

Nicknames in Prison: Meaning and Manipulation in Inmate Monikers

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Each prison yard is a microcosm of society: a community with its own culture and hierarchy. Prison nicknames are a matter of social negotiation, a common everyday phenomenon with a multiplex nature. One of the authors of this article is currently serving a sentence and has supplied examples based on his own observations and informal interviews with other inmates who were willing to give him information they would not usually confide to outsiders. Knowing and using nicknames (1) gives a sense of unity among prison peers, while (2) representing their individuality, and (3) facilitating communication among them. Nicknames can be friendly, showing peer approval and in-group unity. They can also be cruel and vicious. Nicknames can be bestowed due to appearance, personality, preferences, background, or experience. They are also used for in-group communication about hidden activities or identities.

KEYWORDS nicknames, prison, inmates, criminals, monikers, underworld culture

Mention of names like Robert Stroud, George Kelly, or Kate Barker usually draws a blank stare. But *The Birdman of Alcatraz*, *Machine Gun Kelly*, and *Ma Barker* are more likely to get an interested response. The nicknames of famous criminals tend to be better known than the names their parents selected. Benjamin Siegel was better known as *Bugsy*; Joseph Bonnano was called *Joey Bananas*; Caryl Chessman was the infamous *Red Light Bandit*; and John Herbert Dillinger is remembered as *Gentleman Johnnie*.

Anyone wanting one of these exclusive nicknames can go the “Gangsta Name Generator” (<gangstaname.com>) on the Internet. Technology can “generate” a

realistic-sounding gangsta nickname, but it probably would not fool a real inmate. Prison nicknames have sources and functions not reported on the World Wide Web (which dedicates a full website each to nicknames for Elizabeth, Charlotte, Morgan, Margaret, and William, but fails to give prisoners much genuine nickname attention).

Brad Platt knows about the prison nickname web; he is a part of it. Brad is serving a fifteen-year sentence in an Arizona state prison. At 6 foot 7 inches and 300 pounds, he has been variously called Big Bird, Lurch, Jolly Green Giant, Sasquatch, Bigfoot (size 16), Redwood, and the Mighty Oak. He has answered to all of them. But as he is “tall, big, and blonde and was a bit clueless coming into prison — a lot like the Sesame Street character,” Big Bird was used more often than the others, and that one has stuck. He is comfortable with it. He says it could be worse.

Brad Platt claims that each prison yard is a microcosm of society: a community with its own culture and hierarchy, much like a school, a work place, or even a large family. As in other communities, prison nicknames are a matter of “social negotiation” (Adams, 2009; Leslie and Skipper, 1990), a common everyday phenomenon with a “multiplex nature” (Holland, 1990a: 226). Nicknames have a large number of sources and uses. In their study of criminal nicknames, Maurer and Futrell (1981) reported, “Monickers are sociologically, psychologically, and linguistically more important in the underworld culture than nicknames are in the dominant culture” (244). They can be affectionate/friendly, showing peer approval and in-group unity. They can also be cruel and vicious, bestowing a sentence-long or even a life-long negative brand that cannot be erased.

As one of the authors for this article, Brad has supplied both behavioral characteristics and specific examples. In addition to sharing his own observations from his prison yard, he has informally interviewed numerous inmates from other yards. Inmates know him and are willing to give him information they would not confide to an outsider. In helping us understand the nicknaming phenomenon in the prison yard microcosm, he informed us how knowing and using nicknames (1) gives a sense of unity among prison peers while (2) representing their individuality and (3) facilitating communication among them. In his detailed and inclusive study of nicknames, Holland (1990a) called for “greater collaboration and involvement between researchers and subjects” (267). Perhaps he was not thinking of a couple of professors and a prisoner, but we have enjoyed as well as learned from the experience.

Unity within the peer group

Examining nicknames can reveal “social dynamics of the group contexts in which they arise” (Holland, 1990a: 261). Coming from early situations where he experienced nickname abuse in schoolyards and workplaces, Brad noted, “Oddly enough, it was in prison that I got a positive nickname [. . .]. I found it sad that the best friends I’ve ever had have been those I found behind prison walls.” In studying nicknames among groups that might be labeled as *deviant* by some members of the public, Skipper (1985) asserted that nicknames can “increase identification and create a sense of closeness” (99). Or at least they can create a sense of tolerance.

Brad tells of a new inmate whose sneeze sounds like the whinny of a horse. Everyone laughs — every time. One day one of the other inmates turned to him and said,

“Whoa there, Seabiscuit!” A new nickname had been conferred. Brad explained, “He thinks he’ll be called Gizmo, the nickname he grew up with, but he doesn’t yet understand prison nicknames. You don’t get to make up your own. From now on we have a Seabiscuit on the yard!”

Sign of friendship or acceptance

Crozier and Dimmock (1999) referred to nicknaming as an “ambiguous social event” (505). Brad says that about 24–30 percent of inmates have nicknames and most prison nicknames are given by friends or acquaintances. Most inmates feel acceptance “when their buddies ‘find’ a nickname for them.” As time passes, the nickname spreads, and the entire group knows the individual by this name, whether or not he chooses to use it. The moniker becomes a significant part of his interface with this society (see Holland, 1990a). For criminals, knowing each other’s nicknames may symbolize their subculture acceptance (Maurer and Futrell, 1981). In studying the effect of nicknames on individuals’ impressions of others, Mehrabian (2001) found that use of nicknames portrays images of friendliness and good humor along with assertiveness and confidence — all beneficial to those living together in the close quarters of a prison environment.

Nicknames reinforce relationships and reconfirm group attitudes (de Klerk and Bosch, 1996). In the prison group Brad has found that after seven years his close friends use his first name or surname (the more intimate personal designation), while the larger group, his acquaintances, use the nickname that implies group acceptance. Earlier he used his nickname to avoid identification with a subgroup that he considered undesirable. He went only by Big Bird when three others in his yard who were named Brad or Bradley engaged in behavior with which he did not want to be associated — even by name. When the other Brads eventually left the yard, he felt that it was safe to allow his personal name to be used by those who wished to do so.

Brad has found that some prisoners are upset if their given names are used, considering their personal names to be personal information. This tendency was explained by Jackson (1967), who studied prison nicknames, to be a separation of the former life from the prison culture. Maurer and Futrell (1981) found that some criminals outside prison completely conceal their real names from even their close associates and that criminal nicknames are included on official police records and reports.

The darker side

Brad Platt pointed out, “Prison nicknames sometimes have darker undertones when an inmate does something not acceptable by the group. Those nicknames stick and can make it difficult to live peacefully.” English essayist William Hazlett used a dramatic metaphor: “A nickname is the hardest stone that the devil can throw at a man” (as quoted by Jackson, 1967). As he quoted Hazlett, Jackson added, “and one of the stickiest [stones] men throw at one another” (48). Brad gave the example of an inmate called Creepy who is mentally challenged and continually stares at people with a smirk on his face. Force is the only way to keep other inmates from using a nickname, and this man cannot defend himself. So he is harassed by being called and referred

to as Creepy to his face. Creepy is miserable but powerless. Recently, after a “situation” occurred between Creepy and another inmate, he opted for protective custody; he knew he would never be accepted.

Bestowing nicknames is a way of exercising power within a social group (Adams, 2009). Soon after coming to prison, one inmate took a magazine from someone else’s shelf without asking, earning the nickname Fingers. Thieves are particularly disliked in prison. Even though this nickname was originally given in teasing, it has become a tool of social disapproval. Brad commented, “This nickname can be difficult to deal with, and it may follow him.”

Holland (1990a) referred to nicknames as “psychodynamic agents of [...] oral aggression” (265). Brad used more inmate-friendly terms: “Bullies love to see negative reactions, so they’ll continue using the name to get the response.” A prisoner who accepts a nickname he really hates “goes a long way to losing the nickname,” according to Brad. He is reducing the bullies’ power to taunt by “deflecting” the weapon (Adams, 2009: 87).

The sticking power of openly despised nicknames can be seen in the experience of “Can’t Do Right,” an inmate who never listened to instructions, did everything his own way, and was almost always wrong. In studying criminals, Maurer and Futrell (1981) found that the most devastating nicknames are those that attack self-image, as survival in the underworld depends on having high self-confidence. Holland (1990a) mentioned such prison nicknames as being “painfully appropriate” (258). Can’t Do Right hated the nickname, and the angrier he became, the more the inmates used it. He changed yards to get away from the nickname, but it followed him as other inmates were moved as well. He thought he had escaped it when he was paroled, and for two years he did escape. But true to his nickname, he could not do right; he was returned to prison, and the nickname was waiting for him. “Neal the Nose” escaped his hated nickname when the inmate he assaulted went home and he changed his attitude and friends. But there was no such luck for Can’t Do Right.

Inmate individuality

Although establishing nicknames is a group process, nicknames usually reflect the individuality of those who receive them (see Holland, 1990b) — Adams (2009) used the phrase “identity markers” (82). Starks, Leech, and Willoughby (2012) were more specific, stating that nicknames “*encapsulate* the way the bearers are perceived by others in their social milieu” (136, *emphasis added*). Maurer and Futrell (1981), who dealt with the specific milieu of criminals, noted that these nicknames are “highly connotative and seemingly *tailormade*” (243). Several researchers have mentioned that some nicknames establish an expectation for (some use the word *compel*) the individual to “live up” to the implications of the name (Holland, 1990b; Jackson, 1967; Maurer and Futrell, 1981; Starks, Leech, and Willoughby, 2012). For example, Brad mentioned Diablo (devil), a Latino inmate with a quick, mean temper.

Despite the originality of the prison nicknames, we non-inmates were interested to later learn that the categories we had spontaneously derived from the names initially sent by Brad Platt were almost identical to the categories Holland (1990b) mentioned in his review of literature as found by researchers studying Amish (Mook, 1967) and Icelandic (Hale, 1981) nicknames — both a long way from Arizona State Prison.

Appearance

As with Brad's Big Bird moniker, nicknames often relate to physical features, the first characteristic on most researched lists. Additional appearance-based nicknames from Arizona State Prison are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
APPEARANCE REFLECTED IN NICKNAMES

Name	Characteristics
Rojo (Spanish for <i>red</i>)	Latino inmate with red hair
Torch (or Crispy)	Inmate who is covered with third-degree burns, suffered when his meth lab exploded
Green Eyes	African American inmate with green eyes
Elf	Inmate with pointed ears, who hates the nickname and struggles fruitlessly against it
Wolverine	Inmate who looks like the character from <i>X-Men</i>
Monkey Man	Inmate who looks like <i>Curious George</i>
Twig	A young, skinny inmate with double-jointed fingers
Frodo	A young inmate who is short and chubby with hairy feet, like the hobbits in <i>Lord of the Rings</i>
Smeagol	An inmate who looks like Smeagol (Gollum) in <i>Lord of the Rings</i>
Tank	A tall, solid inmate who does not give way easily
Ogre	A tall inmate with long curly hair
Spider and Elmo	Inmates with these tattoos - highly symbolic in prison life
51-50	Another inmate with a symbolic tattoo: this is the police code for a crazy person

Personality and preferences

Personality traits often generate nicknames among the inmates. For example, Bam Bam (Bam for short) has been a strong and frequent fighter, though he seems to have calmed down with prison experience. An inmate called Crazy reinforces his nickname daily. Joker jokes and laughs continually, even in serious conversations; Brad thinks this may be a defense mechanism. Nicknames can be ironic: Happy, who is always scowling in a perpetual bad mood, is a very negative person. Ironic nicknames have also been found to be common among criminals on the outside (Maurer and Futrell, 1981).

Preferences and passions are additional sources for nicknames. For some fortunate inmates, the nickname can actually validate a "positive face" (Adams, 2009) as it maintains an individual's identity (Holland, 1990a; see also Adams, 2009; Crozier and Dimmock, 1999; Starks, Leech, and Willoughby, 2012). For example, Brad wrote about Cowboy, a bow-legged inmate who loves country music. Brad confirmed that there are, of course, several Cowboys in an Arizona prison. NASCAR draws racecars and chatters constantly about racing stock cars.

Nicknames often include evaluation or judgment by the namers. Brad called attention to Reverend Riff-Raff, who can be heard preaching loudly at religious services,

Bible in hand. However, outside of church he is “one of the most vulgar, profane, backbiting men on the yard.” He talks about becoming a pimp when he gets out of prison.

Background and experience

Individuals’ backgrounds and experiences are common sources of nicknames in a wide variety of cultures and settings (Starks, Leech, and Willoughby, 2012). For prisoners, experiences both prior to and during their incarceration can earn a variety of monikers — some fairly obvious, some seemingly a little strange.

Places. Canada and Kentucky received their nicknames from their birthplaces and distinct accents. Tennessee and Mojave also proclaim birthplace, as do several inmates named Cuba. Eskimo, a Native American from Alaska, has a nickname that reminds him of home. Skipper (1990), in his study of place names reflected in nicknames of professional baseball players, found place names used widely, with a dominance of places in the US South. Although the prison in Arizona seems to have a wide geographic range of place names, the South is able to claim only two. Brad explained that sometimes prison officials hear a place nickname and decide to check the inmate’s files for more information, and then they may question the inmate. But he added, “We are smart enough to see through their stunts.”

Jobs. Some inmates’ prior jobs affect their nicknames. For example, Preacher preached on the streets for “The Disciples of Christ,” a motorcycle club. Prison makes no difference in this “calling”; he continues to preach in prison. Brad noted that he “walks the walk and talks the talk.” Limo was doing well with a limousine business until he was caught videotaping his customers committing fornication and adultery in the back of the limo. There are several inmates nicknamed Joker. One of them has actually played Batman’s Joker on the stage.

Prior experiences. Some inmates bring their nicknames in from outside, the products of earlier associations and experiences. Leslie and Skipper (1990) commented that calling up a nickname from the past may serve “to indicate a lost identification, to reminisce, to create humor, or perhaps even to do all three” (279). Ghost received his nickname in his family. As a young child he was “always underfoot” — no one seemed to see him until they bumped into or tripped over him. Now he is big and stern, but he likes and keeps his nickname; others also enjoy the ironic humor in it. Similarly, Spooky came into prison with an established nickname. Men in his neighborhood said he looked just like a guy called Spooky who had committed suicide not long before he moved in. So this Spooky inherited the nickname as well as the peer group, and he brought that past name and identity to prison. Brad adds, “The way he received his nickname, in itself, was rather spooky.”

Inside experiences. For inmates, as for so many in-groups, nicknames tend to be “embedded in social contacts” (Adams, 2009: 83). A number of inmates receive nicknames representing things that happened to them during social situations early in their prison residence. Playing basketball during his first time in the yard, Shamrock clowned around with the fighting stance of the Notre Dame “fighting Irish” leprechaun. Having “Irish” curly red hair and rather short legs, he received his nickname from his buddies on the spot. Rock also received his nickname on his first day in the yard. A whistle sounded, a signal to the inmates to drop to their bellies and make no

movement until they heard the “all clear.” Everyone dropped except Rock, who stood like a rock with a “deer-in-the-headlights” expression on his face. In this procedure anyone who does not comply can be shot; fortunately for Rock, he was struck only by a lasting nickname.

In contrast to peer-given titles, young Billy Goat received his nickname from a prison officer. He was so excited over having a visitor that he forgot to get rid of the illegal lighter that he had hidden in the waistband of his pants. When he was caught with the lighter, the guards sent the visitor away. After a little self-directed verbal abuse, he lowered his head and rammed into a brick wall — resulting in unconsciousness, a concussion, and a nickname.

Those who work in the prison kitchen receive food-related nicknames: Peaches, Muffin, and so on. One prisoner started out as Fish Stick, since all kitchen newcomers are labeled Fish for their first two years or so. When he obtained his permanent status and someone else came in as the newcomer, Fish Stick was honorably advanced to Pork Chop.

In-group communication

In-group unity and individual recognition are important in the environment of a prison. But nicknames have a more concrete and practical function as well. Brad explained that inmates “trust few staff members,” so they need a way to communicate to or about individuals that will not get them in trouble if they should be overheard. Nicknames can provide significant, though not infallible, protection. The word *nickname* was derived from an Old English word meaning to “add to”; thus it was “an additional name, an ‘also name’” (Skipper and Leslie, 1990). Nicknames are “also names” today as well — and Brad and his fellow inmates know how to use them. Brad gave the following example: “Tennessee talked to Bird the other day about putting Creepy on blast.” He concluded, “An officer would have no clue who was being talked about. He’d have a cast of 1,260 characters to choose from.”

Hidden activities

Brad explained the need for secrecy, “Loose lips definitely sink ships.” Some prisoners conduct stores, buying commissary and selling it with 35 to 50 percent interest every week. If items on a list of store goods have been found in a store inmate’s area, he is in trouble, and each of his customers can be in trouble as well. If nicknames or other codes are used to identify customers, they cannot be recognized as participating, and only the one inmate is affected instead of many. Other inmates run gambling circles for football, baseball, racing, poker — even dominos. As with the stores, participants are identified only by nicknames and thus cannot be singled out by the prison officials for punishment.

Brad mentioned that there are men in the prison who he has known for seven years but does not know their first or last names — only nicknames. Once a prison officer demanded of him whether he had seen a certain inmate violating prison policy. Brad did not recognize the name, so stated truthfully that he had no information to give. Later he found out that the man in question was his next-cell neighbor, but Brad had known him only by his nickname. In telling the story, Brad was quick to say that

he probably would have maintained silence even if he had known the name, but the widespread use of nicknames does conveniently make it harder for prisoners to inform on each other. He noted, “Snitches in prison have difficult lives.”

Hidden identities

The inmates enjoy giving nicknames to the staff members. A nickname gives some “power” to the nicknamer (Adams, 2009), which is gratifying to inmates, who live under a heavy power imbalance with members of the staff. Using nicknames, inmates can talk about staff members in their presence without fear of repercussions. In studying criminal monikers, Maurer and Futrell (1981) found that criminals on the outside give nicknames to particularly capable detectives for the same reason. For example, an investigator with a photographic memory might overhear a criminal refer to the new Photo-eye and not realize he was the one being traced and identified.

In studying nicknames among railroad workers, Holland (1990b: 296) found that using nicknames aided individuals in dealing with the conditions and resulting stresses of their environment. Explaining this position, Holland quoted sociologist Basil Bernstein (1964: 60), who theorized that specific group speech systems and communication practices, referred to as *codes*, develop from “a backdrop of assumptions common to the speaker[s]” who have “closely shared interests and identifications” and a “system of shared expectations.” Nicknames, according to Holland, are part of this code, which enables group members to communicate efficiently and exclusively. Many nicknames, he explained, convey information that serves as a warning for those who may be inconvenienced or endangered by an individual.

Vestiges of this process can be inferred in some of the prison nicknames, particularly those given to staff who might present a threat. For example, Brad mentioned CSO (Chief Sex Offender), a male supervisor who harasses both inmates and staff; he has been named in several sexual harassment suits. So far CSO has been punished only by the nickname, which warns inmates to be careful of him — as well as providing a good taunt when they want one. Book Nazi is the overly strict librarian who “gives out tickets like candy on Halloween,” and Saigon Sally is a Filipino woman who also likes to bring disciplinary action for minor offenses. These nicknames warn inmates to avoid the individuals when they can and to avoid even insignificant misbehavior in their presence.

Most of the staff are resentful about having nicknames, particularly if they find out what the nicknames are — the meaner the staff member, the meaner the nickname. Leslie and Skipper (1990), who have studied nicknames extensively, noted that “it is not impossible to discern these meanings [. . .]. [We] share any number of social meanings, even at an everyday level” (278). Thus CSO and a female guard nicknamed Horseface are easy to identify. The inmates are particularly satisfied when the nickname of an unpopular guard is learned by other guards, who torment him (or her) by using it.

As with inmate nicknames, many staff nicknames represent the individual’s appearance. For example, Ichabod is tall and skinny; he looks like Ichabod Crane in the Disney version of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Warren Jeffs looks like polygamist leader Warren Jeffs; he particularly likes doing strip searches. A very short and well-liked female staff member is Pikachu (Pokemon character); her real name is

Picacho; both the prisoners and Pikachu herself enjoy the coincidence of physical and phonological similarity.

The behavioral nicknames are generally darker and more serious. The doctor on the unit has been nicknamed Dr. Death because inmates have died when his medical care was delayed. Captain America spent time in the army at Guantanamo Bay. He shaves his head, marches around rather than walking, and wants to run his yard like an extension of the army — or an extension of the terrorists. Female staff members disliked by the prisoners are given sexually explicit nicknames, the mildest of which is Sgt. Slut.

Staff who treat the inmates respectfully receive respect in return. The nursing staff are all respectfully addressed by their first names; the inmates' reaction to and naming of the doctor and the nurses are “day and night,” according to Brad. The nurses call the inmates by their last names. Relationships are respectful, and so is communication.

Conclusion

In 1919 H. L. Mencken commented that nicknames are embedded deeply in American culture (cited by Leslie and Skipper, 1990). De Klerk and Bosch (1996) extended the basic concept by saying that “nicknames might be regarded as fairly reliable indicators of current trends and attitudes” (526). For most of us, nicknames are a popular cultural practice, often conveying friendly acceptance and/or family affection. But we realize that some of them convey the derision and scorn of bullies or abusers, with deep and lasting damage to their victims. These are trends and attitudes with which all of us must be concerned.

Parents try to teach their children “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” Unfortunately, this is not true — in schoolyards or in prisons. In prison, the nicknames given to inmates and staff can be a sign of unity, an acknowledgement of individuality, or a defense against punishment and maltreatment. Theodore Holland (1990a) suggested a very apt analogy: “Nicknames are a sort of human mirror in which we see reflected the intersection of individual lives and community experience; to explore their myriad dimensions without losing sight of that humanity is the challenge we face” (269).

In preparing this article, we have found this challenge fascinating — one author from the direct participants' mirror, and two from the mirror that consists of our common humanity. The prison yard is a microcosm of humanity under pressure and stress. Considering the phenomenon of prison nicknames can give us all more understanding of the people and conditions they represent.

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