

Identity, Power, and Control in Prison:

A Within-Case Thematic Analysis

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Methodological Rationale and Alignment

This study explores a simple but deeply human question: How do prisoners describe their identity as shaped by experiences of power and control while incarcerated? Rather than testing a hypothesis, the goal is to listen carefully and understand how someone inside prison makes sense of who they are now, who they were before, and who they hope to become.

The design follows a qualitative, semi-structured interview approach. Open-ended “how” and “what” questions were intentionally used to invite reflection rather than short answers. This structure allows consistency across interviews while leaving room for depth and nuance.

For analysis, this study draws on William F. Owen’s (1984) approach to interpretive themes. Owen explains that themes can be identified through repetition (exact words repeated), recurrence (similar meaning expressed in different language), and forcefulness (strong emphasis or emotional intensity).

To ensure the findings are trustworthy, this study also aligns with Andrew K. Shenton’s (2004) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These standards help ensure that interpretations are grounded in the participant’s words rather than the researcher’s assumptions.

Interview Questions

(Questions are ordered intentionally, beginning with background and moving toward deeper reflection on identity and future orientation.)

Background and Pre-Incarceration Identity

1. How would you describe who you were as a person before you were incarcerated?
2. What role, if any, did ideas about power and control play in your life before prison?

Experiences of Power and Control in Prison

3. How do you experience power and control in your everyday life inside prison?
4. How do you feel when decisions about your daily life are made by others rather than by you?
5. How do prison rules, routines, or authority figures shape how you think about yourself?
6. How, if at all, do issues of power and control extend to your relationships with fellow inmates?

Agency and Adaptation

7. How do you try to maintain a sense of control or personal agency while incarcerated?
8. In what ways, if any, has being incarcerated changed how you see yourself?
9. How has your understanding of who you are shifted over the course of your incarceration?

Future Identity and Reentry

10. How do your experiences with power and control in prison influence how you imagine yourself after release?

Closing Question

11. Is there anything else about power, control, or identity during incarceration that you feel is important for me to understand?

Optional probes included:

- Can you tell me more about that?
- Can you give me a specific example?
- What was that experience like for you?
- How did that affect how you saw yourself?
- What changed over time?

Alignment With Best Practices

This interview:

- Uses open-ended “how” and “what” questions
- Moves from less sensitive (background) to more reflective (identity shifts)
- Incorporates multiple question types (behavior, feelings, beliefs, background)
- Ends with a catch-all question
- Allows flexibility for probing while maintaining structure
- Centers the participant’s lived experience and insider perspective

Within-Case Analysis: Francisco Capo

Francisco Manuel Capo, Jr., is an inmate in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice McConnell Unit in Beeville. He is currently serving a 40-year sentence for murder. He was interviewed for this project on February 11, 2026. The following themes emerged from his interview transcript (see Appendix A) using Owen’s (1984) framework.

Theme 1: From Exploitation to Self-Awareness

One of the strongest patterns in Francisco’s interview is his repeated contrast between who he “was” and who he is “now.”

He describes his former self as:

- “Irresponsible”
- “A user”
- Someone who “used people”

- Someone who “wasn’t a good person”

These phrases demonstrate repetition and recurrence (Owen, 1984). Even when he uses different wording, the underlying meaning remains consistent: he sees his pre-incarceration identity as morally flawed and exploitative.

The forcefulness is especially clear when he states plainly, “I wasn’t a good person.” There is no hedging or minimization. This declarative tone signals deep reflection.

Over time, however, he describes becoming “self-aware,” “sober,” and committed to change. The identity shift is not sudden; he acknowledges it took years. That gradual recognition reinforces the theme that identity transformation is a process, not an event.

Thematic Interpretation

Incarceration functions as a site of moral reckoning. Identity is reconstructed not defensively but through acknowledgment of wrongdoing and deliberate reform. Power shifts from manipulation of others to regulation of self.

Theme 2: External Control, Internal Discipline

Francisco repeatedly emphasizes how prison removes autonomy:

- “We don’t schedule our feeding time.”
- “Everything is scheduled for us.”
- “Control is usually not in my hands.”

This language shows clear recurrence around structural control.

Yet, alongside this loss of external power, he describes cultivating internal control:

- “I do what I’m supposed to do.”
- “I try to remain grounded.”
- “I try to be the same person every day.”
- “I’ve only had one fight in 23 years.”

Thematic Interpretation

Although prison removes structural autonomy, Francisco constructs agency through compliance, consistency, and emotional regulation. Control becomes internalized self-governance rather than dominance over others. Here, power shifts meaning—it becomes discipline and emotional control.

Theme 3: Power as Moral Responsibility

Francisco distinguishes between two forms of power in prison:

1. Coercive power (gangs, drug extortion, sexual abuse)
2. Constructive influence (peer education, life coaching, cultural reform)

He references drug exploitation, sexual abuse, and job “politics,” yet contrasts these with his role as a peer educator and life coach, stating, “We need to change” and “It’s about making positive change.”

Statements such as “I don’t want that guy to be my neighbor” reflect strong forcefulness (Owen, 1984).

Thematic Interpretation

Power becomes ethical responsibility rather than domination. Francisco situates himself as morally accountable not only for his own reform but for influencing others’ transformation.

Theme 4: Identity as Ongoing Process

Francisco emphasizes gradual change:

- Arrested in 2003
- Drug-free since 2012
- “The shift was not immediate”

He repeatedly frames change as incremental—through self-awareness, reflection, family support, and continued good habits.

Thematic Interpretation

Identity reconstruction is longitudinal. Transformation emerges over years, not through a singular rehabilitative moment. This strengthens the authenticity of the narrative, avoiding an “instant redemption” story and instead presenting identity as developmental.

Theme 5: Rehumanization and Future Orientation

Francisco challenges dehumanizing perceptions:

- “Almost everyone will be released.”
- “It’s in society’s best interest.”
- “It’s about being humane.”
- “Most people don’t care until it affects them.”

His analogy comparing inmates to dogs receiving air conditioning reflects strong emotional forcefulness (Owen, 1984).

Thematic Interpretation

He constructs inmate identity as human, reform-capable, and socially consequential. Identity is relational and future-oriented. He frames incarceration as preparation for reentry and emphasizes society’s stake in humane rehabilitation.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

To strengthen rigor, Shenton’s (2004) four criteria were applied:

Credibility

Direct quotations ground interpretations. Themes were derived inductively using Owen's framework.

Transferability

Thick description of prison life, gang culture, and reform efforts allows contextual judgment by readers.

Dependability

The analytic process was transparent: transcript review → repetition → recurrence → forcefulness → thematic clustering.

Confirmability

Interpretations are anchored in verbatim excerpts and avoid imposing external theoretical constructs not present in the participant's framing.

Overall Interpretation

Francisco's narrative reflects a clear identity transformation shaped by experiences of power and control.

Before incarceration, power meant manipulating others.

Inside prison, power means mastering oneself.

Looking ahead, power means influencing positive change in others.

Using Owen's (1984) thematic framework and Shenton's (2004) trustworthiness criteria, this within-case analysis demonstrates that incarceration, for this participant, has reshaped identity from exploitative autonomy to disciplined moral agency.

Reflexive Reflection on the Interview Process

The interviewer established rapport and maintained open-ended questioning. However, deeper probing at emotionally significant moments may have yielded richer data. Sensitive topics

required neutrality and attentiveness. Overall, the participant constructed his narrative in his own terms, aligning with qualitative best practices.

References

- Owen, W. F. (1984). Interpretive themes in relational communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70(3), 274–287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383697>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>

Appendix A:

INTERVIEW WITH FRANCISCO CAPO ON FEBRUARY 11, 2026

Interviewer

Okay, so we should be rolling now. All right, so thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this study is to better understand how individuals describe their identity as shaped by experiences of power and control during incarceration. This will take about 45 minutes or an hour so to get this done. So I'm interested in your honest reflections and detailed experiences. There are no right or wrong answers, and everything you share will remain confidential. And at any time you want to stop the interview or skip a question, you're free to do so if you consent, I'd like to record this interview for accuracy and transcription and the recording will be securely stored and destroyed after transcription and analysis. So you have any questions?

Francisco Capo

Ah, No.

INT

okay, so, so how would you like to be identified in this paper? By your real name?

FC

Sure, that's fine.

INT

Okay, can you state it, please?

FC

My name is Francisco Manuel Capo Jr.

INT

And can you tell us what you're willing to share regarding your incarceration, the sentence thing, anything along that nature?

FC

I'm I'm fine with sharing everything. I guess.

INT

I mean, but if you would tell me here so we can record it, okay?

FC

Well, I was sentenced to 40 years for murder in 2003 and as we speak, this year, 2026 will be I'm coming into my 23rd year of incarceration.

INT

Okay, now, how would you describe who you were as a person before you were incarcerated?

FC

Before I was incarcerated, I was an irresponsible, the word I'm looking for is user. I used people, I use relationships, for as much as I could, I guess I was, you know, aside from the fact that I couldn't hold the job, most of my marriages, in any relationship, I had failed because I ultimately ruined them by Using the person for what I could get, mostly monetarily because of my drug addiction.

INT

And what role if any, did you feel at that point, or did you even think about power and control in your life before you got incarcerated?

FC

No, I've never thought of it as a power. But upon reflection in my time in this place, I realized that due to my addiction and just again, being irresponsible, not wanting, or rather, yeah, that's basically not wanting to hold down dub in doing that. I I stipend off of people and in and of itself. I guess you could say I abused that, and maybe not thought of it as a power. But I know sweet talk, I guess, would get me where I was going.

INT

Okay, interesting, interesting. Now let's talk about your time in prison here. How do you how do you experience power and control in your everyday life in prison. Now this has this be any way you can, you know, consider whether you were talking about your your relationship with fellow prisoners, your relationship with jailers, your relationship with the system, anything along that line.

FC

Okay, well, um, in prison, as you probably know, we are a microcosm of society, right? So basically, what goes on up there goes on in here, albeit in smaller, smaller scale. And so what you have in here are you? You have the stereotypical movie power where you see gangs flex their muscles and yeah, they they're not as prevalent today as they were when I first came in. As the culture has been changed, or is changing, rather for the better anyway, but it goes on, and there are people that still get abused, as far as whether it be sexual abuse or whether it be extortion or through drug addiction. Again, you know the most of the drugs being brought in are

usually handled by some of the gangs in this place, and so because of that, you know, that's the power in and of itself that they can use to extort money from people through their drug

addiction. Me, the way I've seen power is through my conduct,

I do what I'm supposed to do, and therefore I get a better job, and because of my better job, then I have a little bit more freedom inside here I if that makes sense, you know, I can, I'm still not free, but I'm freer than other guys to do different things because of my content. Yeah, so maybe that not a power per se, but it is something that I've used. As far as you know. I've never been in a gang, nor do I care to join one. So I had, you know, 23 years in prison. You have to do. You have to make your way somehow. And so I'm neither a big guy and nor my super strong or whatever, you know, so I've only had one site, thank you guys. And you know, the thing is, I try to avoid those at all costs and just try to use my brain in here is more more than I have, or rather, more than I did before.

INT

Okay, and how do you feel when decisions about your daily life are made by others, rather than you?

FC

That is something that we deal with on a daily basis, because as inmates,

we don't schedule our feeding time. We don't schedule our time to get our clothes. We don't schedule our sleep time. Everything is scheduled for us. Likewise, commissary, library, you know everything job, you know we're told when to do it and how to do it so on a daily basis, control is usually not in my hands. I'm really in a structured place, and therefore I have to remit that control to these people. Now, that being said, there are times that you know, things again, that are out of our control or my control. Anyway, you know the computer is down at commissary, and so therefore we can't go to commas there when it's our scheduled time. We have a lockdown. So therefore I can't get a visit or something similar, you know. So there are things that screw up our days.

An officer having a bad day, or flexing their muscle, or his muscle, decides not to let people go to work because he's just not feeling it, and you know. And these are things that we have to deal with daily anyway.

INT

Okay, now, what about prison rules, the routines authority figures? How do they shape how you think about yourself?

FC

It has changed here in the last, I would say, three to four years, they've tried to change the culture to a more positive culture, whereas in the past, administration didn't truly care, I would say, about how you lived in here, as far as as long as you didn't die or you didn't cause any problems. They're okay with you being here, just as always, they're not escaping this, as long as you're not, you know, doing something wreaking havoc, you're okay. But now they're trying to institute positive things, and they're trying to promote positivity through programs, rehabilitational efforts made possible by peers. We have peer educators, we have life coaches, we have field ministers, and so all of these guys take part in programs and church services and anything to promote. So yeah, and this is all allowed through administration. So yeah, I would say that today is a much better place in prison as far as the culture than it was when I first came in.

INT

And how does that impact your thoughts about yourself?

FC

It impacts me in the sense that I've taken a role in being part of the positive change. I am not the same person today that I was when I first entered prison. I now view positivity as far as changing your life so that when you leave this place that you can impact in a positive way, whether it be your community or your future, your family or your friends. You know, in other words, don't, don't waste your time in prison, use it to better yourself, and that only comes through just trying

to create the positive environment here. And so like that, I you know, it's impacted me, just like it's impacting others. So, yeah, I think.

INT

Okay, speaking of others, so let's talk about your relationships with your fellow inmates. How, if at all, do these power issues and controls extend to your relationships with them?

FC

That's a tricky question. Okay? Because as much as I want positivity to rule the day. Not everybody buys into it, and so through the what I said earlier, whereby you you act good and you get a better job, therefore you can do more things, right? Well, use that to their advantage, as opposed to, you know, for the betterment of this place. And so you have some guys that have the their mentality. I now, I am now a life coach, or I am now a field minister or what have you, and try to use that to their benefit to gain things, to subvert the system, if you will.

And because of that, they might lord it over other inmates, I've learned to just let if the person is a good friend of mine, or someone that I know, I will tell them, hey, look, you're going in the wrong direction. You're abusing your authority, or whatever it is you're abusing this. You're we're not supposed to be doing that. But most often, you know, they'll continue until they until they come to abrupt stop by administration gets going to what they're doing, or whatever it is they planned on doing, and therefore removed from wherever, whatever position they had. So, yeah, we call it politics in here, the politics of the job, you know. And then that's just how it is right now.

INT

How do you try to maintain your own sense of control within your own life while you're in there,

FC

I try to mean remain grounded by being the same person every day. We try to maintain a cheerful, jovial attitude, and I don't try to let things that are out of my control bother me to the

point where I become angry or try to lash out at anyone. And if I do get to that point, I'll, you know, and if someone's in the area or vicinity and is approaching me, I'll let them know. Hey, look, I'm having a bad day today, or something like that. I'll have that decency to let them know, not today, you know. And so because of that, again, I think the fact that I've been in here 23 years and only had one fight then to believe that I've done well in that area, I try to be the same person every day, right?

INT

And has being incarcerated changed how you see yourself?

FC

Absolutely, it's not something I'm proud of, but I've come to the realization that the decisions that I made to come in here, like the positive programming, I've decided to use this time to invest in myself to become a better person, taking some college courses, computer college courses. In here, I've done peer education in which I am also a peer educator. Now I try to help the community as much as I can, or whenever possible. You know, things that the selfish, irresponsible person that I was before would not have ever even thought of doing much less in prison. So, yeah, I don't do drugs, I don't drink. I've maintained that I can say that I've been sober since 2006 since 2006 I've not had a single drink. drink, and I have not touched a drug since 2012 so, I mean, I can't, I guess, with that 14 years. So yeah, and it still goes on. It goes on daily in here, there's drug abuse, there's alcohol, there's all kinds of things in here, homosexuality, and it's just like the world, you can choose to engage in it or not, and I've chosen not to, because that's what brought me here, so I feel like I'm a better person.

INT

Okay, now you mentioned that you've been incarcerated 23 years. How has your understanding of who you are shifted over that course of your incarceration? Yeah, how's it shifted? You know, How's it changed or grown over that period?

FC

Well, I've become self aware in the sense that, again, I'm now aware of that I was, as much as I'd like to believe that I was a good person. I wasn't. I wasn't a good person, because, although I may have had good intentions for something, ultimately, my plan was always to deceive people, to try to get money or out of the relationship, or just to not work, or if I was at work, was to find a way how to swipe something. So, yeah, I mean, I wasn't a good person, and I see that now. I see it clearly. I see it in the actions of the guys that are around me that are still in their own addictions or going through their own problems, and I see me years back, and thankfully, as I said, you know, through self awareness, through self reflection, through the help of my family, I've been able to see and and just, you know, change and again, the shift was it was not immediate, as as you can tell, since I was locked up in 2003 and the last time I touched the drug was 2012 so there was still a little bit of the old me in here until that point when I realized that I needed to change. You know, I'm in here for doing some of the things that I was still doing, and so I needed to make that change. And I did okay.

INT

And how do your experiences with power control, influence, how you see yourself after your relief, or how you imagine it's going to be after you get out.

FC

Well, there's a saying that being in prison and saying that you're ready to go doesn't equate to being ready to go once you get outside. So the only thing I have is what I have in here so far. So I continue to build upon what I have, which is, again, you know, just continuing good habits of treating others as I would treat myself or be, be as I would want to be treated rather and being responsible when I don't have to be responsible. You know, just doing the right thing, even if I know I can get away with it and not do the right thing. I'm still trying to do the right thing. I'm not getting paid to work in here. So there's a lot of guys that choose not to work because of that. As they say in here, they lay it down. They're not going to work. But I've worked the entire time that I was that I've been in here, and again, I've kind of risen in the ranks, if you will. As far as employment goes, I'm currently in probably one of the better jobs on units, but that's only through good, you know, good behavior, doing the right thing, not, you know, just not, not being involved in the things that I used to.

INT

And lastly, is there anything else about power, control or identity during incarceration that you feel it's important for me or anybody else out here to understand?

FC

Aside from the obvious, which is that there is still sexual abuse that goes on in here. There are people that get abused sexually, and again, not sexually, but still through the fact that they may be an addict and have a dealer come to them and try to extort them for money, knowing that they're an addict. And so again, being a peer educator is part of my job to try to instill changes and create a culture difference whereby we see each other as humans in here and not, I guess, not money bag or, you know, not a, you know, We need to change because the my neighbor in here could be my neighbor out in the world upon my release. And do I want the guy that selling drugs in here to be the guy that's selling drugs out there? No, I want him to change, just like I've been trying to make change. And so, you know, same thing goes for the guy that molesting or sexually abusing guys in here. You know, I don't want to, I don't want him to be my neighbor out in the world, or to be your neighbor. You know, he could be in here for car theft and got involved in on the sexual side of things, and now he's a rapist. So, you know, the state doesn't know about that, you know, unless he gets caught. So we as inmates see the things that a lot of the things that the administration doesn't see. So yeah, again, as being a peer educator, I want to instill changes in those guys, because I don't want to make that out there, you know, for for their own benefit and for people's benefit out there too. You know, the whole thing is about making positive change. And so, you know, again, you know, you still have your movie cliches going on, not as much as they used to, but we still need. We still have a while to go as far as making complete changes in here. So if I wanted anything is just that people in society should society should know that there is an attempt to try to change things in here, but we're still far from where we need to be, but we still need to make change.

INT

Okay, and and this is just a separate question, just kind of following up. Do you think the the outside world's perception of you is different than what it really is in there. You know, you hear so much about the law and order, lock them up and they don't need air conditioning, that sort of stuff. Do you think they see you more as animals? And then what you guys actually, you know, you are in daily life?

FC

Funny you say that because my brother told me upon me, commenting to him that it was extremely hot in here, that it was my choices that brought me in here. And he was correct. He was correct. It is it is it was my choices that brought me into place Now that being said, there are humane areas or things that the state can improve on, and they have been trying. This particular unit is slated for air condition here in the near future, when I don't know, but yeah, because you know, even though we've committed crimes, at some point, almost almost every one of these guys and girls will be released back into society. So I think, personally, that it's in society's best interest to get us as much change as possible, or, you know, to educate us. Maybe not comfortable. I mean, it's not about comfort, but it is about being humane. You know, if, if dogs and dog shelters get air conditioned, then, you know, personally, I believe that we should do but again, that's an opinion.

The thing is, you know, most people don't care about inmates until it affect them personally or a family member? And then they understand that, you know, it can happen to anyone.

INT

So okay, good point. All right, I want to go ahead and stop this recording. Thank you so much for your time.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>