, so yes, there are some little gangbangers here, but there is not—we don’t have a lot of violence here…” The threat of gang violence, then, prompts some authorities to ban items that are seemingly innocuous, and, if read in a different context, could be understood as educational or even ‘pro-social’ in that language acquisition both expands the mind and increases employment opportunities.

Information That Could Aid in Escape

By definition, a prison, in its contemporary sense, is place of total confinement, and accordingly, a primary organizational imperative of any prison administration is to impede all escape attempts. In defining a prison as a space that physically and socially incapacitates people who have been convicted of crimes, and in delineating total confinement as a primary goal, administrators and staff can legitimize denying prisoners’ access to certain kinds of information.\textsuperscript{18} While the news media often depict sensational accounts of violent prison escapes, and the film industry produces dramatic (and, interestingly, often heroicized) stories of individuals who flee their jailers, incidences of escape are actually quite rare in the U.S. In fact, Culp (2005) estimates that merely 1.4 percent of the correctional population escapes each year,

\textsuperscript{18} Work-release prisons are an obvious exception to this rule, and thus, it is highly unlikely that these kinds of institutions would censor the materials discussed here.
and those who escape from locked facilities (rather than community programs, where the
majority of escapes occur) rarely use violence to do so. Nevertheless, prison administrators and
staff are vigilant about preventing inmates from accessing any written or pictorial materials that
could potentially aid in escape. The most frequently mentioned items that are banned using the
justification that they have the potential to aid in escape are computer manuals and books about
locksmithing or electrical trade work, which are said to pose a threat to the prison’s security
system, and military or survival guides and local maps, which contain information that could
potentially be used by escaped prisoners to avoid capture or survive in the wilderness.

Though most librarians I spoke with said their libraries contain some books about
computers, others claimed that administrators or custody officers remove or ban computer
instructional manuals for fear that inmates might learn how to access the prison’s internet or
security systems. For example, Thomas, a Midwestern librarian, recalled a recent incident in
which custody staff removed a book “dealing with computer networking issues and stuff like
that…so that the inmates didn’t have that knowledge of how to maybe hack into our network.”
Similarly, Simone, who works in the Northeast, said authorities at her prison do not allow
inmates to access books about the electrical trades because they believe the knowledge acquired
by studying these materials could potentially be used for escape purposes: “They don’t want
those here. They don’t want them messing with the electrical system, so those get turned
away….Like someone today asked about a test for electrician, and I’m like, ‘Well, we don’t have
that and I don’t think they’re going to allow it’.”

While banning computer and electrical manuals aims to thwart attempted escapes,
restricting access to local maps and knowledge of survival skills focuses on limiting the potential
for success and/or survival for someone who has managed to escape the prison. Most librarians said they are not allowed to have local maps in their libraries, since inmates could potentially use the information to plan an escape route or coordinate a pickup location with someone on the outside. Leo, a librarian in the West, explained the prison administration’s policy on local maps and his own stance on the logic behind the ban:

And of course, we don’t have books that have maps of the local area. You can understand that sort of thing. Although, who knows what they do in the desert out here. It’s like, a guy escaped from [a maximum security prison], which is on the coast over here. Well, he’s from [a major urban area]. What’s he going to do in the forest? So he gave himself up. Most of these guys are from…an urban area anyway. They certainly don’t know anything about life in the wild. Well, they survive, but in a different environment altogether.

Likewise, numerous librarians mentioned restrictions on nature or survival manuals, such as the survey respondent who recalled her administration banning “an Army field/survival guide (deemed to be under the ‘escape’ clause),” and another who had recently been told that she could not have a “book that has survival skills. It listed how to make weapons, be stealthy, roll a joint, and travel using landmarks and stars.” Unlike the other categories discussed here, the items that are defined as survival guides and maps are somewhat straightforward and seem to be restricted in most prisons. Somewhat more ambiguous, and certainly less consistently defined, are those items that can be classified as ‘referencing’ or ‘promoting’ illegal or illicit activities.

Reference to Activities That Are Illegal or Illicit in Prison

A wide variety of books and other materials are banned because they reference, or allegedly could be a reference to, specific activities, such as tattooing, gambling, and making intoxicants, that are actually relatively common in prisons but are either illegal or against prison regulations. Included among these items are certain books authored by formerly incarcerated
people who write about their experiences during prison, often with the intent of drawing
attention to the injustices committed against prisoners and/or helping others survive in prison.
For example, Isaac recalled a recent incident in which a book was banned because a former
prisoner:

…wrote rather graphically about his prison activities and some of the bad activities that he did in prison.
And of course his purpose was to get them not to do it, but he was a little too graphic in his explanation of
what he did and how he did it, and the decision of the committee was that it would teach or lead someone to
commit unlawful or not allowed actions within the prison system.

The organizational imperative that provides the justification for censoring these items is the
requirement to enforce the law and the rules of the institution, which are ostensibly created to
maintain order and control. However, prison administrators and staff differ in how they define a
‘reference to’ one of these verboten activities.

Just exactly what constitutes a ‘reference to’, or holds the potential to ‘encourage’,
tattooing, is unclear; prison librarians shared various stories of how staff at their institutions
interpret these terms. For example, some prisons exclude all materials that contain depictions of
Mayan, Aztec, or Celtic images, stating that these could potentially be used as tattoo designs,
while other institutions define these materials as cultural and/or religious texts, and thus, do not
ban them. Similarly, several librarians told me they are not allowed to carry any books written in
Asian languages because of the prohibition against tattooing in prisons. Julia, a librarian in the
South, explained: “[T]hey won’t allow something in that people can use for tattooing. That’s
another major one. Like Japanese language characters.” In contrast, Thomas, who works in a
different Southern prison, explained that, although it is common institutional knowledge that
ethnic or religious motifs and Asian language characters are popular tattoo designs, his prison
does not restrict materials for reasons of tattooing unless they explicitly instruct the reader how to make tattoo equipment or give tattoos: “There is books on Celtic design and stuff like that that can be used for tattoos. But they’re not how-to books. We don’t ban on them unless it’s like how to make a tattoo gun. If it’s just a design, they don’t ban.” This provides merely another example of the inconsistent and arbitrary ways in which policies about censorship play out in the everyday lives of millions of incarcerated people.

A less frequently cited, yet still significant, type of activity that prompts censorship is gambling. There are several types of materials that are banned in some prisons for their potential to ‘encourage’ or ‘facilitate’ gambling among inmates. First, there are those items whose primary subject matter is clearly gambling, such as books about winning in poker or how-to guides about betting on sporting activities. The more ambiguous cases concern items such as sports publications that contain information about winning teams. Julia explained the way employees in her institution rationalized the initial restriction, and later acceptance, of such items:

They [custody staff] kept restricting the college and NFL preview editions that were coming from ESPN and places like that because they said they [inmates] were using it for gambling. When it went to the literature review committee, they overturned it and allowed it. They said there’s no way to restrict them because the same information comes in the newspaper.

Another example relating to gambling comes from Margaret, a Western librarian, who stated that a custody officer at her facility claimed that “a book that talked about probabilities for how to do card games and stuff was illegal because it was promoting gambling” and attempted (unsuccessfully, after much ado) to have it banned. Thus, custody staff interpreted a book that could increase knowledge about and skill in card playing (one of a paucity of recreational activities available in prison) as tool to encourage illicit activity. (Imagine such a reaction from a
staff member at an elder care or mental health facility, where people are similarly confronted with intolerable amounts of idle time and a limited number of activities with which to fill those dragging hours.)

Additionally, many of the librarians mentioned a ban (or attempted ban) on materials related to the Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) role-playing game. Prison administrators and custody staff claim that inmates can use the game as a way to gamble. Harper, who works in the Midwest, explained the way the ban originated in her state: “Apparently, in one or two institutions, inmates really got involved in that game, but then they used it as a kind of way to exchange money or exchange favors and that sort of stuff, and nobody really knew what was going on.” In another Midwestern state, the ban on D&D prompted restrictions on a number of fantasy-related books and magazines. Oscar stated that prison custody staff censored a “fantasy book series by Margaret Weiss19 because it describes dragons, and might promote Dungeons and Dragons.” Since many of the themes in D&D are based on Pagan traditions, prisoners have argued that restricting the materials infringes upon religious freedoms. For example, a survey respondent wrote: “Dungeons & Dragons material denied in general approximately 2 years ago, by the then-deputy Warden. Eventually, certain D&D materials authorized, if related to Wicca religion.”

Another illicit activity that is targeted for censorship is the making of homebrewed alcohol, which some prisoners attempt and/or succeed at doing in their cells, whether for the purpose of recreation or profit. Several librarians mentioned a ban on items that contain

19 Weiss’s books are best-selling “sci-fi/fantasy” genre novels (comparable to J.R.R. Tolkien’s work) that are sold in any mainstream bookstore such as Barnes & Noble or Amazon.
information about the “manufacturing of drugs or alcoholic beverages.” An example of the way one prison administration handled a situation that potentially could have resulted in a lawsuit regarding religious freedom comes from a Midwestern prison, in which Oscar was given orders about how to deal with a book on Wicca that contained a recipe for making alcohol: “…[T]here was one of the Wicca books that all of the librarians were told to go through it and cut out specific pages that had to do with brewing beer.” Thus, the offending recipe was removed, while the bulk of the religious text remained in the library.

Additionally, several librarians said their institutions ban items that contain information about the manufacture of methamphetamines. Barbara explained: “Drugs, oh man, drugs is another thing. I got a book on how awful methamphetamine is. They wouldn’t take it. Even though this was a book saying how this was a terrible drug, they had the recipe in there and how they make it. And so, that was not okay.” Similarly, when asked to recount a recent incident of censorship, one survey respondent described the banning of a bestselling novel: “Vanishing Acts, by Jodi Picoult, has been determined by staff to be incompatible with selection criteria because it includes description for making weapons and meth manufacture,” and another librarian mentioned an incident when a science book was censored: “Chemistry book—inmate had formula to make crystal meth.” Though brewing beer or other forms of alcohol is a relatively simple process that can be done with food and materials contained within the prison, it is less clear how inmates would access the specific and tightly controlled ingredients or the manufacturing equipment necessary to make drugs like methamphetamines in their cells. Items that contain other kinds of information (beyond recipes or instructions for manufacture) about, or reference to, drugs or drug use are also banned in certain institutions under the premise that these
materials could ‘promote’ or ‘encourage’ drug use, an activity labeled ‘counter to the goal of rehabilitation’, which constitutes the second broad category of censored items.

COUNTER TO REHABILITATION

The debate about whether or not prisons provide the kinds of resources or environment to facilitate rehabilitation, even as they define it, was discussed in the previous chapter. In brief, many scholars, prisoners, activists, and even prison staff argue that, not only does the state fail to supply adequate educational, vocational, and other ‘rehabilitative’ programs for inmates, but even when such programs are made available, they are often underfunded, poorly implemented, and ineffectual within the hostile and degrading prison environment (see Cullen et al. 2009; Levan 2012; Sullivan 1998, among others). The notion of rehabilitation also assumes that a certain kind of pathology exists among incarcerated people that the state must work to eradicate. As Sullivan (1998:114) argues, “Reformative ideology is nothing if not linked to power or authority structures. Prisons were meant to change people, ‘to rehabilitate.’ One must break the convict in order to mold his personality.” These critiques of the concept and practice of rehabilitation notwithstanding, it remains an officially stated goal of the prison and is therefore used to justify the censorship of myriad items.

The variability and subjective nature of the definition of what qualifies as ‘counter to rehabilitation’ is even greater than it is for what constitutes a ‘threat to the safety and security of the institution’. Thus, prison administrators and staff use this justification to ban a wide-ranging array of materials, and there is a lack of consistency across institutions. One survey respondent
wrote that the library policy at her facility simply states that “any publication that is inconsistent with rehabilitation goals will not be ordered/purchased.” It is then left up to the individuals who work in the institution to interpret exactly what this policy means and which materials fall into this category. Conversely, Emma stated that her Northeastern institution permits materials that may be banned in other prisons based on the grounds that they could interfere with rehabilitation: “If we were censoring everything solely on the basis of rehabilitating the inmates, oh my god, we would not have half of the stuff we have on our shelves.”

Definitions of rehabilitation may vary widely, but one essential aspect of the notion of rehabilitation is desistance from crime. Thus, prison administrators and staff justify the banning of a plethora of items by drawing upon the idea that certain books or materials could encourage individuals to continue to commit criminal acts after their release. The materials purportedly contain information that has the power to dissuade people from undergoing some sort of transformative or rehabilitative process during incarceration. For instance, Toni, a librarian in the Midwest, stated that prison librarians should beware of material that “condones and advocates criminal activity and behavior, which are not suitable for people in a correctional facility that are working hard on changing their behaviors and accepting what is considered the rules of society.” The most frequently banned items from this category are urban fiction novels, materials about gangs, true crime, or drug use, and to a lesser extent, specific Western serial novels.

*Urban Fiction*

When they spoke about materials being contested because they are deemed ‘counter to
rehabilitation’, librarians most frequently mentioned urban fiction novels. As mentioned in the previous chapter, urban novels (also called ‘street literature’) typically tell the stories of urban African American or, less frequently, Latina/o characters who engage in criminal and/or illicit activities such as selling or using drugs, performing or managing sex work, or committing acts of violence. Almost all of the librarians I interviewed said that urban fiction books are incredibly popular and highly contentious materials that are frequently targeted for censorship, though not always with success. Many prison administrators and staff claim that the genre venerates characters that lead a ‘criminal lifestyle’ and stand in stark contrast to the disciplined, law-abiding citizens that administrators claim they are attempting to produce. For example, Zora, a librarian in the West, said that many of the staff members at her institution, including the Warden, “view it [urban fiction] as glorifying the criminal lifestyle” and have repeatedly attempted to ban books in the genre, though the publications review committee does not always side with the would-be censors. In a related manner, Jane, a Midwestern librarian, espoused the belief (shared by administrators in her institution) that urban fiction is:

…not beneficial to these guys because it just continues that mindset. That’s really not going to help them as far as thinking about what they’re going to do when they leave this institution or what got them here. Because it totally promotes that whole ghetto gangster kind of stuff and living the life with the drugs and pimping…it’s not beneficial to them because that’s why they’re here.

Interestingly, some prison librarians claim that, upon closer reading, many urban novels actually contain a narrative of redemption or at least regret and consequences for one’s actions; rather than glamorize crime and imprisonment, they serve as cautionary tales for those who live

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20 The same books are also banned using the justification that they are too sexually explicit, which will be discussed below.
in high-poverty neighborhoods under specific structural conditions that produce opportunities for engaging in a particular kind of ‘criminal lifestyle’. An illustrative comment about the subjectivity involved in the interpretation of the themes contained in urban fiction comes from Agatha, a Southern librarian, who said she believes members of her administration:

…want to see the prison as a rehabilitative atmosphere, and in their minds, they think reading about these things—urban books concentrate on crime…even though the final message in most urban books is the person goes to jail and “Oh, I shouldn’t have done that.” But certainly the thrust of, particularly the urban books, is the street life itself, and I think they feel that in trying to eradicate that from their prison experience, it will enhance rehabilitation…

Zora shared a sentiment similar to Agatha’s, stating that urban novels “do have good messages in them sometimes.” She described one she recently read in which the main character is a woman who refuses to have sex with a record producer who attempts to “sleep with her so that she would be his major star, and she was like, ‘No. Sorry, I don’t want to do that.’ So that’s a good moral message.” Despite individuals’ varying views on the underlying themes of urban fiction, prison administrators and staff across the nation are attempting to keep this genre out of the hands of incarcerated people, who are disproportionately people of color, and this has implications for the question of whether some attempts at censorship are racially motivated.

It is important to recognize the racialized and classed nature of the ‘criminal lifestyle’ that administrators and staff oppose when they attempt to ban urban fiction. In plainly racial terms, a Southern librarian described urban literature as “garbage….They’re poorly written—mostly black characters, mostly smut, mostly free sex.” Also addressing the connection between race and censorship, albeit from quite a different perspective, Oscar spoke of the DOC’s increasing effort to ban urban fiction in his state, which has almost exclusively targeted books written by African Americans. After being told to remove much of the urban fiction from his collection, he
told his Warden that “by the time you guys get done, I’m not going to have any African American fiction on the shelf, and it looks like it’s racist.” In a similar vein, Alexander, who works in a different Midwestern state, described repeated incidents of what he perceives to be racially motivated attempts at censorship, stating: “There’s a lot of discrimination. Of course, the new thing is the street literature.”

In few instances were materials about subjects such as the Mafia or white-collar criminals censored or mentioned in the context of a criminal lifestyle. Instead, the concern is with a racialized account of street crimes like drug dealing, pimping, and prostitution, which are primarily associated (culturally, even if erroneously) with people of color who live in poor, urban neighborhoods. Agatha mentioned this distinction, stating that “…the argument has been made that these are books about a criminal subclass. What’s the difference between that and Mario Puzo books, which is also about a criminal subclass [the Mafia]?” Thomas, a Midwestern librarian whose institution does not ban urban fiction, made a similar comparison between urban fiction and Western cowboy novels: “Instead of the urban individual having a gun and doing this or that, in the Westerns, it’s a cowboy that’s doing it….That’s the way we approach it, but other institutions say, ‘No, it glorifies the gangster lifestyle. We’re not going to have it.’”

The debate about urban fiction is not contained to prisons; it has created a rift among librarians and educators throughout the country. Stephanie Guerra (2012:386), a young adult author and educator, argues that some people view urban fiction “as a compelling expression of inner-city culture, while others feel that the books glamorize behaviors that are destroying urban communities.” She argues that urban novels can be used to increase literacy and promote critical reading skills among incarcerated youth (this argument can certainly be extended to adults as
well), but a barrier that many teachers and librarians come up against is the censorship of many of these novels in juvenile detention centers and prisons. Although she sees urban fiction as “a unique bridge between literacy and real life…” and “a powerful tool in building literacy,” the use of such novels presents “a challenge when the culture of the student(s) clashes with the dominant culture” (Guerra 2012:388). Thus, hegemonic notions about acceptable norms and behaviors exclude much of the cultural knowledge, and criminalize many of the ways of being, of poor racial/ethnic minorities, who are the authors and subjects of urban fiction.

The books that comprise the genre of urban fiction are not homogeneous; some novels are primarily concerned with storytelling and exciting plot lines, while others take a more political tone and speak literally or metaphorically about racial and class inequality and the injustices suffered by people of color in American society, sometimes implicating the criminal justice system as a perpetrator of injustice. Though the majority of discussions about banning items which promote a particular political, racial/ethnic, or religious ideology dealt with white supremacist literature, Isaac, a librarian in the South, explained that his institution does not allow books from a specific publisher known to distribute Afrocentric and politically ‘radical’ books that he calls “pre-urban fiction.” (Others would simply categorize these as early or classic works of urban fiction.) He stated that these books are written by and about “black rebels” and therefore, are restricted from his facility:

> We’ve banned the use of Holloway House,\(^{21}\) which is a publishing company….They publish basically black authors who hate establishment, and most of the books by Holloway House…are written by authors who want to slam society and hurt society. They quite often picture themselves as the victors over society, and they vent their anger in their books. I cannot allow a book published by Holloway house into my library.

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\(^{21}\) Holloway House has published both classic and pulp African American fiction, as well as nonfiction by, and biographies of, influential African Americans such as Jackie Robinson and Elijah Muhammad. It is now primarily owned by Kensington Publishing.
The most popular authors distributed by Holloway House are Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines. Along with Robert Greene, Goines was the author most frequently mentioned by name as a target for censorship. Goines began his writing career while incarcerated and wrote sixteen novels about ‘street life’ and prison during the early 1970s before being shot and killed while working at his typewriter (Goines [1974] 1997). His novels grapple with a range of morally complex situations faced by characters who live in urban ghettos and engage in activities such as sex work, gambling, and drug sales to earn a living, and who are both perpetrators and victims of multiple forms of violence (often described in unsparring detail). Despite the fact that many of his novels contain the kind of redemption script mentioned above, and even though his works have sold almost 10 million copies, significantly influenced African American popular culture, and received critical acclaim even outside the U.S., they are regularly banned in prisons throughout the country. Many of the characters in street lit, including the work of Goines, are members of gangs, another focus of censorship.

_Gangs_

As discussed above, materials that reference gangs are often banned based on the justification that they might promote gang-related violence inside the prison. Additionally, some institutions justify banning certain items they believe could encourage gang involvement or activity post-release by pointing to gang membership as a marker of one’s failure to rehabilitate. The rationale behind this kind of censorship follows very closely with that used to ban urban fiction—the materials will encourage people to live a particular type of ‘lifestyle’ that is defined
by engagement in specific antisocial and criminal activities. Combining both of the primary types of justification, Emily, a Southern librarian, said, “…[T]he gang stuff we try to stay away from simply because there are gang members in here, so we don’t want any type of communication or any type of reinforcement of their old habits.” As Jane, a Midwestern librarian, commented, material about gangs “really promotes this whole, you know, gangster lifestyle, which most of them really don’t need to believe that that’s a good thing.” Another librarian, Toni, who works in the Midwest, described what she perceives as heightened censorship of gang-related materials due to concern among administrators about the ways in which gang members are able to organize their activities in ways that permeate the prison walls, and thus, increase opportunities for continued gang involvement after an inmate’s release:

Gangs are more formally organized than what they used to be because of the methods of communication: cell phones, e-mails, and all those kinds of things allow gangs—I think there’s a bigger connection between prison gangs and street gangs than what there was….We’ve also seen such an increase in the popular culture of acceptable gang related materials, cultures, you know, the increase, it’s become much more mainstream for some of this kind of stuff, and [it is] copied.

This same sort of justification—based on an item’s potential to encourage criminality—is sometimes used to ban materials that describe the use of illicit drugs, another activity which many staff members and administrators believe conflicts with proper rehabilitation.

Drug Use

Because American policies criminalize the use of specific drugs, rather than treat drug use as a personal choice and drug misuse as a public health issue, as many other countries do, our prisons and jails are filled with recreational drug users, those who misuse or are addicted to intoxicants, as well as individuals who distribute illegal drugs (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009).
For those who do suffer from addiction or the problems that result from misuse, treatment programs inside prisons are often difficult to access and ineffective when they are accessed (Harrison 2001). Most drug treatment programs and self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous (common in prisons) equate total sobriety with ‘recovery’, being devoid of nuanced understandings of substance use (Bancroft 2009). Many prison administrators and staff hold a similarly myopic view, and thus, fail to understand the subtleties and variations in the processes of ‘recovery’ or healing for people who misuse or are affected by others’ misuse of intoxicants. Librarians described incidents in which books about drug use, regardless of the message they promote about drugs, were censored. For example, Agatha talked about the restricted list that her state has recently revised due to a lawsuit. She said that numerous books such as Pill Head, an autobiographical account of addiction and recovery, “appeared on there [the disapproved reading list] after it went above the person who originally banned it at the prison to the committee as a whole. Recovery books started appearing on there because they mentioned drug use.” Similarly, Jane, a Midwestern librarian, said that her order of Nikki Sixx’s book, The Heroin Diaries, which describes his year-long battle with, and eventual recovery from, drug addiction during his time in the 80s rock band, Motley Crue, was denied by the administration. She explained what she believed to be the reasoning behind the ban: “I think that toward the end of the book he kind of comes to terms [with addiction], but throughout it, it’s like he’s so into the drugs that it just wouldn’t be sending the guys a positive message. There are so many of them that have issues with drugs and alcohol.” The same book was mentioned by a survey respondent who reported that it was also banned at her facility, and another survey respondent recalled a recent incident of censorship where “senior security personnel” refused an
issue of *Rolling Stone* that “contained [an] article on [the] Northern California marijuana industry,” which “allegedly promoted drug use.” Thus, the idea that continued use of substances (whether legal or illegal) evinces the failure of rehabilitation provides justification for censorship. A similar justification is used to ban true crime books, which are said to provide ideas for or glamorize criminal activities and thus, impede rehabilitation.

**True Crime**

Assumptions about the negative effects that literature can have on incarcerated individuals are also used to justify banning the true crime genre in many prisons. These books, often written by journalists or fiction authors, contain reports and descriptions of (often brutal and/or sensational) crimes that have actually occurred, and some prison authorities and staff believe that prisoners should not have access to such materials, which they claim can glamorize violence or provide ideas about how to commit crimes in the future. As discussed earlier, the infamous case of Steven Hayes, who allegedly checked out Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* from a prison library before murdering a family, prompted a Senator to move to ban all true crime books from Connecticut prisons (Goldberg 2010). Though banning a genre wholesale is constitutionally questionable, many of the surveyed and interviewed librarians mentioned this type of censorship of true crime books. Two librarians made strikingly similar comments about their institutions’ censorship of true crime books. Anna, a Western librarian, stated:

…[W]e were told probably five or six years ago that we weren’t allowed to…have a true crime section and we couldn’t have any books that had pictures of corpses in it. So, we had to eliminate lots and lots of books…even Patricia Cornwell’s *Portrait of a Serial Killer*, her Jack the Ripper book. In the center [of the book], there are two sections of pictures—the pictures from the Jack the Ripper murders. We had to remove those because of those pictures even though everybody has seen them on TV since they were old enough to watch a TV.
Similarly, Oscar said, “They’ve been censoring true crime books like *In Cold Blood* and things like that, or even Jack the Ripper type stuff….What’s the difference between watching that on a TV show?” He went on to share his perception of the administration’s rationale for the ban: “I think they think that somebody is going to learn how to commit another crime by reading these books, or learn how to get away with crime. Or, ‘Well, I won’t make that mistake when I kill the next person’, or something like that.” The reasoning here is that true crime books, while incredibly popular and sold in mainstream bookshops throughout the world, have a different kind of influence on incarcerated people (many of whom are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes) than on the general public.

*Western Series*

Western novels are censored less frequently than the genres mentioned above, but some institutions do ban specific serial Westerns on the grounds that they promote an ‘outlaw lifestyle’ and glamorize acts of physical and sexual violence, which inmates will potentially emulate in the future. An example of an institution that bans specific Westerns comes from Herman, who works the West. He said that “Longarm and Lone Star Westerns” (serial novels that are incredibly popular among inmates) are restricted at his facility because an administrator successfully argued that they promote a type of ‘mindset’ that runs counter to the goal of rehabilitation:

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22 These particular Western series could be compared to some urban fiction, in that they tend to center on a male antihero who is a hypermasculine misogynist living ‘outside the law’. However, not all Western or urban fiction novels celebrate these kinds of characters.
One of my directors…read one of them and she said she felt totally dirty when she finished it. In fact, she didn’t even finish it. One person in there raped a lady and killed a couple of people….And he was the hero. So, do we really want this to be the type of thing—you know, kind of, in a sense glorifying this type of thing—if we want to change them and get them to where when they get out of here they are going to hopefully have changed somewhat and not come back?

Likewise, a survey respondent stated that “The Lone Star series of books” was banned because several female staff members “felt that the brutalization and exploitation of women was a common theme. We decided we did not want to give the impression that mistreating women was acceptable or condoned. This series and similar series were pulled from the shelves.” Though these particular items evidently contain depictions of sexual violence committed against women, these are not the only kinds of materials that are banned for their sexual content. In fact, images and texts containing nudity and/or renderings of sexual encounters of various kinds are some of the most regularly censored items in prisons, and they are banned for various reasons that will be examined in the following section.

SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIALS

Rules and regulations about sexually explicit materials vary widely, and the Courts’ decisions on the topic are also inconsistent. *Thornburgh* permits “censorship of ’sexually explicit’ material that might threaten security, order, or discipline or facilitate criminal activity,” and more recent decisions have upheld prison administrators’ rights to ban “material explicitly depicting sexual activity or nudity, as well as some gay-oriented publications;” however, a smaller number of cases have been decided in favor of prisoners when they sued over the censorship of items related to sexuality or nudity (Boston and Manville 2010:200-01). Another ruling, *Amatel v. Reno* (1988), determined that, when an item is censored for sexual content, administrators have
the right to ban it from everyone in the facility and are not required to “make individual
determinations of whether it is safe for particular prisoners…” (Boston and Manville 2010:201).
Unsurprisingly, interpretation and individual discretion play a significant role in what is actually
excluded from each facility. As legal scholar William Collins (2001:28) states, in reference to
court decisions and prison regulations about sexually explicit materials, “An overly vague rule
fails to tell those subject to it or those who enforce it what it actually bans, leading to
inconsistent and arbitrary enforcement.” A recent example of the way this ambiguity affects
policy comes from the state of Connecticut. In a press statement on the DOC’s recent decision to
ban pornographic materials (which had previously been allowed for personal possession), DOC
spokesperson Brian Garnett claimed that one of the motivations for the ban was “…a never-
ending problem with definitions of what you were trying to ban and keeping up with what was
out there” (Eaton-Robb 2011).

State DOCs differ in their rules about whether or not prisoners are allowed to access
pornography (and, predictably, the definitions of what constitutes ‘pornography’ also vary). In
some states, inmates are allowed to order their own subscriptions to ‘soft-core’ pornographic
magazines like Playboy or Penthouse, which generally feature images of nude or semi-nude
women displayed in sexually provocative poses but do not include depictions of sexual
intercourse, autoerotic touching, or penetration. In other states or institutions, all ‘pornographic’
materials are banned. Several librarians reported that, although there may be official policies in
place about what types of nudity or sexual materials are permitted in and excluded from their
institutions, in practice the regulations are left open to interpretation. For example, Harper, a
Midwestern librarian, said “the pornography issue is much less defined. I’ve had security people
that have said, ‘Oh, that’s okay’ when it’s nude pictures or something like that, and I’ve had other people that have said, ‘Oh forget it. They don’t need that.’” Likewise, Barbara, who works in the West, stated:

> Whoever is in the mailroom, I think, has more of a say than anybody. How strict are they going to apply the guidelines? There is no rule—well, there is a rule—the rule is [that] you cannot be touching any genitals…like, there was a [photo of a] lady that was all dressed up in an S&M outfit. It was all about S&M, but she wasn’t touching herself. Good to go!

> Although it may be unusual for any library (whether public, school, or prison) to subscribe to or purchase pornographic magazines, videos, or books, the specific rules and regulations that states and institutions have about pornography and sexually explicit materials in general—the definitions they use and the specifics of what they permit and exclude—affect prison libraries in a number of ways. First, due to the way prison regulations about inmate property are written, some librarians must restrict any image of nude or semi-nude (typically female) bodies, despite the context in which the image occurs (e.g., art books, fashion magazines, etc.). Second, some institutions censor a variety of materials that contain written erotic passages, maintaining that these are ‘sexually explicit materials’, a prohibition that can affect not only traditional erotica but also classic and contemporary works of literature. And finally, certain institutions ban sexual materials because they claim to want to discourage homosexual acts among inmates, therefore distinguishing between items whose subject matter deals primarily with homosexuality versus heterosexuality, banning the former in ways that they do not ban the latter. All of these policies and practices can affect an incredibly wide range of library materials. In order to address the ways in which definitions of and regulations about inmates’ access to pornography and sexually explicit materials affect prison libraries, I will first
discuss the various ways that administrators and staff justify censoring these materials in the prison more broadly. I will then examine some of the ways in which materials that are not traditionally considered pornographic—nudity in visual contexts such as art and written materials containing erotic passages—are affected by these policies in the context of the prison library.

_Banning Pornography and Sexually Explicit Materials_

Several librarians discussed policy changes related to pornography that have recently occurred in their states. For example, Oscar, who has worked as a prison librarian in the Midwest for several decades (and currently works at a women’s facility), described a not uncommon pattern in state policy surrounding sexually explicit materials and commented on how the changes he has seen take place in his state have affected its prison libraries:

Way back in the 70s when I started working there [in a men’s prison], my library had subscriptions to _Playboy, Penthouse_, and even _Hustler_. And I was told by the administration that the inmates needed that….And so, then, all these years later, now you can’t have a magazine that shows even the side of a breast. Like, if there’s a photograph of a woman who’s sleeveless and she’s got her arm up and if you see a side of the breast, that’s censored….So that shows you how our culture has shifted.

Another account comes from Simone, who works in a Northeastern state that has traditionally allowed inmates to possess soft-core pornographic materials. She discussed and read from a communication she had just received from the DOC about their decision to ban sexually explicit materials and their multiple justifications for moving toward a more restrictive environment:

[Inmates] are given one year to dispose of any material currently in their possession and to let the subscriptions expire. They [the DOC] say: “The material is a danger to the safety and security of our institution, to our efforts to rehabilitate the offender population, and it creates a hostile work environment for staff, which is exposed to it on a daily basis.” And it’s defined as “printed material that contains a pictorial depiction of sexual activity or nudity, except where those materials, when taken as a whole, are
The first two reasons given by this DOC—the safety and security of the institution and the goal of rehabilitation—are the primary reasons for banning the wide array of materials discussed above. However, when it comes to banning pornography or sexually explicit materials, a number of other justifications are also provided by institutions around the country, including the third reason presented in the above quote—these materials affect the staff who work in prisons and create a hostile work environment, particularly for women who work in men’s prisons, an argument often framed in terms of women’s right to be free from sexual harassment in the workplace. Additionally, librarians cited the presence of individuals convicted of sex crimes in the prison and the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) as justifications given by the administration and staff for censoring sexually explicit materials. Connecticut DOC spokesperson Garnett used these kinds of justification to explain the Department’s decision to ban pornography: “While it [pornography] is not supposed to be displayed, it is still visible to staff….And secondarily, is the fact that this is contrary to our rehabilitative efforts, particularly when it comes to sex offenders” (Eaton-Robb 2011). These motivations for censoring sexual materials in prisons reflect larger debates about censorship in general. Attitudes favoring censorship of pornography stem both from “conservatives” who want to censor it “because of the detrimental effect it may have on our collective morals and as a way to maintain order in society,” as well as “liberals and feminists,” whose motives to ban these materials stem from a desire to “protect the vulnerable populations harmed by them” (Lambe 2004:280-81).

Sexual abuse, rape, and the Prison Rape Elimination Act
Many prison administrators and staff refer to incidences of rape and sexual assault, as well as the implementation of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) of 2003, as justifications for restricting inmates’ access to sexual materials. Anna said that her institution recently began to ban all nude imagery, and when she asked administrators and custody staff why this was being done, she was given indirect answers and vague comments that it has “something to do with the Prison Rape Elimination Act.” However, she said there seems to be a lack of consistency in opinion on this issue among the staff at her facility: “I’ve heard both sides of the story—if they don’t have access to pornography, they’ll tend to rape people because they have no other outlet, whereas, if they do have access to it, it urges them to rape people.” This quote encapsulates the primary focus of the debates surrounding the censorship of sexually explicit materials in prisons.

The thrust of the argument here is that ‘sexually explicit materials’ have the capacity to excite sexual desire among people who are incarcerated (and consequently, denied the ability to engage in consensual sexual relations), thus increasing the risk of sexual abuse against inmates or staff. Though there is no definitive scientific evidence to prove that this is true, it is nonetheless used as a justification for censorship. In fact, recent research shows that prison administrators who ban all sexual materials, particularly items such as Playboy magazine that depict nudity but not sex acts, could actually be working to increase aggression amongst the prison population. Sadock and Sadock (2007:153) state in Kaplan and Sadock’s Synopsis of Psychiatry: Behavioral Sciences/Clinical Psychiatry:

Recent investigations indicate that the effects of sexual arousal on aggression depend strongly on the erotic materials used to induce such reactions and on the precise nature of the reactions themselves. When the erotica viewed are mild, such as photos of attractive nudes, aggression is reduced. When they are explicit, such as films of couples engaged in various sex acts, aggression is enhanced.
Thus, censoring sexual materials without reference to scientific evidence or a close examination of the kinds of prison conditions that could promote sexual abuse constitutes not only undue restriction, but could also be counterproductive to the goal of eliminating rape and sexual abuse in prisons. It is also crucial to understand, as Pollack (2013:231) notes, that men who commit rape while incarcerated do so “partly as a sexual outlet but also as a means of ensuring their masculinity. In a prison world, being a man is reduced down to the basic elements of power. For some, power is experienced as the power to abuse and enslave another.” Only recently have prison administrators and policymakers recognized sexual abuse in prisons and jails as a legitimate social problem worthy of study and intervention.

PREA was enacted in 1993, and the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission (NPREC) was formed shortly thereafter in order to “study the causes and consequences of sexual abuse in confinement and to develop standards for correctional facilities nationwide that would set in motion a process once considered impossible: the elimination of prison rape” (NPREC 2009:1). Rape and sexual abuse are prevalent in U.S. prisons and jails, and those who are subject to these acts suffer ‘extra-legal punishments’ and violations of their human rights. Although it is impossible to know the true number of incidents of sexual coercion, assault, and rape that occur in prisons and jails, as people are unlikely to report these events due to shame, stigma, and/or fear of retaliation, some recent efforts have been made to study the prevalence of sexual abuse in U.S. prisons and jails. The Bureau of Justice Statistics’ (BJS) National Inmate Survey of 2008-2009 (NIS-2) gathered data from adults incarcerated in federal and state prisons, local jails, and special correctional facilities. The NIS-2 shows that 4.4 percent of people in prison and 3.1 percent of those in jail report having been victimized one or more times by other inmates or
prison staff within the last year (or since admission, if that time was less than one year prior to the survey) (Beck 2012:2). In an effort to gain more accurate data, BJS also conducted the first study of sexual victimization based on reports of former inmates. The National Former Prisoner Survey (NFPS), also conducted in 2008, asked people who had formerly been incarcerated in a state prison about their experiences of sexual abuse, with the hope of eliminating the fear of retaliation for reporting the incident. The NFPS results show that 9.6 percent of formerly incarcerated state prisoners report one or more incidents of sexual victimization during the duration of their imprisonment (either at a jail, prison, or post-release facility); of those who reported victimization, 5.4 percent reported an incident that involved another inmate, while 5.3 percent reported an incident involving prison staff (Beck 2012:1).

These reports, along with the NPREC findings, suggest that rape, sexual assault, and sexual coercion are serious problems that are too often overlooked, encouraged, or even committed by prison staff. Jenness and Smyth (2011:527) argue that prisons have been reluctant to adopt regulations and practices that would work to reduce sexual abuse, partially because of how the state took control of what was initially a grassroots movement to eliminate sexual abuse in prisons:

…PREA was initiated, formulated, and promoted by non-state actors; however, it ultimately took legal shape at the hands of correctional officials who represent the very organizations—detention facilities, including prisons and jails—that the PREA seeks to expose, regulate, and target for systematic reform…

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23 Both the NIS-2 and the NFPS used computer-assisted survey methods so that people could answer questions about their experiences on a computer (rather than in a face-to-face interview), in the hopes of mitigating some of the shame and stigma that can affect willingness to report these often traumatic events.

24 As BJS defines all sexual contact between incarcerated people and prison staff as 'nonconsensual' due to the power imbalance present in the prisoner/staff relationship, incidents where former prisoners said the sexual encounters were consensual are nonetheless counted as sexual abuse.
Zweig and Blackmore (2008:2), in their effort to discover successful strategies for addressing sexual violence in prisons, found that “the unwillingness of agency staff and correctional officers to change their attitudes and behaviors” surrounding sexual abuse is one of the greatest barriers to implementing PREA standards. Additionally, Moster and Jeglic (2009:71) surveyed 60 Wardens at male state prisons and found that the majority (51.8 percent) of Wardens claimed they knew of zero sexual assaults having occurred in their facilities in the previous year, while an addition 23.2 percent said there had only been one incident.

In order to change the culture of acceptance of or apathy about sexual abuse present in many prisons, as well create new policies and procedures that would standardize approaches to sexual abuse across the nation, NPREC outlines 33 recommendations for the prevention, detection and monitoring of, and response to, sexual abuse in prisons and other detention facilities; not one of these recommendations even mentions restricting access to sexually explicit materials (NPREC 2009). However, prison administrators and staff continue to use both the notion that they are protecting inmates and staff from sexual abuse, as well as the idea that they are following PREA standards, as justifications to censor materials with sexual or nude content. Moreover, the debate about sexually explicit materials and sexual abuse becomes altered and magnified when prison officials and staff introduce the issue of sex offenders into the discussion.

**Sex offenders**

One of the most frequently occurring themes in the data relating to sexually explicit materials and pornography is the concept that these items are justifiably banned from all inmates because some individuals in the facility have been convicted of sex crimes. Though the number
of people serving time for a sex offense has increased by approximately eight times in the past three decades, and these individuals now account for roughly 12 percent of the state prison population, the reasons for this increase are complex (Levan 2012:17). First, levels of reporting by victims have increased in the past few decades as activists have worked to destigmatize those who are sexually assaulted. Second, the amount of time served by those committed of sex offenses has lengthened (therefore increasing the number serving a sentence at any given time). And finally, and perhaps most significantly, the definition of what constitutes a ‘sex crime’ has greatly expanded to include not only rape, but also sexual assault (which is broadly defined), statutory rape, public indecency, and a number of online activities (Levan 2012). In other words, someone who commits rape, someone who chats in an online forum with an unknown partner assumed to be under the age of 18, and someone who urinates in public, thus exposing genitalia, can all be considered ‘sex offenders’ under the new, broad legal definition. The idea that ‘sex offenders’ amount to a homogeneous and dangerous category of people gives authorities the moral (and political) grounding to justify restricting inmates’ access to items with sexual content (regardless of the type of crime for which any individual is incarcerated).

When she explained that there is more censorship in prison libraries than in public ones, Virginia, who works in the West, said that “…you have to understand that we have sexual predators, we have child molesters, and for the most part those people never get better. So they [administrators] don’t want to feed into them. So we wouldn’t have anything with female frontal nudity showing breasts and nipples.” This statement implies that ‘sex offenders’ (as a presumably homogenous group) are both pathologically ‘incurable’ and that they are all aroused by adult women’s breasts (rather than any number of other images), neither of which are substantiated by
evidence. People convicted of sex crimes are certainly not uniformly males who are sexually attracted to adult females, and they also have relatively low rates of recidivism. Leon (2011:178) reports that several studies have shown that individuals released after being convicted of a sex offense have a relatively low recidivism rate of approximately 14 percent, and only about five percent of these reconvictions are for another sex crime. She argues that the lack of differentiation among the wide range of activities categorized as ‘sex offenses’ leads to problems not only for those convicted of minor infractions (such as public nudity), but also for victims, since police, lawyers, judges, and juries may be unwilling to charge or convict people of ‘sex crimes’, knowing that “the zero-sum approach to sex crime and punishment means approaching all criminals with maximum punishment in order to prove we are doing right by victims” (Leon 2011:180). When this type of punitive and undifferentiated stance is adopted by prison administrators, it can result in blanket censorship of anything deemed to be sexual in nature. For example, Oscar explained that “most of the censorship here is dominated by sex, anything that has to do with sex, and so when I have challenges [to censorship], their answer is always, ‘Well, you know, it’s because we have sex offenders in prison now’.”

However, several librarians said their institutions, while still subscribing to the monolithic category of ‘sex offender’, do differentiate between those who have been convicted of sex crimes and those who have not, and they have specific policies in place as far as an inmate’s personal items are concerned, though these do not necessarily carry over to the library. For example, Zora, a librarian in the West, stated:

The mailroom is different because you have offenders—like sex offenders, they have what’s called reading restrictions, so they would not be able to say, get a Playboy magazine, but any other offender who doesn’t have a reading restriction would be able to. So they are a lot more personalized in their censorship than we are.
So, unlike in the prisons that use the concept of the ‘sex offender’ (and all that it invokes) to justify an all out ban on sexually explicit materials, inmates in Zora’s institution who have been convicted of sex crimes could theoretically have access to sexual materials or nude images in the library (or through other inmates), since the reading restrictions only apply to materials that are mailed directly to prisoners with sex offense convictions. The same is true for Charlotte’s Northeastern institution; she explained that if “there are books in the library with nudity, anybody could check them out. They get passed around to everybody under the sun. We couldn’t just say, ‘Oh, inmate B can’t check it out.’ …That would be, like, just too cumbersome to try to manage.” This speaks to one of the many complex ways that institutional definitions of and regulations about pornography, sexually explicit materials, and nudity affect the prison library collection. Even where bans on these kinds of materials exist, the various ways in which definitions and rules are interpreted and applied result in contentious situations for prison librarians. While using the presence of individuals who have been convicted of sexual offenses as a justification for censorship alludes to the inherent dangerousness of these people, prison administrators and staff also draw upon less ‘reactive’ notions and employ protectionist and rights-based arguments—particularly the right to be free of sexual harassment in the workplace—as a way to justify banning items containing sexual or nude content.

*Sexual harassment*

Some librarians linked the increase in censorship of sexually explicit materials during the last decade or two to a national trend in the implementation of sexual harassment policies in the
workplace. Here, the justification for banning pornography and other sexual materials is focused less on prisoners’ access to the items than on staff’s exposure to them. As one survey respondent put it, sexually explicit materials are restricted at her facility as a means of “respecting the rights of female staff.” Recalling a time a little over ten years ago when her institution banned pornography, Virginia said that “…a lot of the policies about what is and isn’t offensive in the workplace, when that changed, I think is around the time that that [pornography ban] came into being.” Additionally, although he works in a different Western state that allows inmates to possess soft-core pornography but bans anything showing penetration, Herman said there are some ongoing efforts at his facility to increase the restrictions, since “some of our women staff have their own concerns with the guys getting it [soft-core pornography].” In general, he says the administrators “want to try to get their [inmates’] minds out of that [sex] so it will be safe for the women working here.”

This type of censorship can be read as what Garry (1993) calls censorship “from below,” meaning that it originates from a ‘progressive’ (i.e., feminist or human/civil rights) perspective rather than from a traditional, conservative force attempting to repress the relatively powerless. However, Britton (2003:179), in her study of the prison as a gendered organization, found that most of the female custody staff she interviewed actually prefer to work in men’s rather than women’s prisons and “do not define the behavior of male inmates as sexual harassment, as they see dealing with it as part of the job.” Women staff members have found various ways to ‘deal with it’, such as using formal institutional policies to write up the men they catch in the act, or by informally employing techniques such as public ridicule and shaming. Britton (2003:141) asserts that many male administrators and staff “invoke a protectionist model of masculinity, arguing
that there are some things to which women simply should not be exposed.” DOCs that use the language of ‘securing a workplace free of sexual harassment’ as a justification for policies that ban sexually explicit materials, thus evoking notions of gender equality, can also be viewed through the lens of ‘protectionist masculinity’. These policies assume that male, but not female, custody staff can ‘handle’ exposure to pornography and/or masturbation, and so, invoke stereotypical images of weak and fragile women who must be protected. However we interpret the motivations for these policies, the censorship that occurs around sexually explicit materials significantly affects how individuals experience their sexualities while incarcerated.

While claims that images of nude women constitute sexual harassment in the workplace may represent the official views of the DOC, these are situated definitions that fail to take into account the perspective of the individuals who display the images. Goffman (1961b) discusses the way that soldiers hang “pin-ups” on their locker doors, noting that, in the act of doing so, they are engaging in ‘role distance’, which is defined as “behaviors that are seen by someone present as relevant to the actor’s attachment to his particular role and relevant in such a way as to suggest that the actor possibly has some measure of disaffection from, and resistance against, the role” (p. 108). In the case of the soldiers’ pin-ups, these posters “introduce a thin layer of sex between what the men define themselves as and what the institutional scene defines them as. We can see that not only a sexual stimulus is involved but also a moral wedge…” (Goffman 1961b:144). Thus, the soldiers—also members of a total institution—are attempting to assert their humanity and resist the definition of the desexualized being that the organization (the military) attempts to impose upon them. We can quite easily transfer this notion to prisoners, who are similarly (if not even more so) defined by the prison as desexualized beings. Perhaps,
then, the nude photos hanging in prison cells represent more than mere pornographic images aimed to arouse (or harass) those who see them. Instead, they could very well be an attempt to resist the institution’s definition of the ‘inmate’ and assert a competing definition of a fully whole, and therefore sexual, human being.

**Masturbation**

Though institutions vary in the ways they define and regulate inmates’ sexualities, it is not only the hypersexualization of inmates as potential rapists that is used to justify banning sexually explicit materials, but also their simultaneous desexualization, in that individuals who are incarcerated are somehow expected to cease having sexual desires and (at least temporarily) become nonsexual beings. As inmates are often denied the opportunity to engage in consensual sex with another person (for a variety of reasons ranging from heterosexual preferences to institutional regulations prohibiting sexual contact), for many, the only sexual outlet that remains is masturbation. The deprivation of heterosexual sex acts (for heterosexual people) is one of the ‘pains of imprisonment’ denoted by Sykes ([1958] 2007). Hensley (2002:2) argues that “this deprivation forces prisoners to turn to alternative methods of achieving sexual gratification [such as] masturbation, consensual same-sex activity, and coerced same-sex activity.” While prison authorities intentionally deny inmates the opportunity to have sex (with the exception being those rare institutions that allow occasional conjugal visits for long-term, married inmates), they also often have regulations that forbid or restrict masturbation (Levan 2012). Thus, prison authorities exercise their power in ways that attempt to reduce those who are incarcerated to nonsexual (not-fully-human) beings (and, as Hensley points out, these attempts are met with
Although the topic of masturbation is always implicitly lying beneath the surface of discussions of censored sexual materials, several librarians spoke about it in explicit terms. For example, Virginia said that her institution restricts any items that contain nude images from the library because “inmates will rip the pictures out of those books and they’ll mutilate the books, and then they’ll take those things back to their cells and masturbate or whatever.” When asked if masturbation is against the rules at her institution, she said, “Well, technically it is, if custody catches you or if you’re flagrant about it.” Similarly, Barbara told a story about a male custody officer who told her to remove the Longarm Westerns from her library because inmates who read them were “masturbating in the cells.” Agatha, who works in the South, said the individual who makes the restricted reading list at her facility “banned several books where masturbation was mentioned—even though non-public masturbation isn’t against DOC policy.” As discussed above, prison administrators often use the notion of female staff’s exposure to pornography and consequently, masturbation, to justify censorship.

*Gender, sexualities, and homophobia*

All of the librarians with whom I spoke said that, as far as they were aware, DOC regulations about sexually explicit materials are identical for both male and female prisons (of course, this does not account for informal or unofficial censorship practices that happen at the institutional level). The vast majority of librarians talked about censorship of partial nudity (exposed breasts or buttocks, rather than full-frontal nudity) with reference to images of the female body. For example, Oscar, the Midwestern librarian who discussed the ban on any images
depicting even a part of a woman’s breast, said that his DOC focuses its censorship efforts primarily on women’s bodies:

…[T]hey censor the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* because it’ll have the woman—she might be topless with her arms crossed over her breasts….And so, it’s all based on this written policy in which it describes that type of stuff. It’s all an obsession with the female body. There isn’t anything, really, about the male body except for genitalia or buttocks. So…if you are [a] gay [man]…you can have a heyday. You can still look at all the men with no clothes on. Plus, all the women in the women’s prison can look at the men without shirts on too.

These regulations about nudity imply both heteronormative assumptions and stereotypes about heterosexual women’s sexuality (i.e., women’s access to partially nude men’s bodies is unproblematic, as women are assumed not to have sexual desires akin to those of men).

However, there were several exceptions in which librarians spoke about the censoring of partially nude male bodies. One came from Daphne, a librarian in the South, who stated that “a few issues of *Maxim* have been restricted due to nudity (both male and female).” Another incident was raised by Leo, who works in a male facility in the West. When asked if he is allowed to have any nude images in the library collection, he responded: “No. In fact, I tried to order a men’s health magazine and they wouldn’t let me get that because of the guys showing their muscles and stuff like that.”

The restriction of partially nude male bodies at Leo’s men’s prison speaks to another aspect of censorship policies and practices surrounding sexual materials. Some institutions have policies that are geared specifically toward restricting gay and lesbian materials, which are thought to encourage homosexual encounters between inmates. When asked what he thought the administration’s main concerns are regarding censorship, Isaac stated that the ban on sexually explicit items actually constitutes a concern about a litany of possible harmful acts that can result
from (even consensual) sexual encounters among inmates. He said the main concern is to:

…discourage sexual activity. Since my prison is all male and others are all female, we want to play down the kinds of inter-inmate sexual activity—in this case it would be homosexuality. And the excitement of sexual interest sometimes leads inmates to do things they would not normally do on the streets, and then that leads to jealousies. That leads to fights. That leads to murders. That leads to people’s throat being cut, and of course staff gets involved. Sex is the main one.

Isaac’s institution censors a wide array of sexual materials containing images of both women and men, on the grounds that sexual materials may arouse desire among inmates. Alexander, who works in the Midwest, noted that his institution also specifically targets and restricts items with homosexual content. He said that “since we’re a male prison, you can’t have homosexual-type magazines, but women are fair game.” (Based on other librarians’ descriptions of policy, this indicates that women are likely ‘fair game’ in women’s institutions as well.) In fact, the disapproved reading lists from numerous prisons assign ‘homosexuality’ as the reason an item was denied. In a troubling, heterosexist way, these institutions have codified homosexuality as a ‘legitimate’ reason for which an item can be censored. Some prison administrators argue that materials dealing with homosexuality pose a threat to the individual who possesses them, since that person can be targeted for sexual assault (Karle 1980). While we do know that inmates who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual tend to report higher rates of sexual abuse during incarceration (NPREC 2009), there is no definitive evidence that shows a connection between sexual abuse and accessing books or magazines with homosexual content.

It is important to note that, in most cases mentioned by librarians, bans on materials related to homosexuality were administratively driven. However, individual bias and prejudice on the part of staff members, including librarians, also motivate this type of censorship. For instance, a librarian from the West went so far as to end the list of items that are banned in her
facility (which included things like instructions for making bombs and drugs) with “homosexuality or bestiality, anything that promotes anything like that.” She went on to say that she removed “a book on homosexuality” that an inmate had donated to the library. She described the item as: “Just a book, like a novel. It had kind of graphic sexual encounters in the book, and so I didn’t allow that on the shelf.” Whether motivated by homophobia or concern for inmate safety, many prisons around the country can legitimately ban items that contain images of or words describing homosexuality based on the notion that they pose a threat to the safety and security of the institution or prompt individuals to engage in actions prohibited by the rules and regulations (i.e., consensual sex). This justification, along with the other discussed above, affect an array of library materials, particularly books and magazines that include images of art and written materials that contain erotic passages.

Nudity, Sexual Images, and Art

As historical debates about censorship have shown time and again, there is a very fine and movable line between ‘pornography’ and ‘art’, and it is often those who occupy dominant positions in unequal power relations who decide where that line is drawn. An illustration of the way this ambiguity can play out with prison library censorship comes from the institution in which Isaac works. He explained the regulations about sexually explicit materials as they apply to library materials:

What is censored is pictorial media, if you follow what I’m saying…sexual contact, sexual activity, digitized or real. [TA: So if it were, for example, a graphic novel that had drawings of naked women, would that be censored?] Naked in and of itself, maybe not. It is the sexual contact—touching, exploitation, a visual concept of arousal—that is definitely taboo. Nudity is pornography except in the form of art, high art. So we have a generalized view, but where it comes in, is in the grosser nature of exercising someone’s interest into sexual activity. Then, all of a sudden, the brakes come on.
This differentiation between ‘pornography’ and ‘art’ raises questions about who decides what falls into each category, and thus, what is banned and what is accepted. Oscar provides an example of how something that many would consider ‘art’—drawings and paintings by a renowned artist—is banned because the administration defines it as sexually explicit material:

_Heavy Metal_ is another magazine [that is banned]—it’s like a graphic arts magazine that shows a lot of [drawings by] Frank Frazetta, mostly naked women wearing no clothing or very little of it, kind of like, what’s her name in the Star Wars movie? [TA: Princess Leah.] Yeah, it’s that kind of stuff. They censor all that type of stuff.

Similarly, a survey respondent wrote: “Fantasy art books by Julie Bell and Boris Vallejo were pulled from the library.” (The content of these artists’ work is similar to that of Frazetta—drawings or paintings of nude or semi-nude women depicted in fantasy or science fiction settings.) Thus, the rules and regulations about sexually explicit materials in the prison more broadly affect what librarians can have in their collections.

Assorted types of books and magazines, such as those relating to art, science, education, or exercise, contain images (whether photographs or illustrations) of the human body in various states of undress. Because prison regulations about pornography can be interpreted quite literally and applied without attention to the context in which images occur, these types of materials are frequently censored. Jennifer, a librarian in the West, said she “pulled some sketch drawing type books out. And even some of the medical journals, honestly. I mean, it’s iffy. If it actually shows those parts (breasts, genitalia, or buttocks), we’re not allowed to have it in there.”

A remarkably literal and myopic interpretation of a regulation against nude images comes from Anna, who told a story of how she had to remove a history book from her library because it
contained a small photographic image of a Renaissance painting of a nude woman (discussed in the previous chapter). When asked why she thought the administration would ban such an item, she replied:

They [the DOC] just recently, I think it was last year, they banned pornography here. So if I provide a picture of women’s breasts in the library, but they [inmates] can’t get anything like that in the mail, you know, I think that’s where they’re coming from. They’re basically saying, “You are not allowed to have it, and we are going to make sure we don’t provide it accidentally to you.”

In contrast, Margaret’s institution in a different Western state does permit inmates to subscribe to and possess soft-core pornography, and thus, her library policies about depictions of nude bodies are decidedly different from those in Anna’s library. She said the policy in her prison states that “as long as penetration or body fluids aren’t shown, or something on that order, they can have a nude woman. In the library, we can have—mostly that comes through an art type thing, and that’s not a problem.” This question of ‘art vs. pornography’ applies not only to the types of pictorial materials discussed here, but also to the written word; similar debates transpire about the value of erotic literature, which is also censored (in various forms) in some prisons.

Erotica

Erotica may be a genre of literature whose primary purpose is to portray sexual/erotic encounters, but this type of writing can also be embedded within a variety of other genres, from classic works by Chaucer or Nabokov to contemporary urban novels by popular authors like Zane or Sister Souljah. As Collins (2001:26) points out, according to some DOC policies, even the Bible (once the only book prisoners were allowed to read during incarceration) could be censored for its erotic content:
Suppose a book told the story of a man watching a beautiful woman wash herself, who then came next to the man and had sex with him. It is sexual; but is it pornographic? Is it a threat to prison security or inmate rehabilitation? The passage, in fact, comes from the Bible, *Song of Solomon* 7:1-10.

The items that librarians said are most frequently banned because of written sexual content are traditional erotica (similar to the currently popular *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James), urban fiction, and certain cowboy Western series. (As discussed above, urban fiction and Westerns are also banned using the justification that they promote ‘criminal lifestyles’ or violence.) The justification used to ban these items falls along the same lines as that used to censor pictorial materials: the belief that they can—as one survey respondent put it—”whip up some passion or arousal.” This view is interconnected with fears about sexual aggression, consensual homosexual acts, and masturbation.

Most librarians maintain that there are far more visual than written items censored for reasons of sexuality. Still, the bans on written works are not insignificant. Zora, who works in the West, said inmates frequently “want Ann Rice’s erotic series and we just say, ‘Sorry, you can’t have this per the selection criteria’.” Another example of censored erotica comes from Margaret, who works in a different state in the West and believes the administrators in her institution are “more worried about visual [images], not reading so much, but it would depend.” She mentioned some written items that are banned from her library: “I know there’s a couple by Zane….Usually the ones that are on it [the restricted list] are just plain hardcore pornography where there isn’t really a plot and it’s just ‘Yee-haw, let’s get it on!’ They have to have a story line.” Thus, some of the ambiguity about definitions of what constitutes unacceptable erotica

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25 Though best known for her *Vampire Chronicles*, Anne Rice also wrote books of erotica using the penname A. N. Roquelaure.
(i.e., pornography) in the written form seem to center on whether or not a book contains a ‘serious’ plot line.

In prison libraries, however, even books which undoubtedly have literary value are sometimes censored for their sexual content. For example, Oscar said that books “by Eric Jerome Dickey, Sister Souljah, Mary B. Morrison, [and] Sapphire, award winning African-American fiction writers,” were censored due to “graphic sex.” The idea that urban novels contain particularly ‘graphic’ descriptions of sex held across many of the institutions that ban these works. However, this definition of the sex scenes in urban fiction amounts to a racialized, white supremacist understanding of sexuality. For instance, Zora, a librarian in the West, said of urban novels:

Yeah, they’ve got sex in them, but, personally, from what I’ve seen just looking through when I get them in from interlibrary loan, they’re not any worse than other books with sex in them, like any book from the romance section. It’s just people [administrators and staff who ban them] might get a little bit iffy about it because it’s an African-American perspective, when they’re not used to that.

It is not only urban fiction that is censored for its ‘graphic’ sexual content; several librarians spoke about certain Westerns being targeted for their particularly exhilarating erotic scenes.

Librarians repeatedly discussed two specific Western series—Longarm and Lone Star—both for their popularity among inmates and their propensity to elicit restrictive actions among staff and administrators. Mary, a librarian in the West, stated that “there’s a particular series of Western books that have graphic sex in them….They’ll ask for that particular Western, and I’ll say, ‘No, those aren’t allowed.’…[I]t’s called Longarm. [TA: Those are really popular.] Yep, and that’s why—that explicit sex.” Going beyond the notion that items, such as these Westerns, are banned due to their extraordinarily ‘explicit’ sex scenes, it is important to understand that the
various justifications provided for censoring sexual materials and the resultant restriction of certain written and pictorial materials are inextricably linked to governing ideologies that are gendered, racialized, and heteronormative.

CONCLUSION

Materials that are banned from prison libraries generally fall into one of two broad categories, based on the justifications provided for their censorship: either they are deemed to be a threat to the safety and security of the institution, or their content allegedly conflicts with inmates’ rehabilitation. The items most commonly censored using the first justification are materials that could promote violence, such as racist or gang-related texts and images; information that could aid in escape; items that contain information about or references to activities that are illegal or illicit in prison, particularly tattooing, gambling, and making or using alcohol or other drugs; and ‘sexually explicit’ materials. The most frequently censored items in the second category are urban fiction, materials that ‘promote’ gang involvement or drug use, true crime novels, certain cowboy Western series, and (again) ‘sexually explicit’ materials.

The justifications provided to legitimize censorship are tied to the two primary organizational goals of the prison, which are to incapacitate and rehabilitate inmates (in an environment that is relatively safe). Despite the widespread use of the goal of rehabilitation as a way to legitimize censorship, many scholars and prison librarians argue that administrators pay lip service to rehabilitation while failing to provide the resources or the type of environment conducive to such a program. Levan (2012:113) argues that “our current system is not correcting anyone. In fact, it is making individuals, communities and society at large more criminogenic
and violent. Continuing incarceration at the rate we have, with no revisions to how we handle treatment and programming, seems foolish.”

In the case of sexual materials, additional justifications are provided to legitimate censorship, including compliance with PREA standards (which do not actually call for the restriction of sexually explicit materials), the argument that exposure to pornographic materials constitutes sexual harassment for female prison staff, through reference to the prevalence of sex offenders, and employing the conception that sexual materials promote ‘deviant’ sexual behaviors among inmates such as masturbation and consensual homosexual sex. These types of restrictions run counter to what many scholars maintain are effective ways to reduce sexual violence in prisons; Hensley, a prominent scholar of sexual behaviors in prisons, argues that “if you allow for autoerotic behavior, if you allow for conjugal visits, if you allow for protected consensual sex, those things should reduce prison rape” (quoted in Johns 2012).

Despite the high rates of violence and abuse in U.S. prisons, administrators and staff often impose reactionary and restrictive policies and practices, such as the kinds of censorship outlined above, rather than fundamentally reevaluate some of the root causes of physical and sexual violence in prison—namely the various ‘pains of imprisonment’ that individuals must suffer on a daily basis, including assaults to their dignity by staff and other prisoners, physical and ontological insecurity, deprivations of liberty and autonomy, and attempts by prison staff to reduce them to desexualized beings.

The rules and regulations about what can be legitimately censored are vague and open to interpretation, and thus, prison staff and administrators can ban items in ways that promote the dominant ideology of the prison and reinforce hegemonic notions of deviant behavior. The
regulations are often interpreted in ways that are racist, classist, and homophobic. All of this occurs within an institution that establishes and reproduces unequal relations of power and prioritizes ‘penological concerns’ (i.e., the best interest of the administration and staff, as they define it) over constitutional and human rights.
CHAPTER 7: SUPPORT, AMBIVALENCE, AND OPPOSITION AMONG PRISON LIBRARIANS

“Books are dangerous where there is injustice….The authorities say we ‘misuse’ our knowledge if allowed to educate ourselves….The say we use the Britannica encyclopedias to make bombs, guns, acids, etc., etc., from the information they impart. They say Marx lies to us about our condition and makes us immoral and craven and desperate….The books we have we hold almost by force of arms—literally….The only ‘rights’ we have are those left to their ‘discretion’. So we assert our rights any way we can….After us, comes you.”
- Jack Henry Abbot (1982:24-25), from In the Belly of the Beast

The previous chapter dealt primarily with the types of materials that are censored in prisons and how librarians understand the various justifications used to legitimize censorship. As discussed in Chapter 5, the processes of censorship that occur in prison libraries are often informal and dependent upon the actions of individuals, including prison librarians themselves. This chapter will examine the ways in which librarians’ beliefs, values, attitudes, and experiences affect their support of, ambivalence about, and opposition to censorship, and the ways they interact with the people in, and adhere to the policies of, the institution. Before doing so, it will also examine the role of the prison librarian more broadly.

The librarian’s position within the prison hierarchy is often tenuous, as the ‘librarian’ is frequently defined by administrators and custody staff as a ‘civilian’ or ‘outsider’ within the paramilitary organization of the prison (Vogel 2009). The pluralistic nature of organizations and the contestability of hierarchical domination produce tensions among workers who occupy various positions within the hierarchy. Of particular importance to this study are the ways in which librarians, custody staff, and administrators variously adopt, enact, and contest the rules
about censorship in contemporary prison environments. As discussed in the previous chapters, much of the way individuals within the organization interact with rules and regulations, and with one another, is influenced by their ‘interpretive lens’, and attitudes toward and behaviors around censorship rules are often tied to beliefs about the purpose(s) of the library, the prison, and punishment more generally. Thus, we cannot assume that state and institutional policies (in this case, about censorship) are accepted and enforced in the same way by everyone who works in the prison. Vuolo and Kruttschnitt (2008:329) argue that, while penal regimes now generally prioritize “truth-in-sentencing, security and classification, and responsibilization (O’Malley 1992, 1996) over rehabilitation,” microsociological examinations of the prison “find an uneven application of these new principles and practices.” The uneven application is, at least in part, due to the inconsistency of individual actors’ acceptance of and/or compliance with the dominant ideology of the organization (though there are, of course, regional and state-level discrepancies as well). As the librarians who participated in this research tend to favor the goal of rehabilitation over retribution and incapacitation, their interactions with the prison’s dominant ideology and policies are complicated and often difficult.

THE ROLE OF THE PRISON LIBRARIAN

Prison librarians are typically expected to simultaneously fulfill the duties of a public or school librarian (providing information about and access to materials), provide rehabilitation or reentry programs and services (oftentimes with few or no resources from the administration), as well as assist custody staff in maintaining order and discipline within the institution. Clark and MacCreagh (2006:51), each of whom has worked for over a decade as a jail librarian, state in
their manual for providing library services in jails and prisons: “As corrections librarians, our most important role is **gatekeeper to information** in an information-hostile environment.” For librarians who come to the prison from a public or school library, or directly from university, the initial experience can be somewhat confusing or unnerving. Glen Singer (2000:12), a prison librarian in Wisconsin, argues that the role of the prison librarian is full of contradictions, which can produce a sort of cognitive dissonance in many professionally trained librarians, who:

…often come into conflict with security personnel over the management of the library since each maintains a different perception of their respective roles. Secondly, the very nature of the position of prison librarian carries an implicit duality. The librarian is expected to assume security functions, such as monitoring inmates, initiating disciplinary actions, and providing security-oriented policies and procedures to govern the administration and management of the library. Because of these factors, such concepts as the Library Bill of Rights, Intellectual Freedom, and First Amendment freedoms become blurred and subject to pragmatic interpretation.

Thus, the dualistic nature of the prison librarian’s role often produces role conflict, as they must simultaneously play multiple roles (librarian and prison worker) that have contradictory demands (Merton 1957).

Britton (2003:216) argues that “jobs are not generic slots in the organizational hierarchy but instead contain embedded assumptions about who the ideal worker is.” Prison administrators and librarians are likely to have quite different assumptions about who qualifies as the ideal prison librarian. While administrators may prioritize the control function of the library and the necessity for the librarian to assist custody staff in a security capacity, librarians (particularly those who have been trained in the profession of librarianship) emphasize other qualities that constitute the ‘ideal worker’. Wilhelmus (1999:117) argues that the typical administrator wants to hire a “qualified professional librarian who will without question follow the policies of the institution—policies which may be in conflict with professional standards and particularly in
conflict with codes of ethics espoused by professional library associations.” In contrast, Clark and MacCreagh (2006:30) maintain that “a good jail [or prison] librarian needs the mind of an educator, the heart of a social worker, the spine of a Navy SEAL, and the stomach and sense of humor of an eighth grader.” Vogel (2009:193) has her own list of requirements for a good jail/prison librarian: “…[O]ne needs an understanding of the system’s legal and administrative parameters, to possess the skills of a politician, and to have the fortitude to persist under difficult circumstances in alien and undesirable surroundings.” Many of the librarians I spoke with initially had only a vague understanding of where they fit in within the structure of prison or how others perceived them when they began the job, but over time and through interactions, their roles became varyingly defined (Goffman 1961a).

Prison librarians have a wide range of educational and occupational experiences. Some states require that prison librarians hold a Master’s degree in library or information science, while others do not have any defined educational requirements. The majority (64 percent) of survey respondents reported having a Master’s degree, while 18 percent have a Bachelor’s degree, five percent have an Associate’s degree, eight percent have a high school diploma or GED, three percent have a PhD, and three percent have some other type of degree such as a trade certification. Fifty percent of the respondents have either a Master’s in Library Science (MLS) or Master’s in Library and Information Science (MLIS) (the other 14 percent with Master’s degrees held them in various disciplines such as Education, English, and History). However, the librarians who participated in the interviews were more likely to have a Master’s degree in any discipline (81 percent, or 21 people) and also more likely to have an MLS or MLIS (69 percent, or 18 people) than the survey respondents. Four (15 percent) of the interviewees’ highest level of
education is a Bachelor’s degree, and one person’s highest level of education is a high school diploma.

Almost all of the prison librarians I interviewed either transferred to the position of librarian from another position within the prison (these individuals are not professionally trained librarians), or they had received a Master’s degree in library science and worked in public or school libraries prior to working in a prison. Only one librarian, Toni, who works in a Midwestern state, actively chose to seek a position in a prison while she was studying for her Master’s degree in library science. She explained that “lots of people get into the profession without thinking it through,” but “I actually researched and looked at becoming a corrections librarian before I even interviewed and came for a job. So I spent a lot of time thinking about it.” In contrast, Harper, who works in a different state in the Midwest (and has an MLS herself), explained how librarians are appointed by the DOC in her state:

They will just put in anybody in that position. Sometimes it’s a teacher. Sometimes it’s a social worker. Sometimes it’s a teacher’s aide or something like that…and for the most part, those people that they just stick in there, they find this annoying job that they have to add on to their other duties, and so it’s not even what I would consider run like a library. It’s just, “We’ve appointed so-and-so as our librarian.” Then it gets really, really murky….And it all goes back to the Warden. It’s whether the Warden supports the service.

These background differences can affect librarians’ beliefs about what their role should entail; their often complex relationships with coworkers and inmates; the level of satisfaction they get from their work; and their attitudes toward censorship.

Relations with Administrators and Custody Staff

The data revealed the multiple ways that custody staff’s, administrators’, and inmates’ attitudes and behaviors affect prison librarians’ work lives. One recurring theme was the
perception of distrust and lack of respect from custody staff and/or administrators. Other kinds of ‘civilian’ staff who work in prisons, such as mental health professionals and educators, report having the same sort of uneasy relationships with custody staff. Berggren (2009:7), a mental health practitioner in a prison, states: “The people responsible for our safety have the upper hand, and although we have cordial and bantering relations with corrections officers, interactions are fundamentally guarded and careful.” Likewise, Wynne (2001:79), the director of a rehabilitation program at Rikers Island, argues that custody staff views non-custody staff (which would include librarians) with “weary tolerance. From their perspective—and sometimes they’re right—free world teachers, psychologists, are easily manipulated by inmates and fail to follow security measures….Many ‘do-gooders’, as we’re known, see corrections officers as power-hungry oppressors.” Research on front-line custody officers shows that they often feel undervalued and disrespected by administrators in ways comparable to librarians (Britton 2003; Crawley 2001; Owen 1998; Tewksbury and Higgins 2006). However, some custody staff also resent professionals and ‘civilian’ staff who work in rehabilitation/reentry programs, whose roles they see as conflicting with their own, though these attitudes are generally less prevalent among custody staff who are younger, urban, female, black, and/or Latino/a (Britton 2003; Pollack 2013).

An example of the ‘weary tolerance’ described by Berggren comes from Anna, a librarian in the West, who said that “…pretty much here, if you’re not in, you’re not in. If you’re not security, they’re not going to sit down and discuss security issues with you…” Julia, a librarian in the South, described the hostile relationships she has with certain custody officers at her institution who intentionally damage the library: “They just do little things to pick on us. I
believe it happens in most institutions. Honestly, I think it’s officers that barely have a high school degree, and they hate the world, and they hate their jobs, and they hate the inmates.” The kinds of attitudes and behaviors reported by Julia could result from work stress, which has been shown to be significant among prison staff. Tewksbury and Higgins (2006) found that, for prison staff in two prisons in the southern U.S., work stress is positively correlated with three factors: emotional dissonance (a feeling produced by a disconnect between the emotions one actually feels and the ones that are ‘acceptable’ to display in the workplace), role conflict, and ‘task control’ (the level of efficacy and autonomy one has in performing one’s job). Based on their own research and the existing literature, they argue that “the stress of correctional work is not so much a product of interactions with clients [prisoners] as it is a product of working in a bureaucratic, para-military organization” (Tewksbury and Higgins 2006:262).

While perceptions of disrespect, distrust, or even animosity were common among the librarians, several of them discussed the ways in which learning the formal and informal rules of the institution helped them earn respect. Vogel (2009:193) states that, in the “paramilitary, male-dominated culture [of the prison] there are rites of passage for all new employees. While librarians of both genders will be tested simply because they are librarians, a female may have a greater hurdle to overcome.” She goes on to quote Sabo, Kupers and London (2001:8): “Women and prisoners hold the lowest positions in the pecking order [of the prison], with women guards and professionals a notch above prisoners themselves” (quoted in Vogel 2009:193). Demonstrating this notion of initiation and the subordinate position of the librarian, Virginia, who works in the West, explained how she had to earn the trust of others:
You don’t automatically get the respect of either staff or inmates. You have to earn it. So, earning it is based on what you do, and I can safely say that most of the staff and inmates do respect me because I’ve been around for a long time. I know all the rules and regulations, so if I say no, I’ve got something that I can back it up with. Most of the staff trust and respect me that I work with, but if custody is going to make a big fuss, it’s just a lot easier all the way around that you let them have their way. Because if you don’t, they will think of ways to make your life miserable! And, you know, we all have to get along.

Even though she made this statement in a humorous way, she refers to the retribution that she has presumably faced, and fears she might face again, at the hands of custody officers who have disagreed with her. She is keenly aware of the ways that custody staff can exercise power over librarians, who rank very low on the ‘totem pole’ of the organization structure.

For some librarians, supporting custody staff constitutes a vital part of the role they play. Bouchard and Winnicki (2000:49), both prison librarians, claim that all potential prison librarians should be aware that “security is the prime imperative,” and “each specialist must subordinate professional concepts to the umbrella notion of institutional security.” Toni stated:

Custody staff [in my institution] thinks that it’s one of the best ones [libraries] in the state...because we have really good relationships with custody. Officers are usually very helpful in finding materials. I wouldn’t say mine is necessarily typical, but part of that is credibility with staff and talking...carrying through and doing the job and being aware of the custody and security issues as well as the librarianship....I mean, my job is to support custody. And custody and administration know that that’s how I feel and how I operate.

However, other librarians resent the expectation that they should be acting as security staff and would rather not have to ‘police’ the inmates. Oscar, who works in the Midwest, described a change in his role as a librarian in the past few years: “I am having to be more of a cop...than I ever have or needed to before. So there are some dynamic changes, and I think because of that, it makes the administration more paranoid and more controlling.” Oscar attributes the necessity to play the role of a ‘cop’ to both a changing inmate population that is younger and less appreciative of library services and an increasingly repressive administration.
The various ways that administrators exercise power in their relations with librarians can result in feelings of frustration, anger, and resignation among librarians. Framing her position in explicitly hierarchical terms (‘down here’), Anna, a librarian in the West, said that she feels powerless to challenge the actions of the administration when she disagrees with a particular policy or action taken by the administration: “We don’t really have disagreements…because down here at this level none of us make those decisions [about censorship], so it’s not like I can say, ‘Hey, why did you do that?’” Oscar contextualized the distrust of librarians as part of a culture of paranoia and strict authority that has recently grown stronger among prison workers. He believes this culture of distrust is:

…planted into them—you can’t trust inmates, you can’t trust this, you can’t trust that. And then it creeps into the fact that you can’t even trust staff. Like I was telling you, staff can’t even use the internet. Staff can’t do this, staff can’t do that….They put in metal detectors. We never had that [before]. So, they put in metal detectors because they were concerned about [staff] bringing in contraband.

Oscar explained that being treated this way affects his morale, and as tensions mount, although he loves the work he does with inmates, he moves gradually closer to choosing to leave the prison altogether: “So every day I continue to work here, I tell them [administrators and custody staff], is a blessing, so don’t piss me off too much!” And Harper, who also works in the Midwest, said, “My biggest gripe is the administration. The administration really couldn’t care less about library services….I find that that’s not only demeaning, but narrow minded.” She claimed that she has grown so tired of being disrespected and devalued by administrators and custody staff that she is merely “treading water long enough to find a way out.” Thus, some librarians experience significant psychological and emotional stress due to the ways they are treated by administrators and staff.
Though these cases involve tension produced by administrative policies and attitudes, in other cases, librarians reported that, if they have problems with individual staff members, they can go to the administration for help. Alexander, for instance, works in a Western library in which he has suffered repeated attempts by custody officers to disregard policy and steal magazines that belong to the library:

I used to have to do the whole thing [decide if an item is admissible] myself, and the books and magazines would come through me….The biggest problem I had there was to keep them away from staff. They kept disappearing from my office. I had to go to the Warden, finally. It was like selective stealing. If I had 15 pornographic-type things, I’d come in after the weekend, and there would be 12 of them. Cops [custody staff] are doing it. So I had to go to the Warden. He instructed them not to do it anymore and gave me a place that I have the only key to. You see, they don’t like that, but that’s just the way it had to be.

In this case, since Alexander inhabits a subordinate position in relation to custody staff, his attempt to exercise power within this unequal relation was unable to effect change. Thus, he appealed to the Warden, knowing that within the hierarchical structure, custody staff is subordinate to the Warden. In doing so, he convinced the Warden to exercise power in a way that solved the problem of the stolen magazines but also intensified the hostility between him and the custody staff. His comment reflects the complex nature of the interactions and relations that librarians have with staff. Relations with prisoners, for whom they are expected to provide information and (typically) rehabilitation/reentry services, are also multifaceted, yet they tend to be less antagonistic.

*Relations with Inmates*

The majority of the librarians said they generally feel that their relations with inmates are amiable and based on mutual respect. They also believe that the majority of people in prison
appreciate the services provided by librarians. For example, Isaac, who works in the South, described the way he approaches his work and how he perceives his interactions and relationships with the inmates in his facility:

…IIf the librarian approaches this is a wonderful opportunity to invest in the lives of inmates within the confines of the regulations given, and then excel within those confines, it is a wonderful service….And I enjoy every minute of it….Because I’ve seen some of the craziest stuff. I laughed with some of the funniest—I’ve heard stories that I would have never heard anywhere else, and I have inmates now that are willing to kill for me. I don’t want them to do that! But they’re willing to protect me because I have something that they need. I’ve seen them step up and prevent people from getting in my way. Because they don’t want the library affected, because they see it as a plus.

Expanding upon the notion that inmates value the services provided by librarians, Virginia described the types of programs she has established in her library and the high rates of participation among inmates:

I have self-help groups that I sponsor that are facilitated by other inmates….We have all kinds of stuff….Our population on my side runs about 2800 inmates. I’ve had over 1000 participants. So these are very active groups. We’ve had, I think there’s been over 157 groups and 157 facilitators. I use facilitators all the time, some of them paroled. That’s one of the things I’m most proud of, because I didn’t think we could ever do anything like that. It is all volunteer-based, and it happens in the [library] building, except one or two that meet across the hall on Saturdays….But we’ve a tremendous, tremendous success with these.

As discussed in Chapter 4, all of the librarians I interviewed believe that the library should support rehabilitation and reentry programs, and thus, they define the facilitation of these activities and services as part of the role of the prison librarian.

Despite the prevailing sentiment that relations with inmates are far less contentious than relations with administrators and staff, some librarians expressed concern about what they perceive as attempts by prisoners to manipulate them. Jennifer, who also works in the West, said that prisoners “always push the envelope. That’s their job. They test us and we say no, and then they write a complaint and we answer it. It’s the circle of life;” and Toni stated that “…as a
group of people, there are enough of them that are extremely manipulative….Prisoners spend a lot of time trying to undermine the confidence of the staff, and if you can’t stand up to that, then it’s not a very good place to work.” Only a few librarians mentioned feeling unsafe in their work environments. Virginia discussed some of the ways she tries to protect herself from what she perceives as the potential dangers of working in a prison:

I’m very careful about the inmate clerks that I hire, and I have seven. I always go read their files. Believe it or not, the lifers who have come to accept their situation and want to make the best of it usually make the best workers. And I don’t have anybody with what we call an ‘R’ on their jacket, which means a sexual offense, because I just don’t feel comfortable.

Beyond relations defined by manipulation or fear, several librarians said they are occasionally treated with disrespect by inmates (though not nearly as often as they mentioned being treated disrespectfully by custody staff or administrators).

Though he believes he generally has amiable relationships with the majority of the inmates at his facility, Oscar said he has noticed a discouraging change in the way some of the newer and younger prisoners treat him. He believes that the “more that society starts disintegrating,” the more the inmates who arrive at his institution are troubled:

There is a shift in the inmates themselves, though. And that is kind of interesting. For decades, those of us in programs usually got automatic respect from the inmates because we give it back to them. And then I noticed, right around about 2000, for the very first time I would have an inmate, and I would say, “Remember, you’re in the library. You need to be quiet.” [And she would say,] “Well, fuck you! Who the hell are you? You just make up these rules and say that I can’t talk to my friend in the library?!?”…I don’t get the respect that I want to.

The above quotes illustrate the frequently tenuous and demanding position that prison librarians occupy with the organization, as well as the ways in which the library exists as a contested and
ambiguous space, with differently positioned individuals, who have divergent viewpoints, vying to define the role it plays in the prison.

Job Satisfaction

Despite the often hostile work environments described above, many prison librarians choose to stay in this line of work not for the sake of job security (which many do not feel they have) or because they desire substantial salaries and benefits (their pay is moderate, and state benefits are becoming increasingly austere). Rather, many prison librarians remain in a prison (rather than a school or public) library because they find the job personally satisfying and believe they are performing a service that benefits the individuals they interact with inside the prison and has a favorable impact on society. For example, Simone, who works in the Northeast, said: “…[W]hen people leave I often get a note from them saying, ‘You helped make my time here worthwhile. Thank you so much for all you did.’ I get those a lot, and it’s really very rewarding to know that you helped somebody stay sane in this environment.” Similarly, Emily, a Southern librarian, explained the sense of satisfaction her work brings: “If they get out of here and want to sit down and read a book rather than going out running around and causing trouble like they did to get in here, you’ve won. You’ve made a difference….I don’t think in public schools you really get to see that difference, but in here you do.” So, it is the interactions they have with their patrons that makes the job worthwhile despite the difficulties they deal with on a regular basis.

These rewarding experiences, however, happen in the midst of what some librarians see as a daily battle in which they engage in a significant amount of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). For example, Oscar discussed the weariness he feels after having worked in prison
libraries for decades. He attributes the changes he has experienced to the shift in the inmate population discussed above, but even more so to what he considers a more repressive style of prison management that devalues the goals of rehabilitation in favor of punitiveness:

I wouldn’t survive if I didn’t have a sense of humor, basically, is what I say…a sense of humor where I’m able to just shrug it off….Sometimes I just want to dig a moat around the library!…I don’t get any praise from the administration, so the only way I get any type of acknowledgment that I am valued is from the inmates. Since I’m getting that less than I used to, it does start to catch up with me. It’s like, why am I doing this? Nobody cares anymore. And I’m tired of fighting about these types of topics [like censorship]. Why don’t I just retire and sit at home? But I just keep trying I guess. But it is harder than it used to be.

The battles that Oscar fights within the increasingly repressive atmosphere of his institution are oftentimes related to administrators’ and staff’s attempts to censor more and more materials from his library. The next section will explore the ways in which prison librarians, in their contradictory and complex roles, work to support, enforce, reinforce, challenge, and/or resist censorship.

LIBRARIANS AND CENSORSHIP

If censorship constitutes a penal strategy, in that it is an “organized and calculated attempt[s] to shape behaviour in relation to goals” (Hornqvist 2010:15), then librarians have a role to play within this organized form of power. While DOCs, Wardens, and other administrators may define the formal rules and regulations about censorship using rhetorical justifications embedded in notions of safety and the penal philosophy of rehabilitation, librarians and other prison staff do not necessarily abide by or enforce these rules or accept their underlying justifications.

Baunsgaard and Clegg (2012:200) state that:

Within organizations, where many formal channels of communication are oriented towards the dissemination of strategic visions and missions, and the concrete strategies that these legitimate, a great
deal of effort goes into framing official strategies. These are not always effective, of course: if they were they would never occasion that dissent or resistance that ensures that strategies are rarely unproblematic in their reception…

Thus, while penal institutions have a certain ‘dominant ideological mode of rationality’, or an “overwhelming mentality that penetrates an organization or its parts, and provides meaning in a more or less conscious manner to its members so vigorously that social practice is primarily based on it” (Baunsgaard and Clegg 2012:206), not all members of the organization subscribe to this dominant rationality. Within the prison, as with other large, complex organizations, there are “competing interpellations constituting alternative rationalities embedded in professional identities, powers and rationalities that may not necessarily be in alignment with the dominant mode of rationality” (Baunsgaard and Clegg 2012:206). As discussed in Chapter 5, prison staff regularly engages in many types of informal censorship that are motivated by various rationalities and are not officially sanctioned by the administration, and, as we will see below, some librarians challenge and resist censorship policies for various reasons, including the belief that, in their capacity as professional librarians, it is their duty to fight censorship.

The values and professional ethics promoted by the American Library Association (ALA) and those espoused by DOCs could hardly be more dissimilar. Particularly for those who were trained as professional librarians (which includes the majority of the interviewees), this presents a problem of role conflict, in that they must somehow reconcile their professional identities as librarians with the work they do in the prison, an organization that is restrictive and exclusionary by its very nature. An ALA document, *The Universal Right to Free Expression: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*, states that the ALA “rejects censorship in any form. Any action that denies the inalienable human rights of individuals only damages the will to resist
oppression, strengthens the hand of the oppressor, and undermines the cause of justice” (ALA 1991). Going further, it states:

Courageous men and women, in difficult and dangerous circumstances throughout human history, have demonstrated that freedom lives in the human heart and cries out for justice even in the face of threats, enslavement, imprisonment, torture, exile, and death. We draw inspiration from their example. They challenge us to remain steadfast in our most basic professional responsibility to promote and defend the right of free expression. There is no good censorship. Any effort to restrict free expression and the free flow of information aids the oppressor. (ALA 1991)

These are incredibly powerful sentiments expressing lofty and idealistic goals and invoking moral and ethical imperatives that are fundamentally impossible to reconcile with the rules and regulations about censorship adopted by prisons. In recognition of the incompatibility of the professional ethics of librarianship and the laws of the state, the ALA (2010) developed another document, *Prisoners’ Right to Read*, which attempts to create a way for librarians to operate within the confines of the prison/jail system while still upholding the ‘duties’ of the librarian:

Libraries and librarians serving individuals in correctional facilities may be required by federal, state, or local laws; administrative rules of parent agencies; or court decisions to prohibit material that instructs, incites, or advocates criminal action or bodily harm or is a violation of the law. Only those items that present an actual compelling and imminent risk to safety and security should be restricted. Although these limits restrict the range of materials available, the extent of the limitation should be minimized by adherence to the Library Bill of Rights and its Interpretations.

Thus, although this rationalization endows prison librarians with a means to make sense of their situations, we have seen in the previous chapters that, in reality, the librarian seldom has the authority to ensure that censorship is minimized to those items that ‘present and actual compelling and imminent risk to safety and security’. As Bemis (2011:108) states, prison librarians “must walk a fine line. For most of us, it’s a natural inclination to be adamantly opposed to censorship, but in this situation, security trumps all.” The decisions that librarians
make as they ‘walk the line’ are often onerous, as they operate within the (substantial) limitations imposed by a paramilitary organization.

There are a number of ways to think about how librarians make decisions about if, when, and how they will enforce, interpret, disregard, challenge, and/or resist prison rules and regulations about censorship. One such way is to think about them as actors who are members of a bureaucratic organization and accordingly, must *make choices within constraints*. Although they certainly bring with them to the job all sorts of attitudes, values, beliefs, and experiences (and, for those with an MLS, these have presumably been shaped by their professionalization during graduate school, prior work experiences in other library settings, and/or membership in the ALA), their role within the bureaucratic organization comes with specific expectations about job requirements, formal and informal norms, and so on. These are learned through a process of socialization within the organization. The individual must learn to play the role of ‘prison librarian’ (adding it to the numerous roles she already plays), and so, this new role becomes an aspect of her self (though individuals will embrace or resist the role inconsistently). As Goffman (1961a) explained, total institutions attempt to change the people who work there by providing them with an ‘institutional perspective’ through which they can rationalize the ‘otherness’ of the inmate; however, staff members’ actions do not always coincide with their thoughts or feelings about what they *should* be doing.

Existentialist philosophers argue that making choices within constraints is fundamentally what we do every day as human beings. Hardie-Bick and Lippens (2011:2) explain that:

…choice will never be unlimited. Never. In every possible instance of human existence choice will inevitably be restricted: only a limited number of avenues or courses of action will have been contemplated, and deemed possible or desirable by consciousness. But (and this is the point) choice there will be. Always.
So, it is not as if prison librarians are unique in their constrained decision-making; rather, the fact that they must constantly make choices about how to act “under difficult circumstances in alien and undesirable surroundings” (Vogel 2009:193) makes the existentialist notion of choice within constraints an interesting lens through which to view their actions. While this perspective may initially seem incompatible with a Foucauldian definition of power (Foucault himself denounced Sartre, existentialism, and humanism [Hardie-Bick 2011]), what is important to recognize about the way that Foucault, and later, Hornqvist (2010:4), define power is that power relations are “unequal, contentious and unstable,” and therefore, vulnerable to disruptions and resistance from subordinate individuals. Thus, the notion of the ‘freedom’ (to use Sartre’s term) to resist is always already present in every power relation, even as Foucault perceives it.

Librarians must choose if, when, and how to exercise power around censorship. As they occupy a position superordinate to prisoners, but subordinate to custody staff and administrators, these decisions are often made tenuously and have significant effects on how inmates can access information. (Of course, they exercise power around numerous other issues as well, such as whether or not to write up disciplinary reports for prisoners they witness breaking the rules, when and for whom to make exceptions to rules about distributing supplies like photocopies or envelopes, how and under what circumstances to challenge staff’s or administrators’ actions, and so on.) Because of the conflicting roles prison librarians play, they often experience a great deal of ambivalence about censorship policies and practices. Individual librarians feel this ambivalence to a greater or lesser degree, depending partially upon the extent to which they embrace or distance themselves from the role of ‘prison librarian’. Some librarians employ a
number of rationales to ‘excuse’ their actions when they do not align with their beliefs about how they should behave. At times, this results in what Sartre (1956) calls living in ‘bad faith’, which will be discussed below.

**Attitudes toward Censorship**

As a way to conceptualize attitudes toward censorship, I created different types of librarians and categorized interview respondents according to their degree of support for, ambivalence about, or opposition to censorship, based on the views they expressed. The vast majority of interviewees (81 percent) expressed at least some, if not a great deal of, ambivalence about censorship in prisons. Using these three positions—support, ambivalence, and opposition—as a starting point, I created five categories, combining these in ways that emphasize the prominence of one stance over another. The following are the resultant categories and the percentage of librarians who comprise each one: Supportive (12 percent); Mostly ambivalent/slightly more support than opposition (20 percent); Ambivalent/equal amounts of support and opposition (38 percent); Mostly ambivalent/slightly more opposition than support (23 percent); and Opposed (8 percent). Though the sample is small (eighteen women and seven men), it is worth noting that 43 percent of men, as opposed to 28 percent of women, fall into the

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26 I did not include survey respondents in this typology, since the survey did not fully capture enough information to provide a nuanced understanding of each respondent’s stance on censorship. Survey respondents were asked, however, if their attitudes about censorship had changed since they began working in a prison library, and some provided information about their present views on censorship, which will be included, where appropriate, in the discussion of support, ambivalence, and opposition. The survey data will also be used later in the chapter in the discussion of attitude changes.

27 This typology was created inductively and is certainly a simplification of attitudes that were oftentimes complex and contradictory.
‘supportive’ or ‘slightly supportive’ categories, while the ‘opposed’ or ‘slightly opposed’ categories contain 29 percent of the men and 33 percent of women. The remaining 29 percent of men and 44 percent of women are categorized as ‘ambivalent’. Additionally, those with lower levels of education and those without an MLS are more likely fall into the ‘supportive’ and ‘slightly supportive’ categories.

Though the surveys did not allow for a nuanced description of attitudes toward censorship, I asked librarians how often they disagreed with the administrations’ decision to ban materials. Thirteen percent of librarians said ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’, 21 percent chose ‘some of the time’, 42 percent said ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’, and 25 percent reported that the opportunity to disagree ‘hasn’t happened’ while they have been working at the library. As an open-ended question, I also asked if they have ever disagreed with other prison staff about censorship in their prison’s library, and if so, whether or not they said or did anything about it. Of those who responded to the question, 55 percent said they had never disagreed, while 46 percent said they had disagreed. Of those who had disagreed, the vast majority (79 percent) said something to the person they disagreed with on the matter, while 21 percent said nothing. As discussed above, action does not always follow belief. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the way librarians think about censorship and what they do about it.

Below I will consider how librarians understand and enact each of these positions and discuss the motivations and justifications they employ to explain their attitudes and behaviors surrounding censorship. I will also provide examples of specific actions they have taken pertaining to censorship in their libraries. I will then examine the various ways that librarians say
their attitudes about censorship have or have not changed over time as they have worked in a prison library.

SUPPORT FOR CENSORSHIP

According to the prison’s dominant mode of rationality, the prison librarian should perform the duties associated with the job in a way that neither questions the hierarchical order of the organization nor disturbs custody staff’s imperative to maintain ‘order and security’. Staff should prioritize ‘penological interest’ above all else and follow the rules and regulations set forth by the DOC and the Warden, including those pertaining to censorship. As Bouchard (2010), a librarian at a Michigan state prison, writes about censorship: “Corrections decisions are made within the bounds of our policies and procedures and with society’s expectations in mind.” However, even within a total institution, “the subject can always find ways to challenge, oppose, and resist behavior that is both expected and encouraged….Equally, individuals may decide to conform to the dominant expectations surrounding how they should behave and treat others” (Hardie-Bick 2011:103-04). While it is surely the case that some of the librarians who tend to support the censorship that occurs in prisons entered the job with rationalities similar to the dominant mode of rationality, others seem to have adopted an ‘institutional perspective’ and ‘decided to conform’ to the prevailing expectations about what they should do.

The librarians who generally expressed support for censorship in prison libraries explained their views in various, yet similar ways. They most commonly referenced the following justifications for their support of censorship: the dangerousness of prison(ers) and the need to promote the safety and security of the institution; the principle that all institutions require
rules and regulations, and people should accept and follow these rules; the notion that because inmates have been convicted of crimes, curtailing certain rights, including First Amendment rights, is justified as part of their punishment; and the belief that prisoners require rehabilitation and certain materials can impede or undermine this process.

*Safety and Security*

Many of the librarians who expressed support for censorship policies in prison libraries held the belief that prisons are inherently dangerous places and framed their statements in terms of the need to protect both staff and inmates from harm. To them, this dangerousness justifies the censorship of anything they believe could pose a threat to safety and security. Even librarians who are generally ambivalent about censorship in prisons tended to acknowledge the exceptional context of the prison and made a distinction between what they believe should be acceptably censored in prison, as opposed to public, libraries. For example, Virginia, a librarian from the West who generally opposes censorship, stated: “You know, [for] many of us who have ever worked in a public library or a university library…it’s a little bit different [in prison]. We have to be careful about what we do. You need to really stop and think.” Likewise, Jane, who works in the Midwest, expressed a similar sentiment about the role that censorship of certain materials plays in maintaining the safety of staff and inmates: “Well, I think in terms of security for the inmates in the prison, it’s really important because of the whole prison rape situation. And we have female security and female non-security staff in the institution. Those are huge issues as far as protecting vulnerable inmates and protecting staff.”
Among librarians who tend to support censorship, there was some acknowledgment that, while the system may not be perfect, it is better to err on the side of over-censoring than allowing inmates access to specific items. In his study of correctional administrators’ accounts of their work worlds, Stojkovic (1995:78) found that, “[b]y viewing their environment as hostile and difficult, correctional administrators could justify their problems as issues beyond their control. In this way, they cannot be held responsible for their problems.” This concept can be applied to librarians who justify the kinds of censorship that they ultimately know could be considered unconstitutional. For example, Toni, a Midwestern librarian and one of the most ardent supporters of censorship among the interviewees, said the policies are “the best that can be done, and there’s always problems with these kinds of things, but having worked as long with prisoners as I have, [I believe] there are more things that should be restricted that are not, because prisoners…spend a lot of time thinking of criminal things to do.” Despite her disclaimer about the imperfect policies, her definition of the situation as hostile and dangerous trumps concerns about any “problems” that censorship may cause:

Stuff that you wouldn’t think of becomes an issue, is used as a manifesto for gang activity, and if you’re not familiar with the gang activity and have spent time reviewing or talking with people…you might not realize that this is what it’s being used for. And from that aspect, it should be restricted. It shouldn’t be available.

In addition to the justification that censorship improves the safety of the prison, librarians also explained that their support for censorship derived from their beliefs in the fundamental need for institutional rules and/or their attitudes toward higher authorities within the institutional hierarchy.
Need For Rules and Regulations

As workers in a highly structured and hierarchical organization who have an ‘outsider’ status, ambiguously situated in the inevitable power struggle between custody staff and prisoners, librarians’ beliefs about the institution’s purpose, its rules and regulations, as well as about their own place within the order of the institution, affect their views and actions regarding censorship. Though they may not get to fully define their roles within the organization, some librarians intentionally position themselves as allies of custody staff, and thus, are unlikely to challenge administrators or staff about censorship issues. A librarian who exemplifies this attitude is Toni, who said that her job entails “being aware of the custody and security issues as well as the librarianship….I mean, my job is to support custody. And custody and administration know that that’s how I feel and how I operate.” Even if they did not expressly define the librarian’s role in such terms, others showed their support for censorship policies by referring to a more generalized conception of the purpose and value of rules and regulations.

Some librarians conveyed the belief that a prison, as an organization, must have strict and unbending rules in order to properly function. For example, Anna, a Western librarian who is ambivalent about but generally supportive of censorship, stated: “There have to be rules. There has to be a strict code here for people to get along with so many people in one little area. If we don’t provide structure for them, then there’s no need for us to even be here.” Likewise, Isaac, who works in the South and describes himself as a “very loyal person to the system,” said he believes that following rules and understanding the restrictions those rules entail are not only beneficial to the institution, but actually provide a kind of freedom for the worker (a sort of bizarre twist on or misinterpretation of Sartre’s notions of freedom and limitations):
Freedom comes by enjoying your limitations. Freedom…is not the lack of restraint. Freedom is knowing and enjoying fully the restraints that you have with you. When they [inmates] come to me and pressure me for all these things, and I am under restraints, I tell them, “Can’t do that. Nope. Not in my job description. That’s not allowed. But I can do everything within my job description.” The restraints free me from being used and manipulated.

These beliefs affect his actions, in that he rarely questions the decisions of prison authorities; he said that when he receives a notice that a specific item has been placed on the restricted reading list, he will go to the “shelf, pull that book, and destroy it. No questions asked.” In addition to this type of support for censorship, which is motivated by loyalty to a system or a belief in the need for rules, some librarians also justified their support for censorship by drawing upon the notions of deservingness and retribution.

_Punishment Justifies Censorship_

Prison librarians, like any other group of people, disagree about the purpose of imprisonment and what sorts of ‘extra punishments’ are justifiably added to the primary punishment of incarceration (i.e., separation from society). As Agatha, a Southern librarian who is opposed to the vast majority of the censorship she sees in her state, explained, “There are some [librarians] who are as mad as I am about what’s going on, and then there are others who take the attitude of, ‘Well, I don’t want them reading those books. They’re criminals.’ They just have a different perspective.” By using this definition (‘they’ are ‘criminals’) as a way to distance and distinguish incarcerated individuals from everyone else (‘we’ are ‘normal people’), these librarians adopt the institution’s definition of the inmate. According to Goffman (1961a:84):

The interpretive scheme of the total institution automatically begins to operate as soon as the inmate enters, the staff having the notion that entrance is _prima facie_ evidence that one must be the kind of person the
Several librarians expressed a belief in a sort of punitive or retributive justice that allows for the deprivation of certain rights along with the social segregation that prisoners endure. The essence of this belief lies in the age-old notion that once someone has broken the social contract, this person loses her or his status as a full citizen, and therefore, may justifiably be deprived of any number of rights held by others. This attitude about deservingness, which was expressed by several of the librarians, also reflects Bauman’s (2000:207) notion that failure to adhere to social norms results in exclusion; since those who fail to conform are seen as responsible for their own failures, “it is the excluded themselves who are charged with the guilt of their own exclusion” and justifiably punished so that order may be restored. For example, a survey respondent stated: “You give up the freedom to have these things when you put yourself into a prison setting.” (Note the phrase ‘you put yourself’, a notion that ignores the numerous structural factors that influence who ends up in prison and who does not.) Similarly, Anna expressed her attitude about censorship in these terms: “If you don’t like it, don’t come back to prison. I mean, do your time and get out, and then go read whatever book you want or whatever pornography you want. But when you’re here, you’ve got to conduct yourselves in a different manner. And I agree with that.”

Another librarian, Mary, who works in the West and is ambivalent about but somewhat supportive of prison censorship, spoke about prisoners’ rights in terms of what she perceives as the deprivation of choice for inmates. She understands censorship in the context of a prison as
merely a lack of choice rather than a violation of rights, since inmates have been convicted of crimes:

You know, I know there’s freedom of the press and freedom of this and that, but when they’re in jail in general, they don’t decide what they’re going to wear that day. They don’t decide what they’re going to eat that day. So they’re not going to have that leeway [choice of reading material] either.

This attitude—that censorship in prison violates a privilege rather than a right—was shared by a survey respondent who said that inmates “are in the custody of the state and must abide by the rules/laws set up for it. As long as they’re not being denied their civil rights, the State has the responsibility and the ‘right’ to limit access to extracurricular activities including the library…” She described this as “the reality of the situation” and said, “I am very clear about this when an inmate complains to me [about censorship].” Thus, she chooses to adopt and rely upon her ‘institutional perspective’ when interacting with prisoners and chooses to follow the mandates set forth by the institution. Other librarians framed their support for censorship in a less traditionally punitive way, instead claiming that the ‘right’ to censor is grounded in the notion that supporting censorship works toward the ‘good’ of the rehabilitation of the inmate.

Prisoners Need Rehabilitation

The librarians I interviewed espoused a belief in the need for, and value of, rehabilitation for inmates. Though some librarians found much of the censorship that occurs in their libraries unrelated or even counterproductive to meeting the goal of rehabilitation, others used this penal philosophy as a justification for censoring specific types of materials (typically the same kinds of items discussed in the previous chapter under this category of restricted items). As rehabilitation is one of the officially stated goals of the organization, librarians who adopt this perspective
often do so with reference to the organization’s stated goals, demonstrating Goffman’s
(1961a:91) argument that “[t]he management of inmates is typically rationalized in terms of the
ideal aims or functions of the establishment…” For example, when asked about whether or not
she thinks there are fundamental differences in the way prison administrators and prison
librarians view censorship, Toni, who typically supports censorship, said that the “longer prison
librarians or any person works in a facility—our primary goal, whether we are a librarian or a
nurse or a teacher, our primary goal is protection of the public and then rehabilitation of
prisoners under our care.” Likewise, a survey respondent reported: “Our stated goal is to promote
pro-social thinking and empathy on the part of inmates. Some materials go against that goal and
should not be placed in the library.” And Madeline, a librarian in the West who is generally
ambivalent about censorship, expressed concern for inmates’ wellbeing and related this to the
institution’s policies on censorship:

…[W]hen I see their crimes and I know what we’re trying to do to truly correct them—we try to focus on
cognitive restructuring—I see where, why feed them too much of that kind of thing when there’s so much
other good material that’s out there? I want them to be educated. I don’t think they need to do that [read
violent or sexually explicit materials] while they’re in here. They can go out on the street and get that later.
They are not with us usually for very long periods of time. I try to model maybe a little bit more upstanding
kind of behavior as far as selecting more decent material.

In some cases, librarians expressed an attitude, based on a belief in the need for
rehabilitation, that censorship policies should be even more restrictive than they are at the
present time. For example, Maya, a librarian who works in the West and supports censorship,
stated: “I think that they should probably have maybe even a little more restrictions on what they
are allowed to read, but I just think they need to have—be exposed to a lot of positive things and
a lot more self-help. If there is very much sex in a book, then I don’t think they should read it.”
These attitudes reflect a type of paternalism common among prison staff, wherein inmates are essentially reduced to the status of children who do not understand that staff is doing what ‘is best for them’. The librarians who express support for (at least certain kinds of) censorship, then, are choosing to enforce the ‘institutional perspective’; they are unlikely to challenge censorship when it occurs by custody staff or administrators, and, as seen in Chapter 5, sometimes engage in self-censorship. Whereas these librarians justify certain censorship practices through their beliefs in the power and goodness of rehabilitation, far more of the librarians expressed a significant amount of ambivalence about censorship in prisons. Though they generally oppose censorship in principle, they make exceptions—to varying degrees—about its occurrence in the context of the prison.

AMBIVALENCE ABOUT CENSORSHIP

In her study of prison staff, Owen (1988:14) argues that prison work is full of “conflicts and contradictions” that present “ambiguous meanings about the prison;” in order to “make sense of this world, each worker must reconcile these contradictions in a way that allows the worker to get through the workday. The development of these personal perspectives may also contribute to the alienation of the worker.” Though she is concerned primarily with custody staff, the same concept can be applied to prison librarians, who must regularly negotiate ethical dilemmas and manage feelings of powerlessness. One of the ways librarians do this is to practice ‘role distance’, which Goffman (1961a:114) claims is prevalent in “situations where a subordinate must take orders or suggestions and must go along with the situation defined by superordinates.” At times, librarians employ ‘excuses’ or justifications for going along with the status quo despite
believing it is ethically wrong to do so. This can result in what Sartre (1959:89) calls living in ‘bad faith’, which is a sort of “lie to oneself. To be sure the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth.” It is a state of being in which people deny that they have the ability to make choices (which are, of course, always limited) and convince themselves that “their actions were determined by forces beyond their individual control. These states of denial provide psychological props through which people seek to escape the anxieties provoked by their freedom and responsibilities…” (Hardie-Bick and Hadfield 2011:18). In the case of the prison librarians discussed here, these ‘states of denial’ are related to their compliance with prison policies and practices about censorship even when they believe that doing so is ethically wrong.

The librarians who expressed some degree of ambivalence about censorship in prison did so in several ways. First, respondents discussed the conflict they feel as both librarian and prison worker, roles they understand as not wholly compatible. Other ways in which librarians conveyed their ambivalence were by making an exception to their usual anti-censorship stance because of the dangerousness of the prison(ers); through reference to the inconsistency or illogicality of the institutional rules and regulations; and by arguing that providing plentiful noncontroversial material allays the problems caused by the censorship of certain items. Some librarians also feel conflicted about the censorship that occurs in their libraries but act in ways that are complicit with institutional or individual efforts to censor materials due to feelings of powerlessness, resignation, or fear of losing their jobs.

*Role Conflict*
For many of the prison librarians, particularly those who hold degrees in library science, the role of the librarian is defined as a public service provider whose job it is to make information freely available to all. Inherent to this role is an ethical stance against censorship and in favor of freedom of access to information (as seen above in the ALA’s position that there is ‘no good censorship’). However, as individuals who simultaneously inhabit the role of a prison worker who is beholden to the rules and regulations of an institution that practices censorship and severely limits inmates’ access to information in numerous ways, prison librarians experience varying degrees of role conflict. For example, Daphne, who works in the South, spoke of her competing roles: “Although I am a librarian and do not believe in censorship, I realize that the job setting has certain parameters, and I knew that upon being hired.” A similar sentiment was expressed by a survey respondent, who stated that “[i]t is a very challenging job to balance facility security needs and intellectual freedom of the inmates.” And Charlotte, a librarian in the Northeast, wrote so expressively in the survey: “I support the censorship of materials that instruct in the creation of weapons and items of a similar nature, though it pains my librarian heart to type that.” These statements illustrate the ways in which some librarians experience cognitive dissonance that causes them psychological stress; they often employ various justifications and rationales to mitigate the unease they feel due to this role conflict. For instance, Zora, a librarian in the West, spoke about the way she tries to hold onto her role as a librarian while working within the system:

It’s kind of tough because you have to balance being a librarian and not wanting to have any censorship with being in prison and having that being a very restricted, controlled environment. I’ve gotten a lot more creative; where someone would just look at something and be like, “Oh, that’s not allowed,” I have to think of all these reasons why it is allowed.
Thus, she is working within the constraints of the institution in order to find ways to adhere to the regulations but also ensure that others do not interpret and apply the rules in an overly restrictive way.

The ambivalence expressed by librarians was, in some cases, amplified by their perceptions of the prison (or prisoners) as dangerous. Therefore, they define this as an exceptional situation that requires practices they would not normally condone. For example, a survey respondent stated: “Although I am against censorship, I understand the necessity in a correctional setting.” And while she experienced significant role conflict, Simone, who works in the Northeast, deferred to custody staff despite her own beliefs about censorship and the role of the librarian: “Being a librarian, I have issues with censorship, but you have to figure where you are here. I mean, if they [custody] have seen incidences where it causes an issue, then I guess I have to agree with it.” Simone’s simultaneous acknowledgment of the unethical nature of the censorship and denial of her ability to disagree with the dominant mode of rationality (embodied in the custody staff), is an example of living in bad faith. Regardless of librarians’ tenuous acceptance of certain restrictions, however, the perception that rules and regulations about censorship are often applied inconsistently or illogically, or by individuals who do not possess the expertise to adequately make these kinds decisions, produces another kind of ambivalence.

Inconsistent and Illogical Prison Rules

Even among the prison librarians who have found ways to manage the role conflict they experience, some expressed ambivalence about censorship in terms of what they perceive as legitimate versus illegitimate censorship. This distinction typically centers on issues such as
whether or not a formal review process exists to determine an item’s admissibility, how consistently the regulations are applied, and who makes the decisions about restricting materials. Many of the librarians, like Zora, found a way to justify the censorship of certain types of items in prison, but only if it occurred through a formal and rational process. She explained: “I believe in equitable access to information for all. That being said, in a correctional setting, I believe that we should restrict items that violate the selection criteria, but only after thorough review and not on a whim.” Here she draws upon her professional ethical code, as embodied in the ALA’s Prisoners’ Right to Read: librarians must follow existing laws and rules, but they should work to make sure that censorship is kept to a minimum. However, even where there are formal review processes in place, the restrictions that result are not always perceived to be logical or consistent.

Britton (2003:166) asserts that, for most individuals who do “people work” (meaning they serve customers, clients, inmates, etc.), the primary source of frustration is not the rude or unappreciative people they serve, “whose behavior can be understood or at least rationalized as part of the job, but inflexible and illogical work rules, inept colleagues, or incompetent and unsupportive supervisors.” Many of the prison librarians strongly felt this kind of frustration. Anna, a librarian in the West who is bothered by what she believes are illogical new restrictions at her institution, said that she recently “had to pull all the Thomas Harris—Hannibal, Red Dragon, Silence of the Lambs….They [inmates] have had access to those books for 20 years, and now all of a sudden they decided they’re inappropriate?” Similarly, Alexander, who works in the Midwest, said that “[a]s a librarian, I would say that probably twenty percent of what they don’t allow in makes sense, and it’s just part of the system.” Other librarians expressed the concern that censorship is applied in a manner that is inconsistent with the rules and regulations. For
example, a survey respondent wrote: “I see how it is applied arbitrarily by uneducated, non-library-using higher-ups.” So, even if these librarians can accept the institution’s criteria for admissible materials, they do not fully support all of the censorship that occurs, particularly if they believe it is the result of inconsistent or illogical application of those rules, or if they perceive bias or incompetence on the part of those who make decisions about censorship.

Though some librarians have input into the decision-making process about an item’s admissibility, many are excluded from this process entirely. Several of those who do not have a voice in the process expressed frustration about this. Though they may believe that specific items are justifiably restricted from the prison environment, they also feel that, as librarians, they have the expertise to make informed decisions about restrictions based on institutional guidelines. Exclusion from the decision-making process and perceptions of inappropriate applications of the regulations cause some librarians to feel ambivalence about the censorship that occurs in their institutions. For example, Anna, who supports some censorship but believes librarians should have a voice in the matter, said, “It’s ridiculous. Librarians should actually be doing the publications review, not some person that they hired off the street who’s never been in a prison before.” The frustration expressed here speaks to the ways in which a sense of powerlessness or resignation in the face of large, often impersonal and bureaucratic organizations also causes librarians to feel ambivalent about censorship and make choices to passively go along with decisions they believe are unjust.

*Feelings of Powerlessness or Resignation*
Many of the librarians spoke about their subordinate positions within the institution and the various ways they are excluded from the processes of decision-making around censorship. Harper, a librarian in the Midwest, said that if her administration doesn’t “like something that somebody says or does or advocates, they just cut them out of the process.” Some librarians discussed how they theoretically disagree with administrators’ or staff’s censorship of specific materials, yet they either tacitly accept (outwardly, at least) or try to ignore these policies or actions because of feelings of powerlessness, resignation, or fear of losing their jobs, often employing role distance, or acting in bad faith. Prison librarians must constantly negotiate their positions within the organization, and many are also overworked and understaffed. The strain caused by the workplace tension and job insecurity that this situation produces causes some librarians to adopt an attitude of ‘least resistance’, which can translate into inaction or avoidance. For example, Virginia said that custody staff in her institution sometimes bans materials in what she believes to be an arbitrary manner, refusing to offer explanations of their actions. She explained the attitude she has come to adopt toward this kind of censorship: “So, you can’t fight city hall. We just learn—you learn to let it roll off your back like so much water” and “…just kind of live with it.” A similar sense of both an ambivalent acceptance of authority and the futility of resistance comes from Emma. She explained:

If someone in administration says to me, “[Emma], you need to remove this book due to X, Y and Z,” I say, “Okay, will do.” Because I just—we always need to remember, we work in a prison first. We’re librarians second. We would never win the argument, so I would never—I’m not an argumentative, confrontive person, so I would never even go there. Other librarians might. That’s not my style.

Here, Emma draws upon both the institutional perspective that ‘security trumps all’ and the notion of the futility of resistance. In doing so, she justifies her compliance in two different ways
while simultaneously acknowledging that the opportunity to challenge the administration (‘other librarians might’) does, in fact, exist.

These feelings of resignation were accompanied, in some cases, with a fear that speaking up for prisoners or against censorship could lead to retribution on the part of administrators or staff. Shirley (2007), a former prison librarian, writes that some librarians comply with censorship policies because they fear “further harassment by the security staff” and “…feel their energies are better spent in trying to provide service to the underserved inmates than in fighting battles with the security staff.” A survey respondent noted that she disagrees with much of the censorship she encounters, but often doesn’t “voice [an] opinion on these matters. Censorship is a sticky topic for any librarian, but it’s a daily reality for prison librarians. Arguing with administrators or security personnel is a good way to bring disciplinary actions against yourself and to be labeled as an ‘inmate lover’.” Similar attitudes were captured by a survey response in which the librarian reported that she feels that some of the restrictions in her institution are inappropriate, but she nonetheless remains silent about her objections:

Usually, custody (i.e. the officers who work directly with the inmates and are responsible for safety and security) objects to sex in books, especially without literary value (Longarm comes instantly to mind). Because this is a Supermax, because free (i.e. non-custody) staff is regarded as a useless frill, because we can be walked off for introducing contraband inside the perimeter, because I prefer to save my fights for bigger matters—I don’t say anything.

Harper, who works in the Midwest and opposes much of the censorship that occurs in prisons, is cognizant of the ways that librarians actively work to create justifications to excuse their decisions to remain silent in the face of what they perceive as injustice. She said, “I also think people are just overwhelmed. I just can’t and I don’t want to be looked at as a troublemaker. I’ve got plenty to do. I think people can come up with a lot of rationales for not doing things…” One
of the ways librarians articulated this notion of ‘coming up with rationales’ was by referring to the “good selection” of materials available to inmates in their libraries.

*Good Book Selection*

Madeline, a librarian in the West who is ambivalent about censorship, said she believes that the restrictions on library materials at her institution do not have much of an effect on inmates “because we have so much good material to offer them,” a belief expressed by several other librarians. For instance, Virginia, who has learned to let censorship ‘roll off her back’, said she is able to do so because she knows “there are other, wonderful things that we have on our shelves.” The essence of the justification here is that, if libraries are well stocked with “acceptable” items, the banning of more controversial items does not have a significant or negative impact on inmates’ ability to acquire reading materials and thus, the censorship that occurs is less ethically problematic. Thomas, who works in the Midwest, wrote about this type of ambivalence in his survey response: “We try not to censor; we also realize that there is more positive reading material/content for incarcerated individuals, and try to provide a wide range of material to inmates to ‘bring them in the door’ by appealing to all different tastes, educational backgrounds, experiences, etc.” So, for many librarians, finding a way to accept the confines of the institution while still embracing the importance of providing library services and a sufficient range of materials for their patrons, works to alleviate some of the dissonance they experience. For others, however, accepting censorship, whether in theory or practice, is more difficult. Thus, some librarians oppose and resist attempts at censorship.
OPPOSITION TO CENSORSHIP

Hardie-Bick and Hadfield (2011:32) claim that “Sartre’s phenomenological descriptions of bad faith and Goffman’s observations of the performing self show how human beings always have the capacity to question, doubt, access and stand back from themselves.” This section shows how librarians engage in such self-reflection and challenge institutional rules about or practices of censorship. Even if they articulated some degree of ambivalence about it, many of the librarians expressed their opposition to censorship. Some are willing and able to act on their beliefs and challenge administrators or staff who attempt to censor materials, while others feel they cannot actively resist these actions and maintain their positions in the institution. There are several predominant reasons librarians said they oppose the censorship that occurs in their institutions. First, some librarians spoke about their opposition to censorship in ethical terms, with reference to an abstract ideal, as well as a concern for prisoners’ rights. Second, some librarians remarked that censorship is practiced in a capricious, inconsistent, and arbitrary way in their institutions, which they find unacceptable. And finally, those who oppose censorship discussed prison administrators’ and staff’s refusal to recognize or respect their expertise as librarians and their profession’s stance on censorship.

*Ethics*

Many of the librarians who oppose the censorship that takes place in their institutions maintain ethical positions about access to information as a human right and censorship as a violation of that right (similar to the ALA’s stance on the issue). Some explained this ethical standpoint explicitly as a part of their identity as a librarian. For Oscar, a Midwestern librarian
and one of the fiercest opponents of censorship among the interviewees, librarianship inheres specific duties, one of which is to actively fight censorship:

To me, it’s a code of ethics. It’s this definition, and you can’t compromise yourself. It is your job. It is my job to challenge every single incidence of censorship. And I think it also has to do with, why are you there? Why are you working there? I get myself caught, and I get myself burned all the time, because I have the tendency, like Othello, of interpreting the world around you through your own viewpoint and ethics. So I’m assuming that everybody else around me is there because they want to help the inmates, and I’m trying to support their program or activity, and I’m thinking that they’re doing the same back. And then I get burned.

Similarly, Alexander, who also works in the Midwest, discussed his frequent attempts to limit censorship and the ethical and practical implications that accompany these actions: “The prison librarian has to make a choice. It’s a difficult choice. Either you stay and follow your philosophy as a librarian, which is the most difficult choice, or you have to basically do the minimum thing for prisoners and you get along better that way.” Here, Alexander explicitly draws upon the notions of reflexivity and choice, and their connections to ethical action.

While ethics can be understood as abstract ideals, connecting thought and action constitutes what Foucault (1997) calls ‘ethical practices’. Crane, Knights, and Starkey (2008) note that, only in Foucault’s later work did he really begin to address what it means to ‘act ethically’. They argue that Foucault “advises us to create a critical ontology of our selves, which should be conceived…as ethical practices,” which are “…an analysis of how we create ourselves, involving both a critique of what we are, and at the same time an ‘historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them’ (Foucault, 1997:319)” (Crane et al. 2008:304). Both Oscar and Alexander engage in ‘ethical practices’ by regularly challenging others’ attempts to censor items.
Another way librarians spoke about their opposition to censorship was to invoke the concept of prisoners’ rights. The legal definitions around what is justifiably censored in prisons are quite vague, and some librarians believe that allowing the administration too much authority in making decisions about what to ban has led to a situation in which prisoners’ rights are being violated. For example, Agatha, who works in a Southern state where a recent lawsuit changed censorship policies, said that “[a]ll lawsuits that have been brought and were successful were done by a male inmate, generally very smart ones—little gadflies….And I’m glad that they do [file suits] because they’re fighting for their rights.” She noted that, prior to the lawsuit, administrators and staff banned anything they thought “might be injurious to treatment. And that starts going down that slippery slope that, to me, gets crazy. It starts violating their rights.” In reference to prisoners’ rights under the law, Oscar said:

In some of the original cases, the Courts ruled things should be based on a “legitimate” threat to the safety or security of the prison, the inmates, staff, and the community. I question, therefore, how much of the censorship really is a legitimate threat…and I wonder…if the Department could really prove its position.

Within this defense of prisoners’ rights lies the notion that certain items are being unjustly targeted for censorship, which is how some librarians voiced their opposition to censorship—in terms of specific types of items.

*Extreme or Undo Restrictions*

Even some librarians who generally support the censorship policies in their prisons voiced concern about what they perceived to be extreme or unnecessary bans on certain items. For example, Herman, who works in the West, told a story about such an incident:
One of our facilities, they had a ban on any type of cutouts or schematics, especially of engines. To me that’s going a little far. I remember one time when the Warden called one librarian in because a book he received did have a schematic of a jet engine. We weren’t quite sure how the inmates, one, are going to make a jet engine, where they were going to get the fuel, and how they were going to take off. That was a little overkill there.

Another example of such opposition—and in this case an active attempt at resistance—comes from a survey respondent who wrote: “A few years ago, our ‘Communications Threat Group’ decided that any computer books in our libraries were a threat to security. I disagreed and attended a meeting where I was able to discuss my opinions. I was still overruled and all computer books were removed from the libraries.” Though her subordinate position made her act of resistance ineffective in protecting the computer books, this librarian nevertheless challenged the dominant mode of rationality.

It was not only categories of books such as those about computers or electrical trades that elicited opposition from librarians. Several librarians mentioned their frustration with administrative directives to remove books containing specific words in the text or title. For example, a survey responded said his supervisor told him “to remove any book that contained the words ‘penis’, ‘vagina’, or depicted a sex act.” Because he disagreed with this policy, rather than follow the order, he “handed her the keys and said, ‘Go for it’.” In making this sarcastic remark and gesture, he employs a particular type of role distance that Goffman (1961b:114) describes as common among individuals who work in hierarchical institutions:

…[W]e often find that although the subordinate is careful not to threaten those who are, in a sense, in charge of the situation, he may be just as careful to inject some expression to show, for any who care to see, that he is not capitulating completely to the work arrangement in which he finds himself. Sullenness, muttering, irony, joking, and sarcasm may all allow one to show that something of oneself lies outside the role within whose jurisdiction the moment occurs.
Another survey respondent wrote about a similar order, which she opposed: “At one time, a few years ago, there was a staff member on our headquarters’ staff who sent out the memo that no titles with “Kill” in the title would be used in our libraries. Most of us laughed about this as we were thinking about To Kill a Mockingbird.” She similarly employed the type of role distance (joking with her coworkers) described above. These reactions to what librarians perceive as undo or even laughable acts of censorship are often accompanied by reference to the arbitrary nature of censorship in prisons.

*Capricious, Inconsistent, and Arbitrary Censorship*

As discussed earlier, censorship occurs in prison libraries in ways that are unpredictable, as it is often the result of individual biases and interpretations of policies. Most of the librarians who oppose at least some of the censorship that happens in their institutions brought up the notion of the unfair and inconsistent way these biases affect censorship. Agatha summed up this sentiment when she stated: “The arbitrary and capricious nature of the censorship librarians have experienced has no logic or consistency.” Though written policies about excluded materials may exist, individual interpretations of these policies vary widely, much to the dismay of many prison librarians. One survey respondent described the regulations about censorship as “a game of bureaucracy and bending the rules,” and Oscar stated that “anytime you go down the road of censorship, it’s always going to be illogical….It doesn’t make any sense. It’s just one or two people up there in Central Office, and they are the ones that are deciding what meets the definition of this written policy.” Likewise, a survey respondent said that “the interpretation of the policy by DOC staff is different, based on who is doing the review. So at those times when I
have disagreed…I will take it to my supervisor, [and] if she agrees with me that it is worth the
fight, she takes it to the Headquarters level.” It is not only the inconsistency of interpretation that
librarians oppose, however. At times, custody staff or administrators ignore policy altogether and
act according to their own beliefs about what is and is not appropriate for inmates.

One survey respondent reported that she was angered by the fact that, “on occasion, a
Captain or Warden will remove a book from the collection because s/he does not want it in the
facility. This has happened on more than one occasion with the Captain making no effort to
inform the library staff of his removal of the materials.” While some librarians felt that these
types of actions are inevitable and insurmountable, Charlotte, who works in the Northeast, said
that although she understands and somewhat accepts the limitations of the prison policies, she
will “still argue against censorship when it seems like a restriction is being requested due to a
staff feeling personally offended rather than per policy.” Similarly, James, a librarian in the
South, said he often has to defend prisoners’ rights when staff attempts to remove or reject items
based on their own beliefs:

Almost nobody in this institution understands the scope of the Supreme Court or District Court decisions
with regards to legal materials, and not many of them have bothered to school themselves on it….Time and
again, I’ve heard a staff member say, “I don’t think they should be able to get that information.” Well, it’s
like, the Supreme Court is pretty clear on this issue and that’s why this information is available to them.

James’ comment speaks to another reason librarians maintained an attitude of opposition to
censorship—the belief that many of the people making the rules and decisions about censorship
either do not support and care about either the library or the inmates’ best interest, or are
incompetent and lack the expert knowledge of books that a librarian possesses.
**Punitive Administrators and Lack of Librarian Input**

Several librarians mentioned the numerous workplace difficulties that can occur when they challenge censorship. When discussing their opposition to censorship, other librarians shared a sentiment similar to the one expressed by Charlotte: “Most prison librarians, if they come from the outside library world, believe in the freedom to read, and we don’t want to censor anything. Whereas prison administrators are the exact opposite, where everything needs to be censored and controlled.” The perception shared by these librarians is that administrators are more concerned with punishment and control than the rights or rehabilitation of prisoners, and thus, do not give sufficient attention to either the quality of the library or the hiring of personnel who have the expertise necessary to interpret restrictions policies about reading materials. For example, Harper, a Midwestern librarian stated: “I have always advocated for everyone’s right to read. The Warden has denied funds to the library for eight years, and I have been cut out of all library decision-making because he dislikes my ideas.” She claims that the Warden and other administrators simultaneously silence and rely on her:

I inevitably will be overruled when the question [of censorship] comes up, and I feel like they kind of want it both ways. They say, “We want a professional librarian. We don’t want to deal with the library stuff.” And then when you do [object] and something comes up that they don’t like, [they say] “No, you don’t have a say.” You can’t really defend yourself because they’ll make a decision and say, “Here’s the edict. Do it or don’t do it.”

In many prisons, custody staff and administrators do not view librarians primarily as trained professionals who have the expertise to make decisions about reading materials and thus, often ban items without consulting librarians about the nature of an item’s content. However, professional librarians bring with them their professional identities, which they develop through their interactions with others. Baunsgaard and Clegg (2012:209) claim that “the dynamic sense
of being a professional…involves both a socialization process and a legitimation process in which one identifies and interacts with others of similar (and different) professional identities and organization.” So, the identity of ‘librarian’ is validated through the reinforcement of other librarians and against the administration’s failure to sufficiently distinguish the librarian from other prison staff. Agatha explained the way she understands the prison librarian’s position within the organization:

> There are some prison librarians who seem totally supportive of the restrictions—a few. Most resent it. Most resent the fact that—it’s just the interference. The same committee that’s reviewing the publications that the inmates order [is] reviewing the publications that professional librarians are ordering. That’s very denigrating….I mean, they have complete control over our libraries in that we can’t lock a door they can’t open. If they see a book in an inmate’s hand, they have complete authority to say, “I’m going to take this from you.” And so, if the Warden or a prison official saw something in the hands of an inmate, and they were concerned about it, to me there could be some process where they could bring it to my supervisor and we could get together and talk about it. But that’s not the way it happens. It’s just—when your books come in, they can be confiscated by the mailroom and sent to the person the Warden has assigned to look at them, and then they’ll say, “Well, such and such and such can’t come in,” and that’s the final word.

She later expanded on her opinion about ‘the person the Warden has assigned to look at them’:

> …[H]e’s an affable person but he’s not really that well educated….He kind of came up the ranks as a correctional officer. And in some instances, on the local level, the Warden has been known to even put correctional officers in charge….And that’s when you get into these ridiculous scenarios of, well, because the policy says ‘no books that depict guns’…they read this policy and then the cowboy on the Louis L’Amour Western is holding the rifle, and “Oh, this book can’t come in.” It’s ridiculous.

Agatha was not the only librarian to discuss her dissatisfaction with the way administrators assign the task of reviewing materials. In fact, librarians repeatedly referred to the individual or committee that reviews materials as inept or unconcerned with the consequences of their decisions. Alexander also espoused this view:

> I mean, despite that all prisons are [supposed to be] the same within a state, it depends a lot on the Warden how things are set up…..Anyway, there is the so-called restricted list of some kind that’s put together….[A book] goes through some kind of procedure and gets put on the list, okay. In the big picture, stepping back
from the whole thing—how can I say this—prison workers aren’t the smartest people in the world. I mean, in a prison, a librarian, for example, is one of the few jobs that require a Master’s degree. There’s hardly anything, besides maybe a psychologist or nurse, which requires any kind of academic degree. You need nothing to be a Warden—just got to know how to stick it to people. It’s true.

Librarians used these beliefs about prison staff and administrators’ lack of both qualifications and respect for librarians as professionals to explain their opposition to some of the censorship that occurs in prisons. Some also used their motivations and beliefs about censorship to perform various acts of resistance to administrative or individual attempts to ban materials from their libraries.

Means of Resistance

Though many librarians feel powerless to change policies or practices, and others’ fear of retaliation inhibits them from taking action when they oppose the censorship they witness, some librarians discussed the various ways they resist censorship. As it is in Sartre’s concept of bad faith and Goffman’s notion of role distance, the possibility of resistance is a fundamental aspect of Hornqvist’s (Foucauldian) analysis of power: “Power is not fully on one side; the imbalance is never total. The subordinate party retains its freedom to a certain extent. There is always an option to act otherwise” (2010:5). This section deals specifically with those librarians who choose to ‘act otherwise’ and resist what they see as unjust censorship, and the various ways they enact their resistance.

Whether through formal or legal channels, or by circumventing or subverting policies or orders, librarians engage in conscious acts of resistance, often at some personal or professional risk. As Scott (1990) points out, acts of resistance do not need to occur in the ‘public transcript’; oftentimes, resistance is subtle and happens in ways that are hidden or concealed from others.
The librarians who shared these stories of resistance expressed both frustration in the face of what they perceive as injustice and a sense of satisfaction that derives from standing up for what they believe is right (or engaging in ‘ethical practices’). There are several formal channels librarians can take to resist censorship, including submitting paperwork to challenge an episode of censorship, appealing to higher authorities when an individual attempts to confiscate an item, and attempting to obtain a position that provides some input into the decision-making process.

An example of a librarian who regularly submits official challenges is Oscar, who stated: “I try to challenge their findings on the basis of their not knowing the full story, having tunnel vision, etc….I challenge censorship notices, even if I do not have the book in my library.” He explained that once an item is placed on the restricted list in his state, it remains there permanently, and thus, he believes it is better to be proactive with his challenges, since he has no say in the review process.

The lack of librarian participation in publications review, discussed above, prompted Agatha and several of her colleagues to take action by repeatedly petitioning the DOC to include a librarian in the review committee:

For years, librarians knew this disapproved publications list existed, and our thing was that we should have a representative there. I mean, they’re making decisions about these books. Why doesn’t the [library] department have a representative? And we worked and we worked, and it was like they didn’t want anybody from our agency to be on this committee, but finally we broke through…

Though the particular librarian that was appointed to the committee proved to be a disappointment, she believes this ‘breakthrough’ could ultimately lead to better decision-making and protection of prisoners’ rights. The means of resistance employed by these librarians are
done within the formal channels of the organization. However, librarians also shared stories about other means of resistance that were less formal and, at times, more controversial.

Like exclusion from the review process, witnessing informal censorship by staff also prompts some librarians to take action to suppress this behavior. For example, a survey respondent described how she reacted to her discovery that custody officers were practicing informal censorship: “They [custody staff] remove books from donations without justifying removal and/or informing me. Now I count and presort all donations before allowing mailroom officers to see them.” Thus, she chose to secretly begin a process of counting the books without custody staff’s knowledge, so that when she found discrepancies, she could either confront the staff or take the information to an official.

In addition to regularly submitting challenges to attempts at censorship, Oscar also engages in various means of informal resistance, such as finding loopholes in the regulations, or what he describes as “tweaking their little policies.” His DOC does not permit any R-rated films to be shown or held in the library, which severely limits his choices when he hosts ‘movie night’ in the library. He explained how he found a loophole in the regulations that allows him to show a wider variety of films that are more interesting for adults and explore more complex themes than those rated G, PG, or PG-13:

So because of them having this R thing, you can never show Schindler’s List, you could never show Saving Private Ryan, all of these films. So I have fun. I’ve been having fun, because a lot of films are from before the ratings came along. And so I showed even some of the silent films that have full frontal nudity and everything else! The one that I enjoyed playing the most was Zeffirelli’s Romeo and Juliet, which has the scene after they get married. In the morning, he gets out of bed and he’s totally naked. You see his butt and everything….So I have fun tweaking their little policies.
Thus, he found enough of what Goffman (1961a) calls ‘elbow room’ in the constraining environment of the total institution to engage in this act of resistance. Another way that Oscar circumvents the rules is by subtly blurring the distinction between art and pornography. He said that the primary concern for censors in his state is nudity and erotica, and yet he uses the library as a way to make a statement about the ambiguity of the definitions of pornography and erotica:

I can get away with the fact that one of the Michelangelo paintings that’s in the library is the one of the creation of Adam. So every day in this world around me now where they want to censor everything, there is Adam up there with his dick hanging out!…And…behind the counter, I have some Greek and Roman statues that I bought at a hobby shop, and…one of them is naked and her boobs are all right out there too. So I’ve got a dick at one end of the library and I’ve got naked breasts on the other end of the library! And yet Central Office brings people in here to show them on tours!

Oscar’s statement draws attention to the inconsistency in policy that so many librarians find not only frustrating but also unethical. Other librarians discussed the ways in which they defied orders from custody staff who tried to have certain items removed from the library.

Barbara, a librarian in the West, told the story of how a custody officer’s attitudes, which she perceived as biased and unduly harsh, prompted her not only to refuse his request to ban certain materials, but also to use this situation as a way to increase prisoners’ access to the very books he wanted to ban:

…[O]ne of the officers came to me and said, “Could you get rid of these Longarms?” I said, “Well, what is it?” He said, “These things are just disgusting. They call them Westerns, but they’re really nothing but pornography, and the guys are in the segregation cells and they’re just getting their”—I forgot his expression for it, but basically masturbating in the cells. And I thought to myself, “Wow, that’s great! Now I know what to do with all the books that are tantalizing!” And that’s when I put the graphic novels, the comic books, all the visuals…because that’s a way for a person, not just a man, but a person, to survive the lack of stimulation in segregation. I mean, they don’t even get out…an hour every 24. So that’s the way to get your heart rate up. I think it’s healthy. It’s the only way to survive segregation.
So, rather than accept this officer’s definition of the books and attitude toward prisoners’ sexuality, Barbara said that, as a librarian, she “recognized an information need,” which she then supplied to the fullest extent possible. Another example of the way librarians sometimes ignore or refuse directives they believe are illogical or unjust comes from Emma. She shared a story about how a custody officer told her not to order a book about American Sign Language, which she perceived to be both illogical, since she had books about how to learn other languages, and a violation of prisoners’ rights. She said, “I bought the book anyway and sent it [to the prison library], and so far I haven’t heard anything about it. That’s our approach sometimes, is buy it, send it, and if somebody calls us on it, we’ll deal with it.” These librarians have learned to navigate the system in ways that allow them to perform these acts of resistance and retain their jobs. Over time, however, librarians’ experiences within the prison system may be quite different, and, unlike the librarians discussed here, they may, in fact, become more restrictive and less willing to engage in actions that challenge the logic of the system. In the next section, I will explore the various ways in which librarians’ attitudes towards censorship change over time as they work in the prison.

ATTITUDE CHANGES OVER TIME

If we consider Weber’s (1968) concept of bureaucratic rationality and the dehumanizing influence that bureaucracies have on people, we can see how the sort of identity or rationality that one enters into the organization with may become stifled as one is forced to operate within rules and regulations produced through the dominant ideology of the organization. This has traditionally been understood as becoming locked in the so-called ‘iron cage’ of bureaucracy.
However, Crewe (2011a) introduces a much more interesting way to think about the ways that staff and inmates in the total institution of the prison (bureaucratic machines *par excellence*) change (and resist change) over time. He explains that Baehr (2001) has pointed out that English speakers have been using an imprecise translation of the German ‘stahlhatres gehause’, which is more accurately translated as a ‘shell as hard as steel’ rather than an ‘iron cage’:

Rather than suggesting being confined by something separate from us (something which leaves us unaltered), this term implies something that we carry with us—indeed, something that becomes an aspect of, and reconstitutes our being…Baehr (2001:161) notes that while steel ‘evokes hardness and unbending resolution’, it can, in fact be malleable as well as rigid. It cannot be broken or dispensed with, but it is sufficiently ductile to move with the body. (Crewe 2011a:522-23)

Thus, librarians (as well as other staff and inmates) bring with them their personal and professional ethics, a range of experiences, and diverse values and beliefs, but once they enter the prison, they begin to develop a ‘shell of steel’ that limits (but does not wholly determine) the range of possibilities for action. This concept works well with Goffman’s (1959) notion that the various roles we play make us who we are. He argues that we are forever playing roles, engaging in performed interactions with others. These interactions take place within a preexisting social structure and culture, and it is through these crafted performances with others that our selves come to be defined. Thus, an individual begins to play the role ‘prison librarian’ (which already has certain expectations), and as she continues to play that role according to those expectations, the role becomes part of her ‘self’. Arguably, the longer she plays the role, and thus, wears the ‘shell of steel’, the more likely she is to adopt the ‘institutional perspective’ as her own.

In the survey, I asked librarians if their attitudes about censorship had changed since they began working in a prison library, and if so, how they understood that change. I coded these qualitative answers into three categories (‘more restrictive’, ‘less restrictive’, and ‘no significant
change’) according to how the librarians expressed their views about whether or not they endorsed censorship in prison more or less than when they began the job. Of those who answered the question, a slight majority (56 percent) said there was ‘no significant change’ in their attitudes about censorship (their level of support or opposition varied within this category); 36 percent reported that their attitudes had become ‘more restrictive’; and seven percent felt they had become ‘less restrictive’ in their feelings about censorship. Length of time working in a prison library ranged from less than one year to 32 years, with the average being 8.8 years and the median being six years. An analysis of the survey data shows that as years working in a prison increase, the likelihood of one’s attitude becoming more restrictive increases.\textsuperscript{28} This implies that as people work in the prison longer, they move closer to adopting an institutional perspective about censorship and the need to restrict certain materials. Working within the prison system, which has its own imperatives and promotes specific penal philosophies, can influence librarians’ attitudes toward censorship, or even their beliefs about prisoners as a group of people and the purpose of the prison, which in turn can affect individuals’ attitudes and willingness to take action.

\textit{Unchanged Attitudes}

The librarians who said their attitudes toward censorship had generally remained unchanged varied widely in their degree of support for or opposition to censorship. Those who supported censorship policies throughout their careers as prison librarians either began the job

\textsuperscript{28} However, the same was not true for the much smaller sample of interviewees. In fact, the average length of time working in prison was longer for those on both ends of the support-ambivalent-opposed spectrum. The librarians who fell in the ‘ambivalent’ category were the ones with the shortest average length of time working in a prison.
with the belief that censorship, in and of itself, is not ethically problematic, or that the prison is an exceptional setting and thus, certain types of censorship are acceptable or unavoidable. For example, one survey respondent stated that his “opinions about the war against censorship haven’t changed during this time….I am not opposed to censorship per se. Censorship if reasonably and intelligently used can in fact have a worthwhile, relevant and valuable purpose,” and another respondent said he “do[es]n’t care much what they censor from the inmates…” While these prison librarians expressed support or apathy about censorship as a practice, others were explicit in stating that their attitudes toward censorship in prison are based on their perception of the prison as a dangerous place. Julia, who works in the South, reported that she “still believe[s] it is a dangerous environment that should allow staff some discretion in what inmates read,” and a survey respondent wrote: “I’ve always been pragmatic about what material to get in here. It’s similar to being a parent. Some people aren’t ready for some material. That applies to inmates and staff alike.” The paternalistic attitude expressed here was conveyed by other librarians as well (though this particular woman includes staff as well as inmates in her paternalistic gaze).

On the other end of the spectrum of attitudes were those who reported an unwavering opposition to censorship throughout their time working in a prison setting. Though the respondents who fell into this category were fewer in number that those who expressed an unchanged attitude of support, they typically espoused the belief that censorship limits knowledge and is not beneficial to society. For example, when asked if their attitudes had changed, Emily simply stated, “Not really. I don’t like censorship; never have and never will,” and a survey respondent wrote: “The freer access and more Right to Read, the better.”
kinds of unequivocal statements were rare, however. More librarians expressed some degree of
ambivalence about censorship even when they said their attitudes had not changed.

For some librarians, working in a prison library had made them examine their beliefs
about censorship, which often resulted in some degree of dissonance in their ways of thinking.
An illustrative case is that of Emma, who explained the transformation she underwent during her
time as a prison librarian:

I can’t say my attitude has changed, though I’m a bit more comfortable with it now. When I started as an
intern, I knew the restrictions of the library collection and I understood them in the abstract. The more time
I spend in the facilities, the better I grasp the importance of a few restrictions within the prison walls. That
being said, it’s made me even more fierce in my opposition to censorship of library materials in any other
library setting. If I was in prison and was denied certain materials, one of the first things I would do when I
got out would be to go to my public library to find out what it was that was being kept from me.

So, although she has come to accept the restrictions in the prison, witnessing censorship on a
regular basis has actually clarified and amplified her initial position that censorship does not
benefit society. Another librarian who expressed a similar sort of ambivalence is the survey
respondent who wrote:

I think my attitude has essentially remained the same. I have certainly thought a lot more about censorship
and the need for ALA’s ‘Prisoners’ Right to Read’ statement. Only when materials ‘present an actual
compelling and imminent risk to safety and security’ do I consider not allowing it in our libraries.

Thus, although the majority of librarians claimed that their attitudes toward censorship had not
changed, close examination of their statements reveals, in some cases, a considerable amount of
contradiction or ambivalence about the initial claim that their attitudes have remain unaffected
by the experience of working in a prison library. Other librarians discussed the ways their
attitudes had changed in a variety of ways.
More Restrictive Attitudes

Among librarians who claimed their attitudes toward censorship had changed during their time working in a prison, a transition toward a more, rather than less, restrictive position was much more common (36 percent, as opposed to seven percent, of respondents). Librarians generally explained the changes in their increasingly restrictive attitudes as the result of their interactions within, or better understandings of, the prison setting. One survey respondent recounted the incident during which she considers herself to have ‘changed sides’: “Initially I agreed with the ALA’s position about censorship. However, when an inmate ordered Hitler’s Mein Kampf… I denied the request. By censoring this book, I crossed over to the other side, i.e. making a decision whether a books is suitable for an inmate or not.” Other librarians also discussed the need to restrict materials they believe are harmful. For example, Maya, who works in the West, said, “At first I didn’t think there should be any censorship. Now I believe what goes in a prison is what comes out. We need to put as much positive energy into these individuals as possible.”

Maya’s comment refers to a change not only in her attitude toward censorship, but also in her understanding of whom or what prisoners are as a group of people. This type of sentiment was expressed by other librarians as well. One survey respondent stated that “seeing violent and nasty prisoners every day makes me less mad about some of the censorship,” and another described a fundamental change, not just in her attitude about censorship, but in her beliefs about prisoners’ rights more broadly: “Before working in a prison I was a strong advocate for
intellectual freedom, now I realize offenders give up some of their freedoms when they are incarcerated.”

Some of the librarians whose attitudes had become more restrictive were starkly self-reflexive and expressed a sense of disappointment or sadness about who they had become. For example, one survey respondent stated:

Actually, my attitudes have changed drastically. When I was in grad school earning my MLS, I was 100 percent against censorship. After working 5 years inside a state prison, I am more open to screening of reading material. My life is in potential jeopardy every day. Sadly, I will do what I need to do, so that I can feel safe while I am on the job.

Similarly, another survey respondent described the changes she had undergone and the way this made her feel about herself as a librarian. When asked if her attitude toward censorship had changed, she responded:

YES!!! I became interested in prison librarianship while in grad school. Then, I envisioned myself as a champion of offenders’ intellectual freedom. Now I suspect the Intellectual Freedom Committee will be coming to revoke my MLS any day now. :) I don’t believe that I restrict access unnecessarily, but I am very careful about collection development & inter-library loan decisions.

In a less overt, but interestingly somber way, one respondent said that his attitudes had changed and simply wrote: “Paranoia strikes deep. Into your heart it will creep,” most likely a reference to the ways in which the highly suspicious and distrusting nature of many of those who work and are held in the prison system can affect others.29 For a smaller number of the librarians, however, being in the prison setting actually had the opposite effect, and their attitudes toward censorship became less restrictive over time.

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29 This is, of course, a reference to the Buffalo Springfield song, “For What It’s Worth,” which contains the following stanza: “Paranoia strikes deep; Into your life it will creep; It starts when you’re always afraid; You step out of line, the man come and take you away.”
Less Restrictive Attitudes

The librarians who said their attitudes toward censorship had become less restrictive over time discussed this change in several ways. Some discussed coming to a realization that much prison censorship is either futile or unnecessarily punitive. For instance, one survey respondent described the way she has changed how she thinks about the influence of reading materials on incarcerated people, and then negotiated her position within the organization accordingly:

I have actually changed my thinking. I have come to the conclusion that we cannot be stringently concerned with how a prison library patron will use the information provided to him, so I am much more objective than I was 3 years ago when I started. That being said, there are still specific criteria that it is my job to restrict for the safety of all. I do push for the idea of freedom for the patrons of this library, though, where I can.

Similarly, another respondent wrote: “I feel that we should be able to read whatever we choose. Even when the offenders get out, they will have access. The prison system is teaching those who are incarcerated to value their right to choose.” This respondent suggests that (at least some) individuals who are incarcerated can and will resist the definitions imposed upon them by the prison.

Others librarians said they entered the job with certain preconceived notions about prisoners and found themselves fundamentally questioning and changing these ideas once they got to know incarcerated people, and thus, their attitudes about barring inmates’ access to materials also changed. As a male survey respondent commented, “My attitude as a whole has changed since I started over 18 yrs ago. You learn that these guys are human beings that may have come from the same background as me.” A similar sentiment about getting to know and
empathize with inmates came from another survey respondent who shared her thoughts about how working in a prison library had changed her beliefs and attitudes:

In fact, I think I feel much stronger. My passion for this topic has grown. I’ve seen how inmates are isolated from society and how this ultimately hurts a society. When they are not allowed to read, think, know things, we have basically told them they aren’t worth their own lives, which is just wrong. I’ve also changed in widening my view of what I think should be allowed—less restrictive than when I started.

And finally, several prison librarians said that witnessing the way censorship occurs on a regular basis in prisons made them stronger advocates for prisoners’ rights. One woman who began her career as a custody officer discussed the way her attitudes about prisoners and censorship changed quite drastically after she began her new position as the prison librarian:

When I was employed as custody staff, I wasn’t always an advocate for prison libraries. As the library director here, I have experienced “repeat offenders” who return again and again—and a few “thank you” letters from some men who were helped through the library and have not re-offended. Information & knowledge are power!

Another survey respondent expressed a similar transformation when she said, “I did not ever think of books and reading as a right, now I know it is.” These librarians, then, belong to a small minority of respondents whose first-hand experiences interacting with incarcerated people and prison staff have resulted in greater empathy for inmates and support for their rights, rather than stronger identification with the imperatives of the prison as an organization.

CONCLUSION

Prison librarians occupy a tenuous position within the prison, as they are often regarded as ‘nonessential’ (i.e., non-security) staff and their roles are often ambiguously defined by the institution. While many librarians see themselves as ‘gatekeepers to information’, providers of
valuable information and programming, and oftentimes, as a sort of counselor (or at least non-hostile source of support) for inmates, prison administrators and staff expect librarians to serve in a security capacity by assisting custody staff and engaging in disciplinary actions towards inmates who violate regulations. Particularly for those who have been trained as professional librarians, the role of ‘prison librarian’ produces role conflict, as the values and ethics associated with the role of the librarian (an essentially anti-censorship stance) are incompatible with the values and ethics promoted by the prison (‘safety and security trumps all’—including constitutional rights and the freedom to read). In order to alleviate the feelings of unease produced by performing the contradictory role of ‘prison librarian’, some individuals engage in ‘role distance’, wherein they act in ways that signal to others that they do not fully accept, or resist to some degree, the role they are playing.

Prison librarians often have less than amiable, or even hostile, relations with custody staff and administrators, who either resent the presence of ‘rehabilitative’ programs like the library in prisons (and sometimes enact this resentment by limiting prisoners’ access to the library or destroying library materials), or simply see the library as an unnecessary ‘line-item’ on a budget. The conflict between penological philosophies can become apparent within librarian-staff interactions, particularly when librarians question the authority of other prison workers or the legitimacy of the institution’s dominant mode of rationality. However, some librarians fully adopt the role and make it clear to custody staff and administrators that they are on ‘their side’ and are willing to ‘police’ the inmates (while providing library services). Relations with inmates tend to be more congenial, yet they are sometimes tinged by a certain degree of distrust (on both sides) and the belief that some prisoners are manipulative, and therefore librarians should have
strict rules about how they interact with prisoners. All of these interactions are, of course, defined and complicated by the unequal power relations within the prison hierarchy.

Most librarians expressed a great deal of ambivalence about the censorship that happens in their institutions, but there is a wide range of attitudes in the level of support for or opposition to censorship. The primary motivations for librarians’ support for censorship are the extraordinary environment of the prison, which they understand as dangerous; a belief in the need for rules and regulations within any organization, and particularly in a prison; the notion that prisoners have committed crimes for which they are being punished and are therefore rightfully subject to restrictions of their rights; and the idea that inmates need to be rehabilitated, and some materials promote attitudes or behaviors that could impede this process. Librarians expressed their ambivalence about censorship in several ways: the role conflict they feel as ‘librarians’ and ‘prison workers’; the inconsistent and/or illogical rules about censorship in their institutions; feelings of powerlessness or resignation in the face of an impersonal and unyielding bureaucracy in which they are marginalized; and the notion that a certain degree of censorship is not very harmful so long as there are plenty of ‘acceptable’ reading materials available in the library. And finally, those librarians who espoused attitudes of opposition to censorship did so because of ethical concerns about censorship as a practice and their duty as librarians to fight against it; what they believe are extreme or undue restrictions on reading materials; the capricious, inconsistent, and arbitrary nature of the kind of censorship they witness in the prison; and the lack of input they have, as librarians and professionals, in the decision-making process about what is censored, which is oftentimes done by people they perceive as inept or unduly punitive.
All librarians, regardless of their attitudes toward censorship, make choices about if, when, and how they will enforce, ignore, avoid, or resist the rules and regulations, as well as the actions of other prison staff, around censorship. In doing so, they act within the limitations of the total institution, and although some librarians actively resist censorship by challenging it through official channels or informally subverting rules or ignoring orders, others choose not to act upon their feelings either because they believe doing so is futile, or they fear they will lose their jobs or suffer reprisal from custody staff.

And finally, some librarians’ attitudes and actions around censorship change over time as they work in the prison. Overall, for those librarians whose attitudes do change, they become more, rather than less, restrictive the longer they work in a prison, suggesting that they increasingly adopt an ‘institutional perspective’ (the safety and security of the institution justifies censorship) as they become socialized into and play the role of the prison librarian. There are, of course, exceptions to this, as some librarians actually became more opposed to censorship over time, as they witness what they perceive to be unjust actions that violate prisoners’ rights.
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

THE PRISON LIBRARY

The prison library constitutes one of the “spaces of the prison” that has “been neglected in earlier periods of study” (Armstrong and McAra 2006:23). It is a space neglected not only by criminologists and sociologists who study the prison, but oftentimes by administrators within the prison as well. By focusing on the library as one part of the prison (understood as “an active, living institution of social control”), I have attempted here to analyze the “social order and the ways in which it is produced and maintained through the actions of its members” (Owen 1988:5).

The prison library is a product of the rehabilitative ideal, created by reformers who believed that reading could be transformative (producing Good Christians, or at least obedient and docile workers), and characterizations of the purpose(s) of the prison library today reflect larger debates about the role of rehabilitation in the American criminal justice system. The ways in which individuals define the purpose of the library within the prison are tied to both their penal philosophies and the positions they inhabit within the organization. The role an individual plays in some ways defines (or at least influences) the knowledge one can access and the socialization process one undergoes within the organization; it “serves as a sort of interpretive lens” through which members make sense of the world and assign meaning to things (Anspach 1987:217). Most librarians still believe in the ideal of rehabilitation and emphasize the library’s role in providing materials and programs for this purpose. However, while they may occasionally employ the rhetoric of reform, many administrators and custody staff embrace a more punitive penal philosophy and define the library either as a control tool (i.e., inmates who are reading are less likely to engage in nefarious activities) or as an expendable frill and waste of precious
resources and space. As administrators’ and custody staff’s interpretive lenses are “grounded in bureaucratic demands” that prioritize security and order (Owen 1988:23), the lack of support for library services is not altogether surprising. Therefore, when librarians must justify the existence of the library to unsupportive custody staff and administrators, they often intentionally emphasize its ‘security function’ rather than promote its recreational or educational functions.

Many prison libraries are operated by overworked librarians (or other prison workers who are appointed to oversee the library on top of their other duties) who function with little to no funding and rarely more than a modicum of support from the administration. The size and quality of the library varies greatly from one institution to the next, and this variation is often a product of decisions made by those in positions of authority within the institution and the DOC, as well as those who work in the libraries. While administrators may decide how to allocate resources (decisions undoubtedly influenced by their interpretive lens), librarians can exercise some power in choosing what to do with their limited resources and are typically responsible for the day-to-day operations of the library (and thus, have some leeway in how they manage the space).

Librarians generally believe the library should serve multiple purposes, including provision of materials and space for recreation, education, and rehabilitation and reentry services. One of the ways that librarians can gain support for educational and employment programs in the library is to label them ‘reentry’ rather than ‘rehabilitation’ programs. Despite the widespread denunciation of the ideal of rehabilitation in penal rhetoric over the past several decades, the concept of ‘reentry’ that has recently been strongly embraced by the criminal justice system is fundamentally centered on the same notions that Foucault (2009) outlined as the three primary principles upon which the prison was built: work, family, and self-culpability. So,
although the programs may differ slightly from those used as part of the traditional rehabilitation model, they are built upon similar moral and philosophical assumptions. However, reentry programs are framed in terms of being beneficial for society rather than for the individual inmate, which makes them more acceptable in a political climate where being seen as ‘soft on crime’ amounts to a virtual death knell for one’s career.

Additionally, the notion that rehabilitation has been abandoned is complicated by librarians’ discussions of the various types of unofficial programs and services that some of them provide in the library (such as peer-run education or occupational classes, essay contests, and so on). While official statistics show an overall decrease in traditional educational programs (Phelps 2011), the kinds of activities described by librarians are unlikely to surface in an official report, as they are unfunded and run voluntarily by librarians and inmates. So, although official support and resources for educational programs may be scarce, there are individuals, such as librarians, working in ‘unofficial’ ways from within the institution to implement and sustain programs and services that are educational or ‘rehabilitative’ in nature. (Of course, few of these programs lead to a degree that is useful for getting a job on the outside.) This finding supports Vuolo and Kruttschnitt’s (2008:329) assertion that, despite the ubiquitous punitive rhetoric of contemporary penal regimes, closer examinations of prisons and jails reveal “an uneven application of these new principles and practices.”

Beyond debates about the ‘rehabilitative’ potential of (‘well-chosen’) books lies another concern about the function of the library, and reading more generally, within the prison. The prison library can offer a space that is somewhat different than and removed from the rest of the prison, one that is oftentimes less crowded, noisy, and chaotic. Individuals can ‘relax’ for a
while, as the perpetual power struggle with custody staff is often less palpable or suffocating in
the library than it is in other spaces within the prison. Additionally, the act of reading itself offers
a temporary ‘escape’ from the everyday realities of prison life. Therefore, both a (well-supported
and sufficiently spacious) library and the act of reading have the potential to diminish the pains
of imprisonment (even if only for a limited time). Reading provides one of the few “zones of
autonomy” (Crewe 2011a) available to prisoners, whose lives are controlled in nearly every aspect by the rules and regulations of the total institution.

CENSORSHIP

Prisons have official policies and procedures that legitimize certain kinds of censorship;
however, these are inconsistent from one institution to the next. There are several formal policies
that affect the content of prison libraries. Most libraries have one form or another of at least one
of the following: ‘incoming publications’ rules and regulations, which outline the criteria for
admissible publications for the mailroom; a ‘publications review committee’ that meets and
decides whether or not to restrict specific items; a ‘disapproved reading list’ comprised of the
names of specific works that are restricted from the prison; and the library’s collection
development policy, which provides guidelines for what kinds of materials will and will not be
held in the collection (which is usually developed in relation to the incoming publications
guidelines). Some librarians must adhere to strict policies and are subject to supervision when
purchasing books or accepting donations, while others have few official guidelines and very little
oversight concerning what is and is not contained in the library.
However, even where they exist in writing, formal rules and regulations are often vague and open to interpretation. Rules exist as part of the organization, but since ruling is an “activity,” the rules must be interpreted by individuals (Clegg 1994:162). Thus, policies are not applied with any sort of consistency, so that what is presented as official policy often differs quite significantly from what happens in practice. Since individual prison workers interpret the rules, some censorship that occurs is the result of bias or punitive attitudes on the part of the person doing the interpretation. Prison workers have a great deal of what Gilbert (1997:49) calls “discretionary power,” which often determines if, when, and how policies and regulations are interpreted and enforced.

In addition to the variation in application of official rules, censorship also occurs in unofficial or informal ways. Informal censorship typically occurs in one of two ways: either a staff member physically removes an item from an inmate or the library (or at least attempts to do so), or the librarian practices self-censorship. In case of the former, which I refer to as incidences of ‘spot and seize’, staff may do this in the backstage (Goffman 1961a), where they cannot be seen by higher-ranking officials (e.g., taking books from inmates’ cells or library carts), or they may do so blatantly by confronting the librarian with the offending item and telling her to get rid of it, thus attempting to exercise power over librarians, who occupy a position subordinate to all security staff in the prison hierarchy.

The ‘looseness’ of the organization allows for varying degrees of adherence to regulations, and over time, these informal actions can become normative practices, even if they are not authorized by official policy. Britton (2003:223) notes that the structure of the prison “includes the distribution of power through hierarchical lines of authority, as well as institutional
policies that have written form and unwritten rules that mandate normative practices.” For example, although doing so is technically against regulations, custody officers regularly take library books from inmates’ cells during searches and destroy them with impunity. In cases where Wardens and other high-ranking administrators engage in ‘spot and seize’ censorship, what begins as an informal or unofficial kind of censorship can lead to changes in policy, due to the position of authority these individuals inhabit. Self-censorship by librarians is done for a number of reasons, including fear that items will eventually be challenged by some other staff member, personal bias about what is appropriate for inmates, and/or concern that extremely popular items will be stolen or damaged (and therefore, buying them is a waste of limited resources).

Censorship constitutes the exercise of power, whether by a Warden, custody officer, or librarian, each of whom occupies a different position in the prison hierarchy, but one always superordinate in relation to inmates. Hornqvist (2010:4-5) argues that power relations are “unequal, contentious and unstable,” and therefore, are vulnerable to disruptions, resistance from subordinate parties, and influence from processes or parties outside the direct relation. However, within the prison as an institution, “power is essentially exercised in an organized form,” which allows for some stability despite the always-present threat of disruption (Hornqvist 2010:14). These processes simultaneously result from and produce the nature of the interactions and relationships that prison staff and inmates have with one another, and the variation in the ways censorship occurs has a very real effect on the availability of reading materials to people in prison.
Though some laws purportedly protect against undue or biased censorship, the rulings concerning prison censorship are incredibly vague and grant prison administrators and custody staff a great deal of discretion in deciding whether or not to ban an item. According to *Turner v. Safley* (1987), anything that is “reasonably related to legitimate penological concerns” can be banned from prisons. Building upon this decision, *Thornburgh v. Abbot* (1989) further states that it is “appropriate” for prison administrators to use “broad discretion” in determining whether or not an item could “be detrimental to the security, good order, or discipline of the institution or if it might facilitate criminal activity.” Given the undefined term ‘legitimate penological concern’ and the prison administration’s low burden of proof in cases dealing with censorship, an incredibly wide range of materials are ‘legitimately’ censored using these guidelines.

There is a great deal of inconsistency in what gets censored by various institutions. The same books that are banned in one facility are permitted in another. These differences are not merely a function of a prison’s security level or a particular state’s formal policies, though these do matter in some cases. Much of the variation rests on the decisions made by a number of individuals at the local, institutional level. That being said, there are two broad categories into which most censored items fall, based on the type of justification given to legitimize their censorship: (1) materials considered a threat to the safety and security of the institution, and (2) items containing subject matter that is deemed to conflict with the institution’s stated goal of rehabilitation. Items that fall within the first category include materials that could promote violence (defined in multiple ways), information that could aid in escape, items that ‘promote’ or ‘encourage’ activities that are illegal or illicit in prison, and sexually explicit materials. The second broad category contains assorted items such as urban fiction novels, true crime books,
several particularly ‘graphic’ cowboy Western series, items that contain ‘references to’ or
‘promote’ gangs, gang symbols, or drugs, and (again) sexually explicit materials.

The justifications used to ban these items are tied to the two primary organizational goals
of the prison, which are grounded in definitions of the prison as a specific kind of institution that
must: (1) contain and control inmates (while providing some degree of security for both
employees and inmates), and (2) encourage the rehabilitation of prisoners (Foucault 2009).
Beyond these broad justifications, there are several other ways that prison authorities legitimize
banning sexually explicit materials, such as using the notion that (female) employees’ exposure
to these items constitutes sexual harassment; claiming that inmates who access these items are
more likely to engage in sexual assault, consensual homosexual acts, or masturbation; and
making references to the Prison Rape Elimination Act and/or the presence of ‘sex offenders’ in
the prison. These justifications paradoxically define prisoners as both hypersexual (i.e., potential
rapists) and nonsexual (i.e., beings expected to cease having sexual desires and engaging in
sexual activities).

Many of the justifications provided to legitimize censorship rest on notions of ‘prisoners’
as a particular class of people who are deservedly deprived of rights in ways that would be
unacceptable for ‘normal people’ (this is especially true for ‘sex offenders’, who occupy the
lowest stratum in the hierarchy of the excluded). Goffman’s (1961a) work on total institutions,
along with that of others who study deviance and organizations, exposes the “often routine ways
in which the formal processes of institutions ensure the authoritative categorization of
individuals, or whole groups, as subordinate or morally unacceptable in some way” (Dennis and
Martin 2005:200). Prisoners, as a category, and ‘sex offenders’ as an especially deplorable
subcategory, lie outside of our scope of justice, and thus, are “morally excluded, beyond our moral concerns, and eligible for deprivation, exploitation, and other harms that might be ignored or considered as normal, inevitable, and deserved” (Opotow et al. 2005:305). Thus, to categorically deny all inmates access to a great variety of reading materials remains morally unproblematic for most people in our society.

Prison authorities claim that they aim to control violence through censorship, yet they seem either to fail to recognize or explicitly deny that the very nature of the prison as a particular kind of total institution—one in which prison staff regularly exercises power over subordinate inmates, who lack autonomy and suffer assaults to their dignity and security (at the hands of both staff and other inmates) on a regular basis (Crewe 2011a; Goffman 1961a; Sykes [1958] 2007)—actually promotes violence.

Additionally, the organization’s stated goal of promoting ‘rehabilitation’ is one of the most frequently cited justifications for censorship, despite the fact that the state fails to supply adequate educational, vocational, and other ‘rehabilitative’ programs for inmates, and even when such programs are made available, they are often underfunded, poorly implemented, and ineffectual within the hostile and degrading prison environment. The notion of rehabilitation also assumes that a certain kind of pathology exists among incarcerated people, which the state must work to eradicate. The types of materials that are excluded, which purportedly ‘promote’ a ‘criminal lifestyle’ are based on hegemonic, racialized and classed notions of what constitutes ‘acceptable’ behavior, language, dress, and so on (i.e., what lies outside the ‘norm’ is justifiably brought to order through coercion and/or punishment). Essentially, ‘the prisoner’ is synonymous with ‘the Other’, an excluded being whom the state has the right and responsibility to ‘correct’.

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THE PRISON LIBRARIAN

Prison librarians occupy a tenuous position within the prison, as they are often regarded by custody staff and administrators as ‘civilians’ or ‘outsiders’ within the paramilitary organization of the prison. While many librarians see themselves as providers of information and facilitators of rehabilitation/reentry services, prison administrators and custody staff expect librarians to serve in a security capacity. Particularly for those who have been trained and have degrees in professional librarianship, playing the role of ‘prison librarian’ often produces role conflict, as they must simultaneously play multiple roles (librarian and prison worker) that have contradictory demands (Merton 1957). The values and ethics associated with the role of the librarian (a fundamentally anti-censorship stance) are incompatible with the values and ethics promoted by the prison for the prison worker (‘safety and security trumps all’—including first amendment rights and the freedom to read). In order to alleviate the feelings of unease produced by performing the contradictory role of ‘prison librarian’, some individuals engage in ‘role distance’, wherein they act in ways that signal to others that they do not fully accept, or resist to some degree, the role they are playing. Goffman (1961a:114) argues that engaging in these behaviors is prevalent in “situations where a subordinate must take orders or suggestions and must go along with the situation defined by superordinates.” However, not all librarians distance themselves from the ‘security’ aspect of the role; some embrace the role fully, including its expectations of assisting custody staff.

The interactions and relations that librarians have with coworkers and inmates are characterized and complicated by the unequal power relations within the prison hierarchy. Prison
librarians often have strained or antagonistic relations with custody staff and administrators, particularly when they question the authority of other prison workers or the legitimacy of the institution’s dominant mode of rationality. Relations with inmates tend to be more affable, yet they are at times tainted by distrust (on both sides) and the belief held by some librarians that prisoners often try to manipulate them. Overall, librarians reported that the primary sources of discontent in their relations were unsupportive administrators and hostile custody staff. This supports Tewksbury and Higgins (2006:262) finding that “the stress of correctional work is not so much a product of interactions with clients [prisoners] as it is a product of working in a bureaucratic, para-military organization.” Despite their often inhospitable work environments, many prison librarians find the job personally satisfying and believe they are performing a service that benefits incarcerated individuals and has a favorable impact on society. The interactions and relations that librarians have with inmates, custody staff, and administrators both influence and are influenced by their attitudes and behaviors around censorship.

Most librarians experience a great deal of ambivalence about the censorship that happens in prisons, but the level of support for or opposition to censorship varies widely among librarians. Librarians’ support for censorship is primarily motivated by the extraordinary environment of the prison, which they understand as dangerous; a belief in the need for rules and regulations within any organization, particularly in a prison; the notion that prisoners have committed crimes for which they are being punished and are therefore rightfully subject to restrictions of their rights; or the idea that inmates need to be rehabilitated, and some materials promote attitudes or behaviors that could impede this process. Librarians expressed their ambivalence about censorship in several ways: the role conflict they feel as ‘librarians’ and
‘prison workers’; the inconsistent and/or illogical rules about censorship in their institutions; feelings of powerlessness or resignation in the face of an impersonal and unyielding bureaucracy in which they are marginalized; and the notion that a certain degree of censorship is not very harmful so long as there are plenty of ‘acceptable’ reading materials available in the library. And finally, those librarians who espouse attitudes of opposition to censorship do so because of ethical concerns about censorship as a practice and their duty as librarians to fight against it; what they believe are extreme or undue restrictions on reading materials; the capricious, inconsistent, and arbitrary nature of the kind of censorship they witness in the prison; and the lack of input they have, as librarians and professionals, in the decision-making process about what is censored, something often done by people they perceive as inept or unduly punitive.

All librarians, regardless of their attitudes toward censorship, make choices about if, when, and how they will enforce, ignore, avoid, or resist the rules and regulations, as well as the actions of other prison staff, around censorship. If, following Foucault and Hornqvist, we define censorship as the exercise of power performed within an unequal field of relations, then a fundamental part of this framework is the notion that, just as the superordinate party can exercise power, so can the subordinate party exercise resistance. As actors who are members of a paramilitary, bureaucratic organization, librarians, who occupy positions subordinate to all but inmates within the prison hierarchy, must decide how and when to act upon their beliefs; they must make choices within constraints. The limitations placed upon possible actions within the total institution are substantial, and even among those librarians who theoretically oppose censorship, many are reluctant to openly resist it, either because they believe that doing so is futile, or they fear they will lose their jobs or suffer reprisal from custody staff and/or
administrators. They may have extraordinarily limited choices, but they can choose (an assertion that resonates with Foucault’s notion of the always-present possibility for resistance within power relations). Some librarians employ rationales to ‘excuse’ their (in)actions when they do not align with their beliefs about how they should behave. At times, this results in a state of denial of the unpleasant truth of one’s contradictory ways, or a sort of lying to oneself—what Sartre (1956) calls living in ‘bad faith’.

However, some librarians do actively challenge and resist censorship in a variety of ways. Some of these acts of subversion are done through official channels, such as filing paperwork to contest an item’s censorship, while others are done in a more confrontational manner, such as refusing to comply with a custody officer’s order to remove certain items. Other times, librarians’ acts of resistance are done in the backstage, through informal means like ignoring or ‘tweaking’ policies in ways that their coworkers will not likely discover.

Finally, some librarians’ attitudes and actions around censorship change over time as they work in the prison. Overall, for those librarians whose attitudes do change, they tend to become more, rather than less, restrictive the longer they work in a prison, suggesting that they increasingly adopt an ‘institutional perspective’ (i.e., the safety and security of the institution justifies censorship) as they become socialized into and play the role of the prison librarian. This supports Goffman’s (1959) claim that the roles we play change us and make us who we are. As someone plays the role of ‘prison librarian’ (which already has certain expectations), and as she continues to play that role according to those expectations, the role becomes part of her ‘self’. Thinking about prison librarians as workers in a total institution—a large and often impersonal bureaucracy—we can also understand these changes using Weber’s (mistranslated) notion of the
‘iron cage’, which should more accurately be called a ‘shell of steel’. The shell is hard and heavy, imposing a certain shape upon its wearer, yet it remains malleable to some degree, thus allowing for (always limited or constrained) motions or actions of resistance (Baehr 2001; Crewe 2011a). While librarians bring with them their personal and professional ethics, a range of experiences, and diverse values and beliefs, once they enter the prison, they begin to develop a ‘shell of steel’ that limits (but does not wholly determine) the range of possibilities for action. Arguably, the longer they play the role, and thus, wear the ‘shell of steel’, the more likely they are to adopt the institutional perspective as their own. There are, of course, exceptions to this, as some librarians actually became more opposed to censorship over time, as they witness what they perceive to be unjust actions that violate prisoners’ rights.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, there are several ways that DOCs could limit undue censorship and create a less restrictive and punitive environment. Some of the following policy recommendations pertain to the library in general, and others are geared more towards the practice of censorship. First, all prisons (and other types of ‘correctional facilities’) should hire professional librarians with a Master’s degree in Library and/or Information Science. The expertise and professional code of ethics that professional librarians bring with them to the position prepare them to assess literary materials in a holistic manner and critically assess

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30 These recommendations are necessarily limited to those dealing with the library and censorship policies, and thus presume the continued existence of the prison as a total institution (an institution to which I am ethically opposed), and so all of these recommendations are mere reformist strategies that are likely to have little real impact on the lives of the millions of people who are punished, marginalized, and excluded by the criminal justice system. Policy recommendations alone cannot change something so deeply embroiled in our culture and socioeconomic system.
censorship practices. Second, administrators should allocate more resources to the library, including funding for materials, library staff, and space. All prisoners should have access to a browsing library that is adequately stocked with current materials and provides a space in which they may read or engage in recreational activities. Third, due to the overwhelming rates of limited literacy among those who are incarcerated, prisons should employ professionally trained literacy specialists, as well as peer mentors, who work with librarians to develop programs that increase literacy and decrease the stigma associated with limited literacy.

Fourth, in order to minimize the amount of censorship that occurs, DOCs should limit the discretionary power of administrators and custody staff in making decisions about censorship. All prisons should be required to have a publications review committee comprised of people who occupy various positions within the institution, including, but not limited to, a representative from the security team, a prison librarian, an educator, a prisoner, and potentially a librarian who works in the state library system at a public or school library. Every item that is challenged should be addressed by this committee in a timely manner, and once a decision has been made on an item’s admissibility, inmates and staff should be notified and should have the right to petition the decision. Fifth, as the research has shown the arbitrary and often biased ways in which censorship occurs, all institutions should henceforth dissolve any existing disapproved reading lists and require that each item on the list be reevaluated if someone attempts to bring it into the prison again, whereupon it will pass through the publications review committee. (This is essentially what happened recently in the state of Virginia following a lawsuit over the egregious nature of the disapproved reading list.) And finally, a conversation should take place between practitioners, researchers, and currently and formerly incarcerated people in order to reevaluate,
using scientific evidence, policies about restricting sexually explicit materials (which would likely lead to permitting nude images or ‘soft-core’ porn but not penetration or ‘hardcore’ porn). The members of this committee/conversation should invite input from both inmates and prison staff from other countries, many of which permit sexually explicit materials in their prisons and also have much lower rates of sexual abuse.

FUTURE RESEARCH
The current research project focuses specifically on prison librarians, and while their perspectives are undoubtedly important and overlooked in the criminological literature, the biggest limitation of the research is that it is only able to capture librarians’ perceptions of other people’s attitudes and experiences around censorship and reading. Clearly, the prison library, as a space and a resource, is most crucial for the individuals who are incarcerated in the prison. Therefore, future research should examine the ways in which currently and formerly incarcerated people have used and defined the library, how censorship policies have affected them, and what sort of role reading has played in their lives (after and/or during incarceration). This matters not only for understanding how reading can provide a temporary escape from the pains of imprisonment, but also in a more pragmatic sense, in that those who do not possess the fundamental literacy skills necessary to engage in such reading may be deprived not only of this outlet during incarceration, but of myriad opportunities in life. Future research should also focus on existing literacy programs and book groups to understand how various approaches are experienced by and might benefit people with a range of literacy skills.
The voices of prison administrators and custody staff, whom librarians claim are often indifferent about or hostile toward the library and other spaces and programs they deem unessential, are also absent from the current study. Research that asks administrators and custody staff similar questions about the processes of and justifications for censorship could reveal more complex and nuanced perspectives than prison librarians attribute to these individuals. It could also contribute to our understanding of the various ways that actors exercise power within total institutions.

And finally, more work should be done about prisoners’ lack of access to the internet. Although I did not address the issue in this manuscript, it is a topic that librarians spoke about frequently, often with considerable concern. The lack of internet access (and training for how to use the internet—particularly for long-term inmates) has consequences for communication with family, access to information, and the chance for success in today’s digital world. American policies that restrict internet access wholesale should be compared to policies in other countries where incarcerated people have (limited or supervised) access to the internet. Perhaps looking to places where access is granted could lead to suggestions for changes to the restrictive nature of American policies about internet access in prisons.
REFERENCES


Farabbee, David. 2005. Rethinking Rehabilitation: Why Can’t We Reform Our Criminals?


*United States v. One Book Called Ulysses by James Joyce*, 72 F.2d 705, 706 (1934).


APPENDIX A: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Please check the box next to the appropriate response(s) or fill in the blank. There are questions on both sides of the paper (total of 4 pages of questions). When you’re done, please use the self-addressed, stamped envelope to return the survey to me by 06/06/11. Thank you so much for taking the time to complete the survey.

1.) What is your position at the prison library?
2.) Do you work at the prison library full-time or part-time?
   Full-time Part-time
3.) Approximately how many years have you worked in a prison library?
4.) What is your educational background?
   High school diploma or GED
   Associate’s degree
   Bachelor’s degree
   Master’s degree
   PhD
   Other_____________________
4a.) In what subject/major do you hold your degree(s)?
5.) What is your gender?
   Female Male Transgender or other
6.) Which security level(s) best describes your institution? (Please check all that apply)
   Supermax Maximum Medium Minimum Other_____________________
7.) Approximately how many inmates are in your institution?
   Less than 500 501-1000 1001-2000 2001-3000 3001-4000 More than 4000
8.) How many (non-inmate) staff, including yourself, currently work in your library?
   1 2 3 4 5 More than 5
9.) Approximately how many of the following are in your library?
   Books Less than 5000 5000-10,000 10,001-15,000 More than 15,000 Don’t Know
   Magazine subscriptions None 1-25 26-50 51-75 76-100 More than 100 Don’t Know
   DVDs/videos None 1-50 51-100 101-150 151-200 More than 200 Don’t Know
10.) Who selects the books and other materials for the library? (Please check all that apply)
    I do Chaplain Library staff of more than one Superintendent/Warden
    Other (if so, who?) ___________________
11.) Does your library have a formal collection development policy for library materials?
    Yes No □ (If No, skip to question 12)
11a.) Who makes the policy? (Please check all that apply)
    Myself □ (Please answer question 11b)
    Library staff of more than one □ (Please answer question 11b)
    Superintendent/ Warden
    Department of Corrections
    Department of Education
    Don’t Know
    Other_______________________
11b.) If you (or you and other library staff) make the policy, who has to approve it? (Please check all that apply)
   Nobody
   Superintendent/ Warden
   Assistant Superintendent/ Warden
   Department of Corrections
   Department of Education
   Don’t Know
   Other________________________
12.) If your library accepts donated materials, do the materials have to be screened and approved by corrections officers or administrators before being sent to the library?
   Yes No Don’t accept donations
13.) The following items are banned in some prisons. Please check any of the following books that would not be allowed, for any reason, in your library’s collection.
   Prison Legal News
   In Cold Blood by Truman Capote
   The Anarchist Cookbook
   Blood in My Eye by George Jackson
   48 Laws of Power by Robert Greene
   33 Strategies of War by Robert Greene
   Works of Noam Chomsky
   Works of James Patterson
   Maxim magazine
   Bruce Lee’s Fighting Method
   Dungeons & Dragons Manuals
   Slocum series by Jake Logan
   Different Seasons (with Shawshank Redemption) by Steven King
14.) Does your prison have a list of specific books or other materials that are restricted from the library?
   Yes No Don’t know □ (If No or Don’t Know, skip to question 15)
14a.) Are you able to provide a copy of the list for comparative research purposes?
   (The list can be sent with the completed survey, or you can let me know how to access it.)
   Yes No
15.) Does your prison have regulations about certain types or categories of books and other materials that are restricted from the library?
   Yes No Don’t know □ (If No or Don’t Know, skip to question 16)
15a.) Which types or categories of materials are restricted?
   Sex
   Violence
   Race
   Religion
   Terrorism
   Subversive politics
   Instructional manuals depicting weapons, escape, etc.
Mystery/suspense novels
True crime
Graphic novels
Urban fiction
Gangs
Works written by prisoners
Other(s)____________________________

15b.) Of those categories that are restricted, are there any you think should be less restricted or not restricted at all?
Sex
Violence
Race
Religion
Terrorism
Subversive politics
Instructional manuals depicting weapons, escape, etc.
Mystery/suspense novels
True crime
Graphic novels
Urban fiction
Gangs
Works written by prisoners
Other(s)____________________________

15c.) Who interprets the regulations to decide if a specific book or material falls into the restricted category? (Please check all that apply)
Myself
More than one library staff
Superintendent/Warden
Department of Corrections
Department of Education
Other ______________________________________

16.) Do inmates have any access to the internet in your library?
Yes No Not yet, but there are plans to implement an internet policy.

17.) Are you familiar with any of the following cases related to censorship in prisons?
Turner v. Saflcy Procunier v. Martinez
Lewis v. Casey Bounds v. Smith

18.) Are you familiar with the American Library Association’s stance on censorship both in general and as it pertains to prison libraries? Yes No Somewhat

19.) In the past, when the administration has censored materials, how often have you disagreed with their decision to do so?
Always Most of the time Some of the time Hardly Ever Never Hasn’t happened

20.) When materials are removed from your library, how often is this process a formal administrative procedure versus an informal action of individual prison staff? (Circle a number.)
21.) Have you ever disagreed with other prison staff about censorship in your prison’s library? If so, did you say anything? If not, why not? If so, could you describe what the disagreement involved and how it was resolved?

22.) What, if anything, do you believe should be censored in prison libraries?

23.) What effects do restrictions of materials have on the library and the prisoners, and how do inmates and staff respond to this?

24.) Can you describe a time when a specific book, magazine or other item was censored by the staff? What was that item, who censored it, and why?

25.) Have your attitudes about prison censorship changed since you started working in a prison library? If so, how?

26.) Would you like to participate in an interview (either in person or over the phone)? Yes No If so, how should I contact you?
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

How long have you worked as a prison librarian?
How did you become a prison librarian?
Do you have to follow the same rules as the mailroom?
   If something is rejected in the mailroom, do you get notification that you can’t have it in
   the library?
For the list or types of restricted books:
What are some of the titles, authors or types of books on the list?
Who makes the list?
Do you think that it is a good idea to restrict these authors/titles?
Do inmates ever want or request these authors/titles?
   How often, and what’s most common?
Do inmates ever get a hold of these authors/titles, even though they are restricted?
   What happens? Example?
How do inmates share this material among themselves—do they trade it or barter with it, sell it,
give it away?
Are there any authors/titles/types of books that are not restricted that you think should be?
What do you think prison administrators’ main concerns are regarding limiting access to certain
   types of materials?
Do all prison administrators share the same concerns? How much of censorship depends on the
   individual warden and staff at each facility?
Are there fundamental differences in the perspectives of prison administrators versus most
   prison librarians on this issue?
What are your main concerns?
How often do you have a discussion or disagreement with the superintendent, other prison
   administrators or C.O.s about whether or not a certain book should be restricted?
   Is it usually C.O.s or higher-ups?
   Example?
What effects do you think these restrictions have on the inmates?
   (probe answers with leads…)
   Do you think the restrictions affect their morale?
   Do they affect their ability to make decisions and feel autonomous?
Have the restriction policies changed while you’ve been working there?
If so, how, and who initiated the changes?
What do you think of these changes?
Since you started working in prison libraries, have your feelings about restriction changed? If
   so, how?
   Example?
Do librarians overlook the restricted policy for some inmates they trust?
   Do librarians ever find out that inmates have restricted material but then do not report the
   inmates or try to confiscate their stuff?
What do you think the purpose of the prison library should be ideally?
   Is this the way it really is at your prison?
Does reading matter in prison? If so, why?
What do you think the purpose of prison is?
What do you think about lack of Internet access in prisons?
Do you foresee this happening anytime soon?
Do you think there could be a way to do this?
(If the goal is rehabilitation, and part of that is successful reentry, is this possible without providing Internet access and training?)