

The Grind Game: How Insults Form Solidarity and Resilience Among Correctional Facility Staff Members

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Abstract

Conventions of politeness, though culturally specific, tend to apply broadly to different speech events and social settings. Certain social contexts, however, accomplish positive interactional goals by violating politeness conventions, one of these contexts being dialogue between prison employees. Prison employee dialogue encourages the use of insults via engagement in a 'grind game' that aims to build rapport between coworkers and demonstrate one's competence in a prison environment. This paper locates these types of interaction within key concepts of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, and then develops a framework for understanding how they are used and the relational outcomes they accomplish.

Introduction

Among the many ways people promote friendship and solidarity, insults are rarely at the top of the list. More common are discourse strategies such as politeness, in-group jargon, and conformity to culture-specific rules of conversation. In a 2024 paper titled "The Sociolinguistics of Prison Slang," the authors investigated the sociolinguistics of prison slang usage in American prisons. This paper extends the scope of that discussion with respect to the ways language is used by prison inmates and staff. This research sequel specifically aims to demonstrate how staff members at United States correctional facilities routinely use language that, in other social contexts, would be considered offensive and demeaning to establish comradery and build rapport amongst staff members.

Literature addressing the linguistic and sociological importance of this type of rapport building will be utilized as anchor points for the establishment of our thesis. We propose that insults can build comradery between staff members of equal standing by building more cohesive working teams. For the basis of this thesis, we will complete a literature review relating to four zones of sociolinguistic research: domains, politeness strategies, solidarity, and jargon and slang. We then utilize semi-structured interviews from correctional staff members either currently or formerly employed by the United States correctional system in the Northeast Region of the United States. Orienting our interviews toward those four zones of linguistic literature, we discuss how 'grind games' and insults are employed by prison staff, and the rules by which they are formulated and employed (Lombardo, 1985). The outcome will effectively be a selective discourse analysis of prison staff.

Background Literature & Concepts

Domain

A key concept of sociolinguistics is *domain*, a specific social context in which particular types or patterns of language use are expected. Domain can be defined by any number of features, including the physical setting, participants, purposes and activities that characterize it and, in each case, the linguistic norms that prevail therein (Bell, 2014). Common kinds of domains include educational, familial, employment, political and religious settings. The domain ensconces the independent variable factors in the socio-linguist connection, with the understanding that the social circumstances and common expectations typical of that domain promote the use of a particular language, dialect, style, or register, and may furthermore specify which topics and ways of speaking are expected or dispreferred.

The domain of this study is the correctional facility, which has been described as a *total institution*, meaning that most of what is needed for daily life of inmates (and, to some extent, staff) is available right within its confines. This domain self-isolates because of intense security needs, its activities locating themselves ‘inside the wall’ in contrast to being ‘up top’ or ‘on the streets’. Romaine (2000:44) notes that domains bring pressure to bear upon language, originating in “economic, administrative, cultural, political [and] religious” factors; in this case, the exceptional demands for control and safety within a prison further intensify its language expectations, as do its need for rigid organization. This study proceeds on the assumption that a prison setting creates a unique, highly defined domain.

Politeness Strategies

Brown and Gilman’s 1978 seminal classic, *Politeness*, has left in its wake a plethora of research that has aligned with their conclusion that, even cross-culturally, politeness involves wording that circumvents face-threatening acts (FTAs). However, R. Watts’ (2003) resounding challenge to their hypothesis proves essential to the authors of this paper with its premise that the way politeness is demonstrated differs substantively between cultures and sub-groups within them. This has been demonstrated from other social settings as well, for example, the use of ‘signifying’ amongst African Americans (‘Signifying’; Gates, 1988; Kochman, 1972). Gender represents a significant factor in defining what is (im-)polite (Mills, 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2008; see also Yabuuchi, 2006), which is noteworthy at this point since most inmates in US prisons today are male, as are most staff. To some extent, the presence of a grind game may be typical of speech performed potentially in any male-majority environment.

Rules for politeness, and the solidarity they can promote, may directly violate broader systems of politeness strategies. Though Brown and Gilman’s observations on the avoidance of FTAs does apply here to some degree, domain-specific conditions significantly alter the landscape. Furthermore, (im-)politeness occurs by degrees and with nuances that Brown and Gilman’s work did not explore (Culpepper 2011). It is customary in a prison environment for employees to prey (verbally) on another’s weakness and vulnerability, and to highlight alleged incompetence. In other less-charged environments, this would be considered impolite and offensive. However, prison environments bring out a ‘need’ to exploit a coworker’s weak points and then to expect a retort that proves otherwise.

Solidarity

Social scientists are keenly aware of the universal human desire to belong and identify with a larger social group. Few people want to feel isolated. Glasser (1999) even lists “love and belonging” as one of the five basic needs. Belonging to groups helps a person define who they are and perhaps even their very existence. The means by which solidarity is defined and attained are many, and they include common purpose, shared work environment, and in this case the need for safety. The linguistic mechanisms by which solidarity is accomplished include politeness, abiding by rules considered essential for the environment; for example, studies point to the use of particular pronouns in accomplishing this goal (e.g. Brown and Gilman 1960), as politeness is a facilitator of solidarity (see also Geertz 1960).

Being part of a like-minded group or culture in the case of correctional staff directs and protects them. In an environment such as prisons, where the majority of the resident population has been incarcerated for violence that targeted others, prison staff are continuously at risk – both physically and psychologically. In such a hostile work environment, solidarity is essential for staff safety and security. Despite this, staff assaults and riots continue to be ongoing threats at correctional facilities.

Protective solidarity takes many non-linguistic forms, including training, uniforms, and displays of potential force. Two of the most essential components toward minimizing staff assaults are communication and a clear chain of command. In many ways, this “total institution” is skewed in reverse: most communities are identified by their common purposes and people who form that community gather to promote their interests. Prison communities, on the other hand, are formed against the will of the participants, being created by the United States legal system. Most communities evidence a degree of self-pride in their distinctions whereas this one is characterized by perpetual antisocial behavior.

Under these conditions, the need for mental toughness, resiliency and solidarity among staff is critical. Linguistically, the need to develop these characteristics in staff members is achieved in a less than conventional manner. Many correctional staff members have previously served in the military. Additionally, many have experienced previous trauma prior to employment in a correctional facility. These traumas are often exacerbated by their work in the correctional facilities. The number of men employed in these institutions is significantly greater than the number of women. There are even locations within the prison in which women are not permitted to be posted. Needless to say, emotional toughness is essential in these settings. This is highlighted by oft-repeated maxim heard from staff, *Ohhh... you're in your feels today? You should have left your feelings at the gate* – indicating that when one comes to work, expression of feelings is not permitted because they limit one's ability to perform the job effectively.

Jargon and Slang

In the prequel to this paper, Watt and Sturiale (2024) present a glossary of inmate slang, defining the differences between jargon and slang. Those points will be referenced, but not reiterated, in this study. We acknowledge this work, however, because those details form an integral basis to the present research conclusions. In short, while the jargon that goes with prison is equally shared between employees and inmates, the slang that goes with prison culture is what this current paper assumes, for it is the employment of slang (i.e. including argot/cant) that is essential for grind games amongst prison staff. Furthermore, the rules for its usage among staff may possibly differ significantly for inmates; this paper focuses only on staff conversational usage.

Research Process

The data utilized in this study were drawn from staff recollections and interviews representing more than a century of collective employment experience within forensic or correctional environments. Because one of the authors is also a staff member and participated directly in the interview process, both -emic and -etic perspectives informed the research design. The *emic* perspective provided insider understanding of institutional culture, workplace norms, and the interactional significance of staff discourse. In contrast, the *etic* perspective relied on established theoretical and analytical frameworks to interpret these communicative practices within broader academic contexts (Spradley, 1980; Van Maanen, 2011; Foley, 1997; Tracy, 2013).

Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews with all ten participants. This interview method allowed the researchers to maintain a consistent set of guiding questions while giving participants the flexibility to elaborate on personally meaningful experiences, conversational routines, and workplace dynamics (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Staff were asked to reflect on communication practices, conflict negotiation, humor, and verbal sparring within the correctional setting, particularly the informal conventions that shape everyday interactions.

Following data collection, a qualitative narrative analysis was conducted to examine how participants structured their accounts and attributed meaning to their experiences. Narrative analysis was selected because of its focus on the ways individuals use stories to organize and interpret their social realities (Riessman, 2008). Through this approach, patterns emerged in the linguistic and relational strategies staff employed during “grind games,” or rapid verbal exchanges involving sarcasm, teasing, and playful insults. Although these exchanges often appear combative or abrasive, they frequently serve affiliative functions by reinforcing group solidarity, managing emotional stress, and establishing rapport among coworkers.

The analysis was further informed by Grice's (1975) framework of conversational implicature, which posits that speakers rely on implied meanings and sometimes strategically violate conversational maxims—quantity, quality, relation, and manner—to achieve social goals. In this context, staff communication often involves intentional departures from these maxims to signal trust, shared understanding, and camaraderie. Thus, the examination of staff discourse provides valuable insight into the informal communicative rules that support cooperation and relational maintenance within a high-pressure occupational environment.

Research Participants

The participant group demonstrates a predominantly male workforce, with men representing 80% of the sample and women making up the remaining 20%. A substantial majority of participants (80%) have a military background, indicating that prior service may be a common pathway into their current roles or reflective of the organizational culture within the setting. The staff composition further shows that uniformed correctional officers comprise the largest group, with seven participants serving in this capacity. Two participants serve as non-uniformed treatment staff, and one individual has experience in both uniformed and non-uniformed roles, offering a potentially broader perspective on institutional operations.

The age ranges of participants suggest a mature and experienced workforce. Four participants fall within the 30–39 range, four in the 40–49 range, and two are between 50–59 years of age. This distribution reflects a staff population largely in mid to late career stages, likely contributing considerable professional experience and institutional knowledge. Overall, the demographic profile of the participants reflects a workforce primarily shaped by military experience, security-oriented roles, and male representation, which may influence workplace culture, attitudes, and interpretations of organizational practices.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender

Category Number Percentage

Men	8	80%
Women	2	20%

Military Service

Category Number Percentage

Served in the military	8	80%
Did not serve	2	20%

Staff Role

Role Category Number Notes

Uniformed staff (Correctional Officers)	7	Primary role group
Non-uniformed treatment staff	2	Civilian/treatment-focused roles
Dual-role (served as both)	1	Experience in both categories

Age Range

Age Group Number

50–59	2
40–49	4
30–39	4

Research Analysis

Across participants' descriptions, "grind games" emerge as a multifaceted communicative practice that blends teasing, informal discipline, and social regulation within correctional environments. Respondents consistently frame the practice through analogies to childhood or adolescent teasing, emphasizing its roots in familiar social hierarchies and its variable positioning between playful banter and more hostile forms of ridicule. Several descriptions highlight ambiguity in intent—ranging from "good-natured" joking to explicitly "malicious" or punitive interactions—suggesting that grind games operate along a continuum shaped by interpersonal rapport and institutional power dynamics. Notably, participants distinguish between peer-to-peer exchanges and those that occur across staff–inmate boundaries, indicating that such language play is permissible only when relational trust and contextual norms permit. Taken together, these responses portray grind games not merely as insults but as socially functional acts that enforce norms, negotiate status, and, at times, foster solidarity within the highly stratified setting of a correctional facility.

Analysis of Responses to “Grind Up” Experiences

Participants were asked to provide examples of times they were “ground up” or had “ground someone else up.” The responses reveal that grind games, verbal sparring, and teasing are pervasive elements of social interaction among correctional staff, functioning simultaneously as mechanisms of social regulation, group cohesion, and identity performance.

Several responses indicated that grind games often involve personalized teasing, targeting appearance, professional competence, or relational characteristics. For instance, participants recalled being insulted for their appearance, profession, or errors in job performance, while others described teasing colleagues in humorous ways, often contingent upon mutual trust and familiarity. This aligns with research on workplace humor and teasing, which emphasizes that such interactions serve both affiliative and hierarchical functions (Holmes, 2000; Martin et al., 2003). Importantly, participants noted that grind games are selective, occurring primarily between individuals who are perceived as capable of reciprocating or handling the interaction without harm, reflecting the emphatic relational awareness that underpins these exchanges.

Several examples highlight that grind games often incorporate cultural or social markers, including gender, ethnicity, and personal relationships. For instance, one participant recalled teasing a male colleague after a sports defeat by a female teammate, while another described joking about a colleague’s spouse’s ethnicity. These exchanges illustrate that grind games may reinforce group identity while simultaneously navigating social boundaries, consistent with ethnographic accounts of correctional staff and other high-stress occupations, where teasing and banter serve as informal mechanisms for maintaining cohesion and hierarchy (Van Maanen, 2011; Liebling, 2004).

The responses also reveal potentially negative consequences of grind games. One participant explicitly noted that bullying and grinding can produce violent or harmful outcomes, and expressed a personal preference for supportive rather than punitive interactions. Similarly, errors in professional duties, such as miscounting during a prison operation, were cited as occasions for intense verbal sparring, underscoring that grind games can function as both corrective and coercive mechanisms within institutional settings. This reflects the dual nature of informal social control in organizations, where humor and teasing can enforce norms but also perpetuate stress or conflict if misapplied (Fine & De Soucey, 2005; Holmes & Marra, 2002).

Across these responses, a key theme emerges: grind games are socially negotiated, context-dependent, and culturally embedded forms of workplace interaction. They are not purely aggressive; rather, they represent complex social strategies through which correctional staff enforce norms, demonstrate competence, and foster camaraderie, often using humor and irony as tools of relational management. The data suggest that successful participation in grind games requires interpersonal sensitivity, institutional knowledge, and awareness of social hierarchies, echoing Grice’s (1975) conversational maxims, particularly the principles of relevance, manner, and relational appropriateness.

Overall, these findings reinforce prior research indicating that workplace teasing, verbal sparring, and humor serve as functional social tools, particularly in high-stress, hierarchical occupational settings such as correctional institutions. They also highlight the ethical tension inherent in these practices, where the line between cooperative bonding and harmful bullying is finely drawn.

Analysis of First Experiences with “Grinding Up”

Participants’ accounts of their first experiences being “ground up” illustrate that initial exposure to workplace or institutional verbal sparring often occurs in highly structured, hierarchical, and evaluative environments, such as military training, correctional officer training, or mental health treatment units. Across responses, several themes emerge, including ritualized socialization, resilience-building, identity negotiation, and differential coping strategies.

A number of participants described early “grind up” experiences as ritualized trials of competence, reflecting institutional norms designed to test confidence, emotional control, and social adaptability. For example, one participant noted that during Phase 2 correctional officer training, messing up a procedural task (count) led to teasing, which ultimately concluded with humor and camaraderie, demonstrating that grind games can function as both corrective and affiliative mechanisms.

Similarly, multiple participants referenced military experiences in which verbal sparring—often involving yelling or intimidation—was employed as a method to test resilience and enforce conformity to institutional expectations. These accounts align with findings from military and correctional ethnographies, which highlight the use of controlled verbal stressors as tools for socialization and induction into hierarchical organizational cultures (Van Maanen, 2011; Liebling, 2004).

Another prominent theme involves cultural and social identity as loci for early grind experiences. One participant discussed being subjected to teasing during childhood in Hawaii due to racial and historical tensions, which shaped early experiences of verbal confrontation and resilience. This underscores that prior socialization, including culturally specific experiences, can influence how individuals interpret and respond to later institutional grind games (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Responses also demonstrate differentiated coping strategies. Some participants adopted non-reactive strategies, withholding verbal or physical responses until the grind games ceased, effectively demonstrating emotional regulation and self-confidence. Others framed grind games as an opportunity for learning and social integration, interpreting verbal sparring as a form of playful testing rather than personal attack. This reflects literature on workplace humor and teasing, which identifies humor and playful confrontation as tools for boundary-setting, hierarchy negotiation, and relational calibration (Holmes, 2000; Fine & De Soucey, 2005).

Taken together, these narratives suggest that initial experiences of being “ground up” are complex social phenomena that operate at the intersection of institutional authority, peer relations, and individual coping capacities. They simultaneously enforce rules, evaluate competence, and foster group cohesion while offering participants opportunities to negotiate professional identity and emotional resilience within high-stakes environments. Importantly, these accounts reinforce the dual nature of grind games as both disciplinary mechanisms and affiliative tools, highlighting the contextual sensitivity required to interpret their social and organizational functions.

Analysis of Staff Perceptions of Responses to Being “Ground Up”

Participants’ responses to this question reveal that staff perceptions of colleagues who do not respond well to verbal sparring, or grind games, are highly contextual and contingent on both the personalities involved and the social norms of the workplace. Across responses, several key themes emerge: perceived weakness, relational adjustment, emotional regulation, and social inclusion/exclusion.

A prominent pattern is the association of poor responses to grinding with weakness or vulnerability. Some participants indicated that staff who appear visibly upset, defensive, or emotionally affected by grind games are often perceived as “weak” or “too serious”. This aligns with prior research on organizational humor and teasing, which emphasizes that the ability to tolerate, deflect, or participate in humor and playful banter is frequently interpreted as a marker of competence, social acumen, and emotional resilience (Holmes, 2000; Fine & De Soucey, 2005). Individuals who fail to engage appropriately may risk social marginalization or altered peer perception, particularly in hierarchical or high-stress workplaces (Stoeber, 2017).

Several participants highlighted the role of context and individual differences, noting that responses vary based on both the person being teased and the instigator. For example, some staff may back off if they perceive that the target is genuinely distressed, while others may intensify the grinding to test resilience or provoke a reaction. This dynamic reflects the negotiated nature of informal workplace practices, where relational cues, prior familiarity, and situational awareness shape social interaction (Van Maanen, 2011).

Similarly, participants emphasized the importance of emotional regulation: acting as though one is unaffected, laughing along, or selectively responding to the grind is perceived as an adaptive strategy that maintains social standing and avoids escalation. The data also indicate that responses to grind games are evaluative and strategic, with staff making quick judgments about colleagues’ suitability for inclusion in group dynamics. One participant explicitly stated that individuals who cannot manage being ground up are often avoided or regarded as “too much work”. This highlights the instrumental function of grind games as social tests, which serve to delineate group norms, test coping skills, and reinforce occupational solidarity (Liebling, 2004).

Overall, these responses demonstrate that grind games in correctional settings are embedded within complex social and organizational rules, functioning not only as a form of humor or banter but also as a mechanism for social evaluation, relational calibration, and informal social control. Staff perceptions of how colleagues respond to being ground up are therefore shaped by a combination of individual resilience, perceived competence, relational trust, and alignment with occupational norms. These dynamics underscore the dual role of grind games as both affiliative and evaluative practices within hierarchical, high-stress institutional environments (Van Maanen, 2011; Holmes & Marra, 2002).

Analysis of Engagement in Grind Games Relative to Experience and Crew Cohesion

Participants' responses indicate that engagement in grind games is strongly influenced by interpersonal familiarity, group cohesion, and occupational roles. Across the responses, two major themes emerge: relationship-dependent participation and role-based moderation of grind behaviors.

First, participants consistently emphasized that grind games are more frequent among tightly knit crews or with familiar coworkers. Several participants noted that knowing one's coworkers personally facilitates humor and teasing based on lifestyle, mannerisms, or shared experiences, whereas interactions with unfamiliar colleagues tend to be more restrained. This reflects the broader social-psychological principle that in-group familiarity promotes informal social practices, including teasing and banter, as a mechanism for reinforcing group solidarity and social bonds (Fine & De Soucey, 2005; Holmes, 2000). Participants described grind games as a reciprocal and playful practice, often contingent upon mutual understanding and trust, consistent with previous findings in occupational and military contexts where humor functions to establish relational norms (Martin et al., 2003; Van Maanen, 2011).

Second, occupational role and responsibility influence engagement. One participant, a training sergeant, reported intentionally limiting grind behaviors toward trainees to maintain professional boundaries and effective teaching practices. This indicates that institutional hierarchies and role expectations modulate participation in grind games, suggesting a deliberate awareness of the potential impact of such interactions on learning, morale, or perception of authority (Liebling, 2004).

Additionally, participants highlighted the dual nature of grind games as both affiliative and potentially affective. While these interactions are described as humorous and bonding in nature, there is recognition that they can elicit negative emotional responses in some individuals, even within close-knit groups. This aligns with literature on workplace humor, which identifies the balance between camaraderie-building and inadvertent emotional harm as a key dynamic in teasing and verbal sparring (Holmes & Marra, 2002).

Finally, participants noted that familiarity increases comfort in participating, suggesting that grind games serve not only as social reinforcement but also as an outlet for managing occupational stress and maintaining peer cohesion in high-pressure correctional environments. The practice appears largely selective and strategic, reinforcing relational norms while maintaining a boundary of trust that distinguishes insiders from outsiders.

Overall, these responses indicate that grind games function as contextually contingent social mechanisms within correctional settings, with frequency and intensity shaped by crew cohesion, mutual familiarity, and occupational role. The findings highlight the interplay between humor, relational trust, and institutional hierarchy in shaping informal social regulation.

Analysis of Targeting and Purpose of Grind Games

Participants' responses indicate that grind games serve multiple social and organizational functions, and that the likelihood of being targeted is influenced by both individual characteristics and situational context. Two primary themes emerge: differential targeting and functional purposes of grind games.

Differential Targeting

Several participants noted that certain individuals are more likely to be "ground up," often based on perceived vulnerability, physical appearance, experience level, or behavior. Characteristics such as being overweight, physically smaller, new to the job, or prone to mistakes make individuals "easy targets" for verbal sparring. This aligns with literature on workplace teasing and bullying, which identifies those individuals who deviate from group norms or exhibit perceived weaknesses are more frequently subjected to humor or teasing practices (Rodriguez et al., 2020; Holmes, 2000). Participants also emphasized that targeting is contextually moderated by familiarity and crew cohesion, with newcomers or less integrated members being more likely to experience grind games until they develop relational trust or adapt to group norms.

Functional Purposes of Grind Games

Across responses, participants described grind games as serving both affiliative and developmental functions. One central purpose is socialization and norm enforcement: grind games are used to encourage compliance, improve performance, and instill resilience, particularly among newcomers or those perceived as making mistakes. This mirrors research on military and correctional cultures, where structured verbal sparring is employed to test emotional regulation, build “toughness,” and acculturate individuals into hierarchical organizations (Van Maanen, 2011; Liebling, 2004).

Another reported function is relationship building and camaraderie. Participants highlighted that grind games create opportunities for bonding, and shared humor, particularly among established crews with strong interpersonal trust. This reflects findings from workplace humor literature, which suggests that teasing can foster in-group cohesion and strengthen social bonds when enacted in a context of mutual familiarity and perceived good intent (Fine & De Soucey, 2005; Martin et al., 2003).

Participants also acknowledged potential negative outcomes, particularly when grind games are applied to those who are already vulnerable or react poorly. In such cases, excessive targeting can provoke emotional distress or aggression. This underscores the dual-edged nature of grind games as both socializing tools and potential sources of interpersonal tension, consistent with prior research on workplace humor, teasing, and informal social control (Holmes & Marra, 2002).

In summary, the data suggest that grind games function as contextually contingent social mechanisms: certain individuals are targeted based on perceived vulnerability, experience, or behavior, while the overarching purpose is to socialize, acculturate, reinforce norms, and build camaraderie. The practice is moderated by crew cohesion, interpersonal familiarity, and role expectations, highlighting the complex interplay of humor, hierarchy, and social regulation in correctional environments.

Analysis of Responses: One-on-One vs. Group Grind Games

Participants’ responses highlight that grind games differ significantly depending on whether they occur in a one-on-one interaction or in a group setting, particularly when multiple staff members target a single individual. The contrast between these formats reflects broader sociolinguistic patterns regarding facework, power, solidarity, and interactional pressure.

One-on-One Grind Games: Personal, Relational, and Negotiated

Participants consistently described one-on-one grind games as more personal, reciprocal, and conversational. These exchanges often involve “inside jokes” and mutual understanding, aligning with Goffman’s (1967) theory of facework, in which individuals manage impressions and negotiate social belonging through carefully balanced verbal acts. In these cases, teasing operates as relational work, functioning similarly to the “positive politeness” strategies described by Brown and Levinson (1978), where humor shows familiarity, reduces social distance, and affirms group membership.

However, because one-on-one grind games target the recipient directly without diffusion of attention, they may also be experienced as more personal or more emotionally salient. This supports Culpeper’s (2011) assertion that impoliteness triggers stronger face-threat when there is a clear single aggressor and a direct target.

Group Grind Games: Intensified Pressure, Heightened Risk, and Hierarchical Dynamics

Participants described four-on-one or multi-person grind games as significantly more intense, often experienced as “piling on,” “bullying,” or a deliberate escalation. Several participants noted that group teasing tends to be harsher, more humiliating, and more difficult for the target to manage. This aligns with sociolinguistic research showing that when humor becomes collectively directed, it amplifies face-threat and reinforces social hierarchies (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Fine & De Soucey, 2005).

The group dynamic shifts the interaction away from playful sparring toward a performance of solidarity among the teasers—sometimes at the expense of the target. Brown and Gilman’s (1960) analysis of power and solidarity pronoun systems is useful here: group grind games symbolically enact power, while one-on-one exchanges more often enact solidarity. Participants themselves labeled group grind games as heavier, more aggressive, and potentially harmful.

Differential Treatment Based on Personal Feelings and Social Relationships

Respondents emphasized that grind games vary depending on whether staff like the target. Individuals who are liked receive teasing marked as playful or “good-natured”, whereas those who are disliked receive harsher, more hostile forms. Mills (2003) describes this phenomenon as contextual politeness, where the interpretation of verbal acts depends heavily on interpersonal alignment and shared norms. Participants also suggested that some individuals “attract” grind games more than others, mirroring sociolinguistic research showing that deviations from group norms—physical, behavioral, or competence-related—invite teasing or negative evaluations (Watts, 2003; Holmes, 2000).

Risk of Escalation and Breakdown of Normative Play

Several participants noted that certain individuals respond poorly, potentially leading to “violent confrontations”. This underscores that grind games function within a delicate communicative balance, consistent with Grice’s (1975) discussion of conversational maxims. A breach of expected responses—such as failing to return a joke, overreacting, or taking offense—can abruptly shift an interaction from solidarity-building to hostility. This supports Gates’ (1988) framework of “signifying,” where playful verbal dueling reinforces social competence; failing to perform adequately can result in loss of status or face.

Analysis of Responses: Consequences, Situational Variation, and Housing Unit Differences in Grind Games

Participants’ responses suggest that the consequences of failing to respond appropriately to grind games vary depending on individual reactions, social context, and institutional culture. Two major themes emerge from the data: social and professional repercussions and environmental or situational influences.

Social and Professional Repercussions

Several participants indicated that failing to manage or respond effectively to grind games can lead to heightened peer scrutiny, intensified teasing, or social exclusion. Terms such as “made fun of more often” or “booted or shunned” reflect the use of grind games as an informal social regulatory mechanism, consistent with Goffman’s (1967) theory of facework. Grind games, in this sense, function to assess emotional resilience, interpersonal savvy, and professional suitability, particularly in high-stress occupations like corrections (Higgins et al., 2022; Liebling, 2004).

Some participants explicitly linked poor responses to potential escalation, noting that extreme reactions could lead to conflict or, in extreme examples, violence. This aligns with Culpeper’s (2011) research on impoliteness, which highlights that failure to navigate teasing or verbal provocation appropriately can result in interpersonal tension or confrontation. The underlying principle is that grind games serve both as a social filter and stress inoculation mechanism, testing the capacity of individuals to remain composed under pressure (Badgett, 2016; Lombardo, 1985).

Situational and Housing Unit Differences

Participants consistently emphasized that the occurrence and intensity of grind games vary by environment, with Level Five - High Security (L-5) housing units noted as particularly conducive to these practices. This pattern is explained by structural and occupational factors: larger, tight-knit crews in L-5 units, combined with higher levels of downtime, create both the opportunity and social incentive for grind games to occur. In contrast, general population officers or staff in medical units experience less frequent or differently structured grind interactions, as they often work solo or in smaller, more task-oriented teams. This aligns with research on correctional culture, which identifies that physical layout, crew size, and situational monotony shape the informal social dynamics among staff (Husain, 2024; Higgins et al., 2022).

Variation in Purpose and Motivations

Across responses, participants highlighted that grind games are generally motivated by relational, socialization, and stress-testing purposes. Participants consistently noted that grind games serve to assess resilience, foster group cohesion, or establish relational hierarchies. These motivations correspond to sociolinguistic research suggesting that teasing, verbal sparring, and structured humor in high-stress workplaces function both as bonding tools and as informal assessments of competence (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Fine & De Soucey, 2005). The variation in intensity—ranging from playful to potentially harmful—is mediated by familiarity, crew cohesion, and individual disposition.

Analysis of Responses: Unwritten Rules, Hierarchy, and Limits in Grind Games

Participants' responses reveal that grind games in correctional settings operate within a framework of informal, socially negotiated rules, which are largely intuitive rather than codified. Across the dataset, participants highlighted the role of familiarity, relational context, and rank in shaping acceptable behaviors.

Unwritten Rules and Social Norms

Most respondents agreed that there are unwritten rules guiding grind games, although these rules are rarely formally articulated. Commonly recognized boundaries include avoiding personal family matters, death, or deeply private topics. These findings align with sociolinguistic research on face-threatening acts, where verbal sparring is constrained by social norms to prevent severe harm to the target's self-image or well-being (Goffman, 1967; Brown & Levinson, 1978). Several participants emphasized that these rules are learned through experience and observation rather than formal instruction. This echoes Spradley's (1980) principle of participant observation in workplace cultures, where tacit knowledge is acquired through immersion and socialization.

Hierarchy and Rank Considerations

Responses indicated that rank and hierarchical position influence but do not strictly limit grind games. While CO1s may grind CO2s and *vice versa*, participants noted a general reluctance to target senior ranks such as captains or administrators, except in cases of established familiarity or personal rapport. This pattern reflects the interaction of power and solidarity, as described by Brown and Gilman (1960), where hierarchical position moderates the intensity and acceptability of verbal challenges. Some respondents also highlighted that respect for authority and professional role informs decisions on whether to engage in grind games. For example, trainers may consciously limit their participation to avoid undermining professional norms, reflecting ethical and role-based considerations.

Limits and Contextual Sensitivity

Participants emphasized that limits are often context-dependent. The acceptability of grinding certain topics or individuals is influenced by factors such as crew familiarity, perceived resilience of the target, and potential for workplace retaliation. In situations where boundaries are violated, targets may experience resentment or diminished trust, potentially undermining cohesion (Holmes & Marra, 2002).

Participants also noted that transgressions, such as discussing a colleague's spouse, their children or other highly personal matters, are generally considered 'below the belt' and can generate negative consequences. Thus, while grind games are a tool for bonding, stress testing, and social regulation, their effectiveness depends on shared norms, relational knowledge, and situational awareness when it comes to engaging the game appropriately.

Analysis of Responses: Gender Differences, Respect, and Safety in Grind Games

Participants' responses reveal that gender significantly shapes the dynamics of grind games in correctional settings, influencing both the frequency and intensity of participation, as well as perceptions of respect and acceptable behavior.

Frequency and Intensity of Grind Games by Gender

Across responses, participants consistently noted that men are subjected to grind games more frequently than women. This disparity is attributed less to respect for female staff than to fear of formal consequences, such as sexual harassment claims or institutional paperwork. The findings align with sociolinguistic studies demonstrating that occupational hierarchies and gendered power dynamics influence informal workplace interactions, including teasing and verbal sparring (Holmes, 2006; Mills, 2003).

Some participants observed that women who can tolerate grind games effectively earn respect from male colleagues, which can lead to enhanced social integration and perceived competence. This mirrors Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory, where the management of face-threatening acts—including verbal challenges—is sensitive to social roles and perceived status.

Indicators of Excessive or Unsafe Grind Games

Participants emphasized that determining when a grind game has crossed acceptable boundaries requires social and emotional attunement. Signs include visible distress, anger, or verbal escalation. Several respondents linked poorly managed grind games to potentially violent consequences, citing real-world examples such as fights, property damage, or near-lethal confrontations. These accounts reflect findings by Higgins, Smith, and Swartz (2022), who highlight that correctional culture combines high-stress environments with informal mechanisms of behavioral testing, sometimes resulting in dangerous escalations.

Respondents also distinguished between grind games and constructive criticism, noting that the former may lack limits and prioritizes testing resilience, whereas the latter is intended to teach or guide without personal harm. This distinction underscores the functional and affective dimensions of verbal interactions in high-stress occupational settings (Culpeper, 2011; Badgett, 2016).

Safety and Relational Considerations

Across the dataset, participants highlighted that trust, familiarity, and role strongly influence who can safely engage in grind games. Women are more likely to participate when they trust the instigator and perceive the interaction as non-threatening. Similarly, male staff exercise caution to avoid provoking negative repercussions, particularly when interacting with women or higher-ranking staff. These strategies reflect Goffman's (1967) concept of facework and the necessity of reading social cues in complex, hierarchical environments.

Analysis of Responses: Respect, Scoring, Engagement, and Comradery in Grind Games

Participants' responses suggest that grind games function as a complex social mechanism within correctional staff culture, mediating relationships, stress relief, and team cohesion. Three key themes emerge: respect and selective engagement, tracking interactions and "scorekeeping", and relationship-building and comradery.

Respect and Selective Engagement

Responses reveal that respect influences participation in grind games, though it manifests differently across staff. Some participants indicated that they avoid targeting individuals they do not like or trust, suggesting that grind games are moderated by relational familiarity rather than formal hierarchies. Conversely, other participants noted that staff may engage with anyone but can choose to walk away or signal non-interest if they do not wish to participate. This aligns with Goffman's (1967) concept of facework, which posits that individuals navigate social interactions to protect both their own and others' social "face." Respect functions as a boundary-setting mechanism, preventing relational damage while allowing verbal sparring to occur in acceptable social contexts. It also reflects principles of politeness theory, where strategic management of relational threats is crucial for maintaining workplace cohesion (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Mills, 2003).

Scoring and Tracking Interactions

The notion of keeping score, whether formally or informally, emerged as a mechanism for regulating interactions and predicting future social exchanges. Some participants described maintaining a mental tally of who is easier or more entertaining to grind, allowing them to navigate social interactions more strategically. Others indicated that scoring is not commonly practiced and interactions are situationally driven. Scoring and reciprocal engagement serve as informal reinforcement and feedback systems, enabling staff to gauge resilience, familiarity, and compatibility. These practices can function similarly to what Holmes and Marra (2002) describe as humor and teasing as social regulators, where playful verbal competition signals relational trust and competence.

Engagement Choices and Consequences

Participants emphasized that opting out of grind games is socially acceptable if clearly communicated, although it may influence how others perceive an individual's toughness or social integration. Staff assess cues such as verbal and nonverbal reactions to determine whether a grind game has crossed acceptable limits, balancing assertiveness with the potential for relational harm. This underscores the situational and relational sensitivity required in high-stress occupational environments (Higgins, Smith, & Swartz, 2022).

Comradery and Team Cohesion

Grind games are widely recognized as a tool for building comradery and team cohesion. Participants reported that engaging in verbal sparring helps alleviate stress, tension, and boredom, fosters shared humor, and promotes a sense of mutual resilience and trust. These functions reflect Liebling's (2004) observations of occupational culture, where informal interactions help establish solidarity and shared identity in high-risk, high-stress environments.

Participants also noted that effective participation in grind games can enhance relational respect: staff who handle teasing well are perceived as more resilient and competent, which strengthens social bonds. This illustrates the dual role of grind games as both a stress-testing mechanism and a team-building exercise.

Superordinate Themes

Social Regulation and Norm Enforcement

Grind games operate as instruments of social regulation, functioning as informal mechanisms to enforce workplace norms and institutional expectations. Participants consistently described targeting newcomers or less experienced staff, often in response to mistakes, procedural errors, or perceived vulnerabilities. These interactions serve as ritualized tests of competence, evaluating emotional control, professional acumen, and adaptability within hierarchical structures. Grind games in this context are reminiscent of socialization practices observed in other high-stress occupations, including military and correctional settings, where structured humor and verbal sparring are employed to acculturate individuals and enforce informal norms (Fine & De Soucey, 2005; Holmes, 2000; Liebling, 2004).

The practice is not merely punitive but serves both corrective and affiliative purposes: it communicates expectations, encourages compliance, and provides staff opportunities to navigate relational hierarchies effectively. As such, grind games function as socially embedded tests of skill, resilience, and interpersonal awareness.

Hierarchy and Power Negotiation

Participants highlighted that hierarchy and rank play a critical role in shaping grind game dynamics. While verbal sparring may occur across all levels of staff, there is often a reluctance to target senior positions, such as captains or administrators, unless a close relationship exists. Group-based grind games, involving multiple staff members targeting a single individual, were consistently described as more intense, with heightened face-threatening potential, reflecting amplified power differentials and the performance of solidarity among instigators (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Goffman, 1967).

These dynamics illustrate how grind games simultaneously negotiate power and solidarity: one-on-one interactions often emphasize relational humor and bonding, whereas group interactions can perform a regulatory function, reinforcing hierarchies and collective identity. This underscores the dual nature of grind games as mechanisms for both social evaluation and hierarchical calibration.

Relational Trust and Respect

Trust and respect emerged as central factors in moderating participation in grind games. Participants emphasized that individuals are more likely to engage with colleagues they know, like, or trust, and that certain topics, such as family, death, or private relationships, are socially off-limits. Gender also shapes these dynamics; female staff are generally targeted less often due to potential formal repercussions, yet women who can tolerate grind games effectively earn respect and social legitimacy within male-dominated environments. This aligns with research on facework and politeness theory, highlighting that relational awareness and perceived status influence the acceptability of face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Goffman, 1967; Mills, 2003). The ability to interpret social cues, understand relational boundaries, and respect implicit norms is essential for participating safely and effectively in grind games.

Emotional Resilience, Coping, and Safety

A prominent theme across responses is the role of emotional resilience in navigating grind games. Staff described adopting strategies such as laughter, selective engagement, or withholding responses to maintain composure and social standing. Conversely, poor reactions to grind games were associated with vulnerability, social marginalization, or heightened risk of escalation, including conflict or physical altercations.

These findings are consistent with literature on high-stress occupational contexts, where informal humor and verbal sparring act as both stress inoculation and evaluative mechanisms, testing emotional regulation and resilience (Culpeper, 2011; Badgett, 2016; Higgins, Smith, & Swartz, 2022). Grind games, in this sense, function as socially mediated challenges: they assess individual capacity for emotional control while providing opportunities for skillful navigation of complex social hierarchies.

Camaraderie and Team Cohesion

Finally, grind games serve an affiliative function, fostering camaraderie and strengthening team cohesion. Participants consistently noted that shared humor alleviates boredom, mitigates stress, and creates opportunities for bonding among staff. Engaging effectively in grind games signals resilience and social competence, enhancing interpersonal respect and solidifying relational ties.

This theme reflects findings in workplace humor literature, which emphasizes that playful teasing can foster in-group cohesion and relational trust, particularly in hierarchical, high-pressure environments (Liebling, 2004; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). The dual function of grind games—both stress-testing and team-building—underscores their centrality in maintaining relational and organizational stability within correctional institutions.

Summary of Research

This research investigated the social dynamics, functions, and consequences of “grind games” among correctional staff. Grind games, as described by participants, are verbal sparring interactions that range from playful teasing to more aggressive forms of social evaluation. Across responses, these interactions were framed as multifaceted, serving both affiliative and disciplinary purposes within correctional environments.

Participants highlighted that grind games operate along a continuum between good-natured humor and potentially harmful ridicule. The practice is contextually sensitive, influenced by factors such as interpersonal familiarity, crew cohesion, individual resilience, hierarchical rank, and gender. One-on-one grind games were described as more personal, conversational, and relationally negotiated, whereas group-based grind games were characterized as intensified, hierarchical, and sometimes coercive, reflecting broader sociolinguistic patterns of facework and solidarity (Goffman, 1967; Brown & Gilman, 1960).

The research revealed that participants are selectively targeted based on perceived vulnerability, professional competence, or social integration. Grind games function as informal mechanisms for socialization, norm enforcement, resilience testing, and team bonding (Holmes, 2000; Fine & De Soucey, 2005; Liebling, 2004). However, participants also emphasized the potential risks, including emotional distress, social marginalization, and even escalation into physical confrontation if boundaries are crossed or if the target reacts poorly (Culpeper, 2011; Badgett, 2016).

Gender emerged as a significant factor, with male staff experiencing grind games more frequently, and female staff participating selectively, often contingent on trust and safety. Women who demonstrate resilience in grind games gain respect and social legitimacy within male-dominated correctional environments (Mills, 2003; Brown & Levinson, 1978).

Unwritten rules, relational norms, and hierarchical awareness guide the acceptable practice of grind games. Participants indicated that these rules are learned experientially through observation, socialization, and trial-and-error, rather than formal instruction (Spradley, 1980). Respect and interpersonal rapport influence engagement, with some staff opting out of grind games without repercussion, while others maintain informal mental “scorekeeping” to navigate social interactions strategically.

Overall, the findings suggest that grind games are a culturally embedded, socially functional practice among correctional staff, operating as both a mechanism of informal social control and a tool for building comradery, resilience, and professional identity. The research highlights the duality of grind games as both stress-testing and bonding practices, requiring careful navigation of social cues, hierarchy, and institutional norms. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the social microcultures within high-stress occupational settings and have implications for staff training, mental health, and organizational management in correctional institutions.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study highlight the complex and context-dependent nature of grind games among correctional staff, but they also reveal several avenues for future research. First, given the variability in participants' experiences based on gender, rank, and housing assignment, future studies should examine how these factors systematically influence the frequency, intensity, and consequences of grind games. Quantitative studies using surveys or structured observations could complement qualitative insights to provide broader generalizability across different correctional institutions and security levels (Holmes, 2000; Liebling, 2004).

Second, the present study indicates that grind games may have both affiliative and potentially harmful outcomes, including emotional distress and conflict escalation. Future research could explore the psychological and organizational impacts of grind games, particularly in relation to workplace stress, burnout, and mental health among correctional officers (Badgett, 2016; Higgins, Smith, & Swartz, 2022). Longitudinal studies may help determine whether sustained exposure to grind games contributes to adaptive resilience or increases the risk of negative behavioral outcomes.

Third, the role of informal norms and unwritten rules emerged as central to how grind games are performed and regulated. Future studies could investigate how these rules are transmitted, internalized, and enforced across different staff cohorts, including new recruits versus veteran officers. Ethnographic methods, participant observation, and social network analysis could provide rich insights into the social learning processes that underpin these interactions (Spradley, 1980; Van Maanen, 2011).

Finally, this study focused primarily on verbal grind games among correctional staff. Future research could examine the interaction between grind games and cross-gender or interdepartmental dynamics, including interactions between staff and inmates, as well as the influence of institutional policies on acceptable boundaries. Comparative research across correctional settings in different countries may also illuminate cultural variations in the practice and interpretation of verbal sparring in high-stress occupational contexts.

Collectively, these research directions could enhance understanding of how grind games function as both socialization mechanisms and informal regulatory tools, while also informing interventions aimed at promoting healthy workplace culture, reducing conflict, and improving staff well-being in correctional institutions.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of "grind games" as a pervasive, multifaceted social practice among correctional staff. Through semi-structured interviews, participants described grind games as a form of verbal sparring that functions simultaneously as social regulation, stress management, and relationship-building within hierarchical, high-stress correctional environments. The analysis revealed that grind games are not merely casual teasing but structured, context-dependent interactions that reflect broader institutional norms, social hierarchies, and relational dynamics (Van Maanen, 2011; Liebling, 2004).

Key findings indicate that grind games operate along a continuum from playful, affiliative humor to more hostile or punitive verbal interactions. Factors such as rank, gender, experience, and familiarity with coworkers shape the intensity, frequency, and acceptability of grind games. Notably, participants emphasized the role of relational trust and social sensitivity in moderating these interactions, highlighting the importance of unwritten rules and intuitive boundaries in maintaining workplace cohesion while avoiding harmful consequences (Goffman, 1967; Brown & Levinson, 1978).

Gender emerged as a critical variable, with male staff generally subjected to more frequent grind games, while women participated selectively due to perceived risks of formal complaints or institutional repercussions. Successful engagement with grind games was associated with increased respect, perceived resilience, and enhanced camaraderie, whereas poor responses could result in social marginalization, intensified scrutiny, or even conflict escalation (Holmes, 2000; Higgins, Smith, & Swartz, 2022). The findings underscore the dual nature of grind games: they serve as both socializing tools and evaluative mechanisms, fostering group cohesion while simultaneously testing individual competence and emotional regulation (Johnston et al, 2022).

The research also highlights the situational variability of grind games. One-on-one interactions tend to be more personal and relationally negotiated, whereas group-targeted grind games often intensify social pressure, amplify face-threats, and reinforce hierarchical structures. Housing assignments, crew size, and downtime influence the prevalence and intensity of these interactions, with high-security units (L-5) presenting more frequent opportunities for grind games due to tight-knit staff groups and monotony-induced socialization (Husain, 2024; Badgett, 2016).

Overall, this study contributes to an understanding of how informal verbal interactions function as both regulatory and affiliative mechanisms in correctional settings. Grind games operate within complex social and organizational frameworks, balancing the promotion of camaraderie and resilience with the potential for negative emotional outcomes. Recognizing the nuanced dynamics of grind games provides valuable insight into occupational culture, socialization processes, and strategies for managing interpersonal conflict in high-stress environments.

Future research should expand upon these findings by systematically examining the role of institutional policies, gender dynamics, and cross-cultural variations, as well as the long-term psychological and organizational impacts of grind games. By doing so, scholars and practitioners can better understand how informal social practices contribute to both the challenges and strengths of correctional staff culture, informing interventions to promote positive work environments, enhance team cohesion, and mitigate risk for conflict or harm (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Spradley, 1980).

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