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## **Vagrant masculinity : a process of masculine self-conceptualization in formerly incarcerated Black men**

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VAGRANT MASCULINITY: A PROCESS OF MASCULINE SELF-  
CONCEPTUALIZATION IN FORMERLY INCARCERATED BLACK MEN

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Sociology

by

Le'Brian Alexander Patrick  
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2006  
M.A., Louisiana State University, 2009  
May 2013

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explores the reorientation of masculine identities of formerly incarcerated Black men. Analysis is based on 20 in-depth interviews with 17 former inmates from the Louisiana prison system. This research investigates the impact of incarceration on the construction of masculinity. I explore the processes by which formerly imprisoned African American men construct, negotiate, and experience masculinity. My findings present how the way these men define masculinity and see themselves post-incarceration is influenced by not only their prison experience, but also by the reentry programs that they are affiliated with. These men's identities have been reformulated post-incarceration and are profoundly shaped by social scripts embedded within American culture, as well as the social landscape of the reentry circumstances that they find themselves. The worlds that they navigate post-imprisonment are filled with inequality, limitations resulting from structural boundaries, as well as assumptions about and a general mistrust of criminals.

Black men's masculinities are present-day manifestations of a history saturated with discrimination, misrepresentation, and self-limiting internalized beliefs of deficiencies as men. However, the remnants of such a horrific past are quickly changing and so are the ways they view themselves as men. Although their discourses on masculinity are created within a context that privileges White men, the men I interviewed describe how they negotiate masculinity, navigate a social context filled with inequality and a mistrust of former inmates, as well as how they have, and continue to reposition themselves as men with the limited resources available to them. These men have shifted their concepts of masculinity from a focus on toxic hypermasculine elements of masculinity toward positive, more-life sustaining conceptualizations of masculinity. My interviews highlight that personal senses of self guide our everyday performances and become so commonplace that they begin to feel natural and self-initiated, even

with outside influences. My findings provide support for reorganizing reentry programs to reorient positive understandings of masculinity in male inmates and former inmates, which will help reduce recidivism.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

One evening I wait for Shane, a 37 year old Black man, to arrive on the bus after finishing his shift at a local grocery store so that I can interview him in a meeting room of a local organization that works with formerly incarcerated males, OTR – Opportunities Through Reentry. I had been invited to attend meetings with the organization and had been doing so for a couple months. I had been welcomed with open spirits by the members. Through leadership development, community education, and voter mobilization, OTR works to ensure that their constituents are at the center of transforming the criminal justice system to improve the status of all formerly incarcerated persons. I watched and listened as the men met and discussed activism efforts along with their daily struggles for improving life post-incarceration. The men faced troubles that varied from employment to housing assistance to family life. In addition to being a safe space to discuss their troubles, OTR and the other organization that I visited and researched, AMA – Adult Mentorship Academy, served as mechanisms to provide positive male examples for these men through the leadership and volunteers of the organization. After a short while Shane, one of my interviewees, arrived and we began to talk as other men continued to arrive for their monthly organizational meeting. Just before Shane and I finished up and joined the group, I asked him what it meant to be a man and he explained, “I didn’t know. I had no idea. I was a child. I learned through experience and I’m still learning as we speak. I know now that masculinity and being a man are different.” I was so taken aback by his honesty in admitting his continuous learning of what it took to be a man that I decided that if I ever finished this dissertation that I would begin it with his statement because it set the tone for exploring what being a man meant to participants in my study.

Shane and many of the men in my sample discussed masculinity in a bifurcated manner. They have developed new orientations to masculinity that divide masculinities based on the

negative and positive elements associated with the concept. Trying to rebuild their lives, these men developed new understandings of masculinity to help manage how they reestablished themselves as men during reentry, in the face of legal, structural, and cultural boundaries. This dissertation is about the forgotten men who live on the periphery of society because of their incarcerated histories. They find work where, when, and if, they can. Some of these men consider themselves lucky to be able to provide for themselves, and possibly a family, while coping with life post-incarceration. Others are constantly reminded of their situation as they are faced with the struggles of their day-to-day survival efforts. Most of the men interviewed for this dissertation were still grappling with ways of distancing their past experiences from their present lives as they try to live with dignity as Black *men*.

### **Same Script, Different “Caste”: How Did We Get Here?**

A closer look at Shane’s statement reveals feelings that mirror those of the men from Alexander’s (2012) book *The New Jim Crow*. Alexander argues that the get-tough on crime policy from the Nixon administration that was exacerbated with Reagan’s war on drugs has been devastating for the African American community. By conceptualizing the “Drug War as the new Jim Crow,” Alexander illustrates how mandatory sentences and other legal sanctions associated with the drug war for African Americans are used as a new post-Jim Crow way to legally deny them the ability to obtain employment, housing, and public benefits. Alexander recounts the story of Jarvis Cotton, who was a plaintiff in *Cotton v. Fordice* in 1998 after being released as a parolee in Mississippi, a state that denies voting rights to parolees. She traces Jarvis’s family tree and finds that his great grandfather could not vote as a slave; his grandfather was prevented from voting by Ku Klux Klan intimidation, his father was blocked from voting through the use of poll taxes and literacy laws; Cotton himself is barred from the basic freedom that democracy

promises because he has been labeled as a felon. “All men are created equal” according to the U.S. constitution; however, like the historical account of the Cotton men, Shane is among a growing number of Black men who cannot legally vote; a basic right extended to all U.S. citizens by the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment which is supposed to be federally enforced by the Voting Rights Act of 1965<sup>1</sup>.

A common experience of Black men in American history is they have been barred from legally voting through a number of mechanisms. Alexander’s examination of Cotton’s family tree shows that new tactics have been created with each new generation in order to bar Black men from the vote. Similarly, today different mechanisms have been set in place to maintain such limitations. Moreover, Black men are “subject to legalized discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service, just as their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were” (p. 1). Although the cultural and legal context of America has changed in the last 100 years, with the end of slavery and Jim Crow, African American men continue to face insidious and subtle forms of discrimination that continuously limit their autonomy and ability to engage fully in this culture as *men*. These changing patterns of discrimination and inequality have also created new limitations on Black male identity construction.

## **Purpose and Rationale**

The purpose of this study is to explore the construction of masculinity during reentry for a group of formerly incarcerated Black men. I take seriously the intersections of race, class, and gender with the stigma of incarceration in their everyday lives. With the current state of

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<sup>1</sup> To combat federal anti-discrimination laws that were insufficient in overcoming state resistance to enforcement of the 15th Amendment, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law on August 6, 1965. Section 2 of the Act applied a nationwide prohibition against the denial or abridgment of the right to vote on the literacy tests. Among its other provisions, the Act contained special enforcement provisions targeted at those areas of the country where Congress believed the potential for discrimination to be the greatest (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2012).

overpopulation in prisons and the increasing numbers of prisoners being released, this research is timely for realm of criminological and criminal justice research. Furthermore, this research is important for the entire African American community and others who are affected by the restrictions faced by these men as they reenter their home communities.

It is important to study the influence of incarceration on Black male identity because of the overrepresentation of Black males in the prison population and the increasing prevalence of individuals reentering communities – approximately half a million annually (Pager, 2003). Because of the extreme consequences that come along with incarceration, massive institutional, as well as social intervention is needed to address and mitigate the effects of this underrecognized and important mechanism of stratification. Devah Pager's (2003) investigation of the impact of incarceration on employment outcomes of Black and White job seekers shows that the stint of a criminal record presents major barriers to employment, leading to major racial disparities. She found that for Whites a criminal record only reduced the likelihood of a callback for employment by 50 percent, whereas for Blacks this likelihood was reduced by 65 percent. More surprising, her study showed that even Whites with a criminal record received more favorable treatment than Blacks without a criminal record, with callbacks at 17% to 14% respectively. The implications are obvious based on these results; effects of criminal records are more pronounced for Blacks than Whites. Furthermore, this serves as a reminder that employers are, as they have been in the past, more reluctant to hire African Americans and are even more wary of Black ex-convicts. The social psychological effects of this on African Americans become extremely important here, especially on formerly incarcerated Black men.

For formerly incarcerated African American men, imprisonment is a major life event that shapes how they see themselves as well as how others view them. Despite their diminished

status, reigning social norms place heavy pressures on these men to measure up to White, middle-class masculinity with little room for variation. Little is known about how these men accomplish masculinity post-incarceration, or about their daily negotiations of gender. This is a significant limitation within criminology and criminal justice, as identity and behavioral research has the potential for early intervention in the lives of young African American males that could potentially lead to decreases in the number of men facing incarceration. The implications of identity theory on the lives of formerly incarcerated Black males are under-examined. Thus, my research contributes to scholarship about the intersections of race, class, gender, and citizenship. I integrate masculinity theory with a critical race framework to better understand the impact of racial discrimination on how formerly incarcerated Black men construct, perform, and even challenge dominant notions of gender. My research can potentially motivate a rising political and cultural consciousness among Black men and can serve to implement social change in combating racism and patriarchy.

Recent literature in qualitative methods has indicated that the passing down of stories is integral to cultural survival within the marginalized groups (Chang-Ross, 2010; Comas-Diaz, 2006; Cruz, 2001; Fine, Roberts, & Weis, 2001). As stated by Cruz (2001), “Situating knowledge in the brown body begins the validation of the narratives of survival, transformation, and emancipation of our respective communities, reclaiming histories and identities. And in these ways we embody our theory” (p. 668). Collecting narratives from formerly incarcerated Black males, whose voices are all too often silenced because of gender and racial hierarchies and by traditional cultural expectations of law-following as required for citizenship, can challenge cultural understandings of gender, manhood, and identity – within both the African American community and mainstream culture (Anzaldúa, 1999; Fine, Roberts, & Weis, 2001).

In this dissertation, I provide a space for these men to talk about their lives in the borderlands of social acceptance post-incarceration. It is within these borders that they search for work, provide for themselves and possibly their family, cope with stigmatization, and navigate ways of being men with dignity. Many of these men are still in the process of distancing themselves from their discreditable past. The stories told by the men who participated in this project reveal the realities of reentry for African American men beyond how they deal with legal forms of discrimination and paint a human portrait of the discriminatory barriers that burden not only these men, but also the lives of the greater Black community in America.

This dissertation advances sociological and criminological research by integrating multiple theoretical lenses to study ex-offender self-concepts and experiences. I advance a gendered paradigm of criminal desistance that builds on existing theory and on the growing body of work on gender and criminology. Moreover, I propose a series of recommendations for further research. The following research question guides my analysis of how formerly incarcerated Black men experience their everyday worlds: How does incarceration impact the self-concept of formerly incarcerated African American men?

## **Overview of Dissertation**

In this chapter I have opened the discussion of how structural mechanisms, although changing, have continued to limit the full participation of Black men in America. Incarceration serves as a modern-day mechanism for maintaining their second-class citizenship. Because incarceration has continued to play a normative role in the lives of many African American men, it is important to understand how these men reestablish themselves as men post-incarceration. In the remainder of my dissertation, I organize my project in accordance with the typical



chronological processes involved in how the men recounted their lives, with incarceration being a central element in their experiences.

Before I can do this, however, I first explore ways that Black masculinity has been impacted over time by exploring historical epochs in chapter two. Next, in chapter three, I offer an in-depth overview of the existing research on formerly incarcerated Black males and detail the integrated theoretical framework that guides my analysis of Black men's construction and negotiation of masculinity during reentry. Following that, in chapter four I summarize the methodological approaches and strategies that I used and explore how my awareness of my racial/ethnic background, as well as my gender and age and my prior experience with incarcerated persons unexpectedly surfaced and influenced my perspective throughout the course of studying Black formerly incarcerated men's self-concepts.

In chapter five, I present my findings. I begin by describing Black men's definitions of masculinity prior to imprisonment. I explore the ways that masculinity is learned and manifests in their lives. I move toward an understanding of incarceration as connected to performing such a masculinity. By deconstructing their stories, I capture how structural barriers and incarceration experiences have come to shape how Black males conceive themselves as men in different social environments prior to and during incarceration. I discuss prison as a turning point in these men's lives and the way they see themselves as men and conceptualize masculinity. I explore various events that participants experienced during incarceration that sparked cognitive transitions in their desires for positive transitions leading to a life without incarceration. I expand on the ways masculinity can be both redefined and challenged in this context. I discuss the pivotal role of incarceration in these men's realization of this possibility.

In my final chapter I revisit the research questions that informed this study and discuss how my findings add to the literature on theorizing Black masculinity. The bulk of this chapter explores the implications for doing masculinity in the context of reentry for formerly incarcerated Black men. My original extension of the masculine identity framework and Potter's Black feminist criminology (2006) helped to frame an initial analysis with an understanding that traditional feminist criminology has yet to grapple fully the complexities of theorizing from intersecting identities. I conclude by detailing the limitations of my work, recommending ideas for future research and discussing the implications of my study.

## **CHAPTER 2: REMEMBER THE TIME**

In this chapter, I outline the historical context for thinking about Black masculinity today. I review major historical eras that have had significant impacts on African American men and the larger African American community. I discuss slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and the contemporary war on drugs. I also highlight some significant factors that structure Black men's lives today – i.e. family, work, and prison. I conclude by discussing issues that formerly incarcerated Black men face during reentry and present my research question surrounding the potential impact of these factors on constructs of masculinity post-incarceration.

### **Black Males and Slavery**

Any discussion of Black masculinity must consider the impact of slavery. Black male identity is a product of an American history that has been saturated with an unequivocal impact of slavery, combined with narrowly defined understandings of masculinity – i.e. power, dominance, and educational, economic, and social advantages. Unlike their White counterparts, Black men have and have historically had fewer economic and social privileges.

During slavery, African bodies were equated to property and denied participation in public life. Thus, social identities for enslaved Africans were non-existent, as far as being socially recognized by non-Blacks. However, enslaved Blacks found ways of maneuvering such restrictions. For example, antebellum social life and laws considered enslaved persons morally and legally unfit to marry, so they were barred from entering such civil contracts legally (Franke, 1999). They were not thought to have the moral fiber necessary to respect and honor the institution of marriage. Nevertheless, slaves still formed couples and lived together as husband and wife, when they could. They celebrated their nuptials by simply jumping over a broomstick

and having scriptures read at their ceremonies. These couples saw themselves as married in front of God and the community, but it was not legally recognized legally at the time (ibid.). Access to social resources – i.e. legal marriage, money, ownership of property, etc. – became required as enslaved Africans began to be freed. Of course, such a shift could only be accompanied by a shift in the entire social landscape, which affected both Blacks and Whites. David Johns (2007) pointed out in his investigation on the “problems” surrounding the construction of Black masculinity in America that “the transition of enslaved Africans into freed people ushered in a bifurcated Black/White social schema. Subsequently, preserving the socially constructed category of “Whiteness” required of Whites, the categorization of “Blackness” in opposition to the purity, entitlement, and moral hegemony associated with Whiteness. As such, anything identified with Blackness was fixed within a contradictory and flawed notion of inherent deficiency—based primarily on the construction of the word itself (Johns, 2007, pg. 2).” Powerful European land owning Protestants created images of Black males during slavery. Their power to create, validate, and sustain notions of Black masculinity cannot be emphasized enough. Pejorative images of Black males as lazy, violent, and disengaged, which were first offered to justify slavery, continue to impact the ways Black males are represented, understood, and in many ways understand themselves (Johns, 2007). Black men construct their identity through and against a cultural, economic, and historical backdrop that has limited their participation in public life. Moreover, Black men’s contemporary realities are bound in our histories and inextricably connected to its historical production.

The historical realities of Black men have been a subject met with disagreement over the years. The earliest work in the area of the impact of slavery gave rise to theoretical perspectives that depicted the Black male as a docile personality whose will had been broken by slavery.

Historian Stanley Elkins (1959) thesis was that under slavery Black men abdicated their responsibility to their families. However, subsequent historical research has shown that most slave households had a male as head who fulfilled certain role prerequisites under the limited autonomy possible in a total institution. For example, Alex Haley's (1976) book *Roots* and the television equivalent provided a more balanced image of the male slave as strong and resistant to the trauma of slavery. The fact that men did not have unlimited authority in the family does not necessarily mean that they relinquished all familial responsibility. Rather, according to Genovese (1974), this in fact a closer approximation to a portrait that depicts the possibility of a healthier image of sexual equality for Whites – a reflection of a more egalitarian family allowing for greater role flexibility between males and females.

Black men's emasculation during slavery has often been cited as one of the causes for the high rates of female-headed households, single-parent families, and divorce rates within the Black community (Liebow, 1967; Staples, 1982; Wilson, 1987). However, despite multiple structural and psychosocial barriers, historical accounts have shown that even in the worst conditions – i.e. slavery and poverty – Black men have managed to develop a sense of dignity and self-worth, were connected to their families, and provided for them as best they could (Bowman, 1989; Cazenave, 1979, 1984; Gutman, 1976; Gwaltney, 1980; Hunter, 1988; Shaw, 1974). However, because we associate masculinity with being the economic provider and as head of the family, what Black males are and what they should be is measured against the status and privilege of White males. I consider what happens when these men have been told to accept society's definitions of masculinity, but are denied the resources to demonstrate their masculinity. This comparison, which is infused with unacknowledged inequality, has impacted

their community, their sense of self-worth, and their ability to embody dominant practices and conceptions of masculinity.

In sum, I do not want to imply that Black people in general and Black men in particular are not active agents in the construction of their selves and their identities. However, Black masculinity has been intimately shaped by slavery and by abolition. Understanding how Black men performed masculinity during slavery is instrumental to conceptualizing Black masculinity today.

Stereotypes that portray Black men as hypersexual, highly aggressive, criminal, inferior, and unevolved emerged during slavery (Collins, 2004). Such controlling images were constructed and maintained in order to strip enslaved African men of their humanity and have been used to enact violence on Black males, such as in the cases of lynchings (see Staples, 1978; Hodes, 1993; Plous and Williams, 1995). Staples argues that “the White man in America has, historically, arranged to have both White and Negro women available to him, and, in the process has sought to emasculate Negro men” (Staples, 1978). In 1865, a White male-only organization formed as a secret social club called KuKlux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee and one of the Klan’s stated purposes was that females, friends, widows, and their households shall ever be special objects of our regard and protection (Hodes, 1993). Their intention to protect women applied to White women only. As part of their violence, Klansmen also assaulted and raped Black women (ibid.). Moreover, Klansmen took offense when a Black man acted in any manner they judged even mildly insulting to White women. Further, Hodes points out that without the institution of slavery, the rape of White women was the logical extreme to which Black men would go without the institution of slavery to restrain them. What Hodes shows is an example of what Collins (2005) sees as problematic – the reducing of Black male bodies to focusing on the penis, when

sexualizing them and studying their masculinity. Collins says that “beliefs that reduce Black men to their penises, especially penises that are not under the control of White men, created a space for the myth of the Black rapist” (p. 207). Moreover, this opened the door for the creation of the myth of Black men’s need for booty calls within contemporary America (ibid.). These stereotypes are still prevalent in contemporary U.S. society and contribute to Black male disengagement, alienation and misrepresentation. Plous and Williams (1995) found that negative racial stereotypes remain common and relevant. Two of the strongest stereotypes are (1) Whites have greater thinking ability than Blacks, and (2) anatomical differences, such as Blacks having thicker skulls than Whites. Partly as a consequence of these presumed anatomical differences, African Americans were thought to be less sensitive to physical pain and less able to think abstractly - characteristics which, it was argued, naturally suited them to slavery (ibid.).

### **Emancipation/Reconstruction Era [1865-1877]**

If we view slavery as a form of social death for African Americans, then emancipation, or the Reconstruction era as it is also known, alludes to a social rebirth with enfranchisement and other rights bestowed on Black people (Franke, 1999). The time immediately following the abolition of slavery was critical for African Americans in relation to civil rights and state regulation. During this period, just after the Civil War, Blacks celebrated the right to own property, to alienate, or exercise control over, their labor, and to participate in institutions of civil and public life that were considered essential to a good and free life (Franke, 1999). As this post antebellum period progressed, African Americans quickly learned that just because they were gaining civil rights did not mean there would be absence of restrictive state regulation. The relationship between Blacks and state regulations changed because they were not seen as capable

of fully handling autonomy, independence and full citizenship immediately (Franke, 1999). More simply, they had to be “domesticated” into citizenship.

Rather than being able to escape state control, Blacks found themselves encountering state regulation on a different battlefield. In many respects, the movement for Black equality, both historically and contemporarily, must be understood as a legacy of battles won and lost well before what we currently know as the “Civil Rights” movement. During reconstruction African Americans still had to demand for legal recognition for inclusion in social and political institutions (Franke, 1999). The acquisition of rights was two-fold. On the one hand, rights were a source of emancipation, but on the other hand, they were a source of social power for dominant social groups that gave them the tools to *naturalize* their dominant positions with regards to and social power (ibid.).

For example marriage, is a domestication of more “primitive” sexuality (Franke, 1999). It is a site for the transformation of behavior and a placing of men and women as husbands and wives in society. This “domestication” for former slaves is crucial in understanding the rights of Blacks during this time because it was one of the most important ramifications after emancipation. Many formerly enslaved people traveled great distances and endured major hardships to reunite with family members that they had been separated from during slavery (Litwack, 1999). Since many enslaved Blacks had already lived as husband and wife, even if not legally recognized, legitimizing their relationships did little to affect the forms of those relationships. However, for a large number of former slaves, legal marriage was not experienced as a source of validation and empowerment, but rather a source of discipline and punishment (Franke, 1999). The inauguration of Blacks into the institution of marriage can be understood through the converging interests of Black and White males. On the one hand, for the African



American community, the ability to marry was important because it signified freedom and acceptance into civil society; on the other hand, for White males, it had powerful economic undertones and was a way to maintain control over Blacks (ibid.).

White men had their own stakes in African American matrimony that were independent of the altruistic motive of supporting Black personal sovereignty. Many southern states quickly amended marriage laws following the Civil War that validated marriages prior to emancipation – i.e. some new laws legitimized slave marriages if the couple cohabitated when the law went into effect (Franke, 1999). Some states were not as accommodating and they provided time limits to remarry or created and enforced other laws. The enforcement of bigamy, fornication, and adultery laws served to “domesticate” Black people, whose sexuality was seen as outside the normative Victorian matrimonial customs of the time. Once emancipated, Black people were in violation of marriage laws for a number of reasons; for instance, it was not uncommon for a man to marry a woman and then be sold under slavery. Subsequently, they would marry another spouse believing they would not see each other again. Franke (1999) argues that African Americans were given marriage rights when public interests took priority in marriage as an institution over private interests. With these rights came the creation of more laws regulating marriage; consequently, this created marital deviance, in which Black males were the primary “offenders” (ibid.). Along with the creation of deviance and the development and enforcement of new laws during this time to regulate African American citizenship, there followed an increase in the prosecution and incarceration of violators of such laws – and such violators were primarily African American males. White masculinity required new grounds to continue social dominance since the integrity of White masculinity was being challenged because now, at least theoretically, all men were free market agents. Thus, Black men were aggressively prosecuted

for matrimonial deviance. Just as it does today, the use of criminal prosecutions disenfranchised Black males. Moreover, it supported the creation of a criminal leasing system in which Black male prisoners were rented to White planters to work in the fields, sometimes under conditions that were worse than slavery (Franke, 1999). Essentially, this has manifested as a legal form of slavery, with the penal system as well as White farmers profiting at the expense of Black males.

It is my view that this “criminal leasing system” is reflected in what we call today “Transitional Work Program” except there are more humane laws to protect inmates from extremely harsh treatment. Formerly known as work release, the Transitional Work Program allows certain eligible offenders to enter the program from one year to three years prior to release from incarceration, depending on the offense of conviction, according to the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections (2012). Offenders in the programs work at an approved job and, when not working, they must return to the prisons. Taking a closer look at these programs, we can see that the states are gaining at the expense of the inmate because the inmates are responsible for housing and transportation reimbursement as well as incidental fees. Offenders are also responsible for paying their own medical and dental fees while in the program. Earning little from these programs, inmate exploitation in these programs mirrors the racial exploitation for Black men during slavery.

During this time period, the Freedmen’s Bureau – an agency created by the war department set up in 1865 to assist freed slaves in obtaining relief, land, jobs, fair treatment, and education (U.S. Statutes, vol. 13, 1866) – became overwhelmed by reports of systematic violence against African Americans, i.e. lynchings, rapes, beatings, and other brutal assaults, at the hands of Whites. This brutality was supported with arguments that freed men and women were continuing the “disgusting practice of living together and calling themselves man and wife as

long as it conveniently suited them,” and “maintaining bigamous or adulterous relationships” (Franke, 1999). The ratification of these new laws was a double-edged sword. Some couples found themselves married when they didn’t intend or some found themselves “married” to multiple people or at least they were defined that way and these acts were violations of the law. Even without matrimonial intentions, African Americans found themselves with substantial obligations of marriage and divorce under the new technical operations of the law.

Moreover, skin color mattered during reconstruction. The symbolic nature of goodness being attached to Whiteness skin color, which developed during slavery, affected economic and political opportunities for African Americans during reconstruction. With slavery, often biracial, or mulatto, slaves were given less menial tasks, offered more educational opportunities, and treated better than darker slaves. Thus, this provided them advantages that prepared them to be leaders in their postbellum communities. By no means did a light complexion mean that the men in this category would be fully accepted in society. They were not fully accepted into either group (Office of History and Preservation, 2012). Reconstruction created a unique bifurcation in society for all people, but in particular males. There was a new hierarchy among males that consisted of White men, Mulatto men, and Black men. Among the Black men, Mulatto males had greater access to opportunities, but there was also a resentment that formed among darker-complexioned men because of those privileges afforded to mulatto men and the snobbery that sometimes accompanied their privileged existence.

### **Jim Crow [1877-1954]**

The Jim Crow era furthered such conditions that perpetuated restrictions for Black males as White Democrats slowly, but surely regained political power in the South. Southern Whites resisted the power of freedmen, fearing Black domination and during Reconstruction the

majority of southern states were controlled by the Black vote; however, through intimidation tactics, poll taxes, and literacy tests Black voting decreased (Kousser, 1974). As African Americans regained power, laws were passed that made voter registration and electoral rules more restrictive. Nonetheless, Black males still were elected to political offices. New legal restrictions – a combination of poll taxes, literacy, comprehension tests, residency, and record-keeping requirements – disenfranchised more Blacks (and also many poor Whites); resulting in a decrease in political participation among Blacks (Kousser, 1974). These changes did not mean that this was solely an era of legal separation for Blacks and Whites, but more so a period where, in order to retain dominance, Whites had to assert and reiterate Black inferiority within both public and private life. Howard Thurman elaborated on the workings of segregation in his 1965 book *The Luminous Darkness*, arguing that in White supremacist society legislation and law enforcement must be accompanied by a falsification of history and a tampering of religious insights. Additionally, all public accommodations must be kept separate in order to immobilize the Negro in society and keep him in his place. Black children learned through experience through taunting from White children and witnessing degrading treatment of Black adults who was better off than whom; and under such circumstances they often grew up with feelings of inferiority (Chafe, Gavins, and Korstad, 2001).

Tenets of White supremacy became increasingly supported by legislation and custom that decreed that African Americans remain in a subordinate place in American society. History was transformed into a terrain of social and cultural struggle. In their book Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South (2001), Chafe, Gavins, and Korstad write that African Americans relayed a concern that their history would not be acknowledged at all as they experienced it. As historians and academicians retold the history of slavery as

benevolent and civilizing, oral traditions grew in importance for African Americans to maintain an understanding of its cruelty (ibid.). Oral traditions became vital in the maintenance of African American identity and heritage. Emancipation opened the door for Blacks to search for family members that were separated from them, but this was met with little success. Freed Blacks began to create and sustain fundamental relationships – building families and kinship networks, forming supportive communities, and organizing education, economic, political, and religious institutions. To combat denial of equal citizenship, African Americans forged a moral economy, fostered racial solidarity, progress, and equality (Chafe, Gavins, and Korstad, 2001).

For vast numbers of African American youths coming of age during this time period, education may have taken a back seat to seizing the few economic activities available to them once they reached an age suitable for the labor force. It was not that there was a rejection of education, but rather a reaction to the still present lack of job opportunities available for Blacks, combined with their already limited economic position (Litwack, 1999). The Jim Crow period placed Black men in an impossible paradox. On the one hand, this system did not see men of African descent as fully men, or at least they were not capable of being *normal* men; in the sense that they were incapable of handling the same responsibilities as White men, such as being proprietors, entrepreneurs, fathers, state representatives, and inventors. This view served as a justification to exclude Black men from full citizenship with rights, access to networks, and full economic prosperity. Such a system makes it difficult for Black men to be adequate heads of households, protectors, and providers for their families. On the other hand, the Jim Crow regime claims that Black men are naturally deficient as *men* because it demands that they adhere to and aspire to the social codes established for the conduct of men. By perpetuating the idea of Black male deficiency, the Jim Crow regime justified its administration of an entrenched colored

division through violence, intimidation, coercion, and manipulation of the courts, schools, public transportation, and other instruments of public interest (Ross, 2004). By juxtaposing deficient beliefs with high demands, Jim Crow put Black men in a rather tricky position in their families that ultimately required role variation in Black households.

### **Civil Rights Movement**

There were both victories and struggles produced by the Civil Rights Movement. It was a time that produced a Black masculinity modeled after the middle-class, which included conceptions of public civility, private morality, and individual responsibility (Gray, 1995). However, although the civil rights struggle was successful in theoretically winning for African Americans freedom from discrimination, some argue that it failed to secure a national commitment toward ameliorating prior effects of discrimination, like that of violence and self-destructive behavior (Loury, 1998). Among some Blacks such effects have manifested in patterns of behavior which lead to seemingly self-imposed limits on their acquisition of skills. For example, research on stereotype threat and social identity has shown that priming one's social identity with a negative stereotype leads one to perform poorly or in a stereotypic manner (Schmader, 2002; Shih, Pittinski, and Ambady, 1999). Some observers note that while overt racism has been implicated more in the past, today it is behavioral differences that are at the root of racial inequality in contemporary America (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997). However, the deeper issue when we look at the underclass is that the African American experience has been shaped by political, social and economic institutions that have been extremely oppressive. Thus, what we are seeing for Blacks is that their lives are a product of that oppressive history.

## **War on Drugs**

As the Civil Rights movement slowed, new challenges developed. Theoretically, discrimination was supposed to end, but the reality is that new forms continued to develop, especially because this is the time that the “war on drugs” began. In fact, on July 14, 1969, in a special message to Congress, President Richard Nixon identified drug abuse as "a serious national threat" and called for a national anti-drug policy at the state and federal levels. This has had a significant impact on the alarming rate of incarceration for African American males and the stigma of incarceration makes successful reentry quite difficult. Alexander informs us that with nearly one-third of Black men likely to spend some time incarcerated in their lives, they find permanent second-class citizenship waiting for them after they are released (Alexander 2012). Simply put, she sees the “war on drugs” as a deliberate effort to reduce the gains of the Civil Rights movement, rather than a response to an actual increase in violent crime. Interestingly, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) reported a decrease in violent crime during the very time that the modern “war on drugs” was beginning to intensify significantly – in the 1990s – and it had since continued and began to stabilize in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (FBI, Uniform Crime Reports, annually).

Although the war on drugs does not directly affect all African American men, it does significantly contour their lives. Scholars have argued that overtly racist policies created during the Civil Rights movement combined with racial disparities in law enforcement and sentencing have come to diminish the spirit not only of Black men but also the Black community as a whole (see Weich and Angulo, 2000; Rosich, 2007; The Sentencing Project, 2000, 2008). For example, parental incarceration affects a large and increasing number of children. The New York Times reports “at any given time, more than 1.5 million children have a parent who is currently in prison (2009). Most of these children are young, low-income, and Black or Hispanic. These

children face great uncertainty in many aspects of their lives. Temporary, informal care arrangements may permanently separate children from their imprisoned parent, their family, and their friends. The expense and discomfort of prison visits may limit the contact between parent and child needed to maintain relationships during incarceration. For young Black males, the distance created by this impediment exacerbates the social problem of fatherless households, leaving many Black male youth searching to learn masculinity through other channels.

Marc Mauer (2004) argues that racial disparities in rates of incarceration in the United States partially result from sentencing and drug policies which, intended or not, produce disproportionate racial/ethnic effects. One such example is the sentencing policies that were created for powder cocaine and crack. Although the two types of same drug cause similar physical reactions, the sentences that the users and sellers of the drugs face are vastly different. For powder cocaine, possession with intent to distribute carries a five year sentence for quantities of 500 grams or more. But for crack, possessing only 5 grams carries the same term. Because it takes 100 times more powder cocaine than crack cocaine to trigger the same mandatory minimum penalty, this penalty structure is commonly referred to as the ‘100-to-1 drug quantity ratio.’ The maximum sentence for simple possession of any other drug, including powder cocaine, is 1 year in jail (U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2007). The U.S. Sentencing Commission reports (2007) that historically, the majority of crack cocaine users have been Black, but that proportion has been on a decline since the early 1990s: 91.4 percent in 1992, 84.7 percent in 2000, and 81.8 percent in 2006. Approximately 2/3 of crack users are White or Hispanic, yet the vast majority of persons convicted of possession in federal courts in 1994 were African American, according to the USSC. Similar trends follow with the powder form. Such sentencing disparities between the two forms reflect cultural misconceptions about crack – i.e.



who uses it, who sells it, etc. Moreover, such disparities are an illustration of a disturbing issue within America, its embedded racist and classist undertone that has historically fueled our society's political, legal, and law enforcement structure. Weich and Angulo (2000) document that African Americans are 12% of the U.S. population and 12% of U.S. drug users, yet they are 38% of those arrested for drug-related offenses. In 2002, attendees of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights testified before the U.S. Sentencing Commission that despite similar drug use rates between minorities and Whites, minorities are disproportionately subject to the penalties for both types of cocaine (see <http://www.civilrights.org>). While some think of these disparities as a matter of circumstance, Mauer (2004) highlights that many of these effects and disparities could have been predicted prior to the adoption of the legislation that produced them by considering alternative policies that accomplish the same goals of reducing drug use without causing undue racial effects and contributing to the lack of Black male figures in communities.

The increase in Black men in prison is also related to economic profits. According to the New York Times (2012), "As financial pressures grow, officials are using halfway houses as dumping grounds... where low level offenders are thrown together with violent ones." The incentive is simply financial – to raise money for the counties that house the inmates. For example, a recent investigation revealed that Essex County, New Jersey, receives as much as \$108 per day for each bed the federal government uses at the county jail, according to federal contracts. The county spends \$73 per day for a bed at Delaney Hall in New Jersey, which is run by a company, Community Education Centers. The difference of about \$35 a day per bed is extra revenue for the county. To date, Essex County has been paid more than \$77 million by the federal government for housing inmates and immigration detainees in the county jail. The county expects to receive at least \$200 million more through 2016. In the current prison system

which is increasingly based on profit, Black men are taken from their families and shifted from location to location with only economic considerations at hand – a situation which all too ominously mirrors slavery. Thus, the American Criminal Justice System serves as a modern racial caste system disguised behind a new mask (Alexander, 2012).

*The Times – Picayune of Greater New Orleans* (Chang, 2012) reported that for the past five years, Harris County Jail – the third largest in the nation behind those in Chicago and Los Angeles – and LaSalle Correctional Center (LCC) have had a mutually dependent relationship. LCC, sitting in the middle of nowhere 40 miles north of Alexandria, is a Louisiana-based for-profit prison chain and, as reported, “always needs bodies to fill its beds and can provide them – bodies – at a very competitive price with pick-up and delivery included.” With Louisiana being the world’s prison capital, having an incarceration rate that is nearly five times Iran’s, 13 times China’s, and 20 times Germany’s (Chang, 2012), the masked engine behind the state’s full speed incarceration is *green* - cash. The majority of Louisiana’s inmates are housed in for-profit facilities, so maintaining high incarceration rates ensures that Louisiana continues to profit from these “bodies.” However, as this cycle continues, the profit comes at the expense of Black male youth and the entire African American community.

### **Modern Day Challenges**

As America has changed over time, it is only fitting that forms of discrimination alter as they perpetuate inferiority among minorities, in particular toward Black men. For example, in *Thinking About Crime: Sense and Sensibility in American Penal Culture*, Michael Tonry documents how governments have historically used punishment as a tool of social control, with the extent or severity of punishment being unrelated to actual crime patterns (2004). Comparing the extreme increase in the incarceration rate in the United States to stable incarceration rates in

other advanced countries over the same time period, he concluded that governments decide the amount of punishment that is enforced. Moreover, he argues that these decisions are unrelated to actual crime rates and trends. The U.S. has emerged as the leader in severity and length of punishment in the developed world. Furthermore, the targets of much of this punishment are primarily African American men.

Similarly, In his 2005 PBS documentary *Do You Speak American?*, Robert MacNeil points out that even though we are far removed from the passage of the landmark legislation outlawing racial discrimination, it still exists in something as simple as language use. These various forms of discrimination have culminated to form a significant barrier to pathways to the American dream for African Americans. With such barriers to success in place, prison has seemed to continue to have a swinging door for African American men, housing an extraordinary percentage of Black men. According to the U.S. Justice Department, Black males make up 35.4 percent of jail and prison populations, even though they make up less than 10 percent of the overall U.S. population. In short, incarceration has allowed these old forms of discrimination – employment discrimination, voting discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of educational opportunities, etc. – to remain legal for the formerly incarcerated. Federal and state laws have created a web of entrapment for the outstanding numbers of Black men who are, have been, or whoever will be in prison in their lifetimes.

Our punitive laws are a reflection of our attitudes that have penalized Black men. Racial typification of crime has been found to be a significant predictor of the punitiveness (Chiricos, Welch, and Gertz, 2004). Peffley and Hurwitz (2002), in their examination of White support for punitive laws report that negative stereotypes of African Americans— specifically, the belief that Blacks are violent and lazy—are an important source of support for punitive policies such as the

death penalty and increasing prison terms. Moreover, they show that negative evaluations of Black prisoners are much more strongly tied to support for punitive policies than are evaluations of White prisoners. The findings from their multi-method approach suggest that when many Whites think of punitive crime policies to deal with violent offenders they are thinking of Black offenders. Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) implicate the media in helping this typification of race and crime along pointing out that when Blacks and Whites are shown in television news stories, Blacks are much more likely than their White counterparts to be portrayed as criminals as opposed to police officers, role models, news commentators, or other positive figures. While these projects have specifically looked at the racial component of Whites' support for ostensibly race-neutral crime policies, ultimately they yield implications for the intersection of race, crime, and political behavior. Furthermore, with such demoralizing imagery of Black life, what viable and prosperous role models do African American youth have to look to, in particular Black males, for gender socialization?

Given these shifts in the American prison system, it is important to understand how formerly African American incarcerated men negotiate lost rights and privileges post-incarceration. Moreover, how does such limited access to resources shape Black masculinity? Furthermore, how has such a system shaped the way that we see, perceive, and interact with African American men and, specifically, formerly incarcerated Black men?

### **Work Life**

Contrary to popular belief, dual-parent families were the norm for African Americans, not the exception, yet they began shifting as a result of slavery (Ruggles, 1994). What was unique to Black families was that Black women always worked along with their male counterparts (Jones, 2009). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) documents how Black women's

experiences have been shaped by their race and gender. Her sociohistorical analysis reveals the resilience of Black women, even in difficult labor markets. Collins emphasizes their roles in contributing to their families' well-being by being the "glue that holds them together" and teaching their children to survive. She argues that Black women's unpaid work is a form of resistance to oppression, rather than male exploitation of these women (Collins, 2000). African American women's work in both the paid and unpaid labor force, but in particularly the paid labor force, is fundamental in understanding the trouble with comparing Black men to standards of White male masculinity. Her analysis of Black women's work shows how patriarchal White demarcations of public and private divisions of labor are problematic when looking at the African American community.

Black family and work life during the historical period of Jim Crow exposes the arbitrary nature of gendered divisions because Black women, who unlike their White counterparts, worked and were supported through the collectivist values and mutuality that developed within the African American community. The egalitarian feature of the African American family structure removes the supposedly "natural" division between men and women in White American culture. Egalitarianism within Black families is a consequence of living under the harsh economic conditions of the late nineteenth century. This stands in stark contrast to the sharp dichotomy between male and female sex roles so common to White middle class families during this era. However, as expectations of Black males as sole economic providers eroded they became more "dispensable" to the family, further providing justification for viewing Black men as deficient. Holding such an optional status, there is a difficulty in definitively distinguishing a relevant identity that is solely associated with Black men.

## **Family Life**

Even though fatherless households have been the exception rather than the rule, they have laid the foundations for stereotypes about Black men being castrated by their women, who have left them behind with greater educations and economic achievement (Staples, 1978). Such stereotypes have persisted due to the greater egalitarianism within the Black community. Staples's (1978) work points out that this stereotypic thinking has manifested in many Black men's negative self-image. Through the dissemination of Euroamerican cultural ideology Black men are bombarded with images of the worthless, good-for-nothing Black man, which serve as a constant reminder of their inferior status. A major aspect of this type of thinking is that people of European descent – i.e. White people – are inherently more intelligent, beautiful, industrious, and just than are non-White people (Jordan, 1969). All other ethnicities in America (Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, and others) are exposed to pro-White socialization messages disseminated by the school system, mass media, and religious institutions (Baldwin, 1980; Cogdell and Wilson, 1980). Oliver (1989) points out that in America, pro-White socialization is primarily anti-Black and that ideas of White superiority are embedded in every aspect of American society. Research has shown that in an effort to escape this negative self-image, instead of using the higher standards of the majority group, many Black males measure their worth by the achievement of others within their own culture. Being a member of an oppressed minority group also allows individual members to be extrapunitive in determining the reasons for their failures in life (Nobles, 1973; McCarthy & Yancey, 1971). Simply put, by not trying to measure up to unrealistic standards of White maleness in America, Black men compare their situation to other Black men, finding that their status is not that far removed from their brethren – whether incarcerated or not, yet they are far from their White counterparts in the struggle for equality.

## **The Prison Industrial Complex and the Black Male**

Prisons have grown to be a central feature in American life today. Even with the plethora of penal institutions that we have available, overcrowding of prisons is a major problem. At the end of 2010, the Bureau of Justice statistics reported a sum of 1,612,395 inmates under federal and state supervision, according to their National Prisoner statistics (Guerino, Harrison, and Sabol, 2011). Further at yearend 2010, Black non-Hispanic males had an imprisonment rate of 3,074 per 100,000 U.S. Black male residents – a rate that was nearly 7 times higher than that of White non-Hispanic males - 459 per 100,000 (ibid.). This huge growth in the prison population among Black men has prompted scholars and activists to dig deeper into the understanding of punishment in the U.S. and to develop an understanding of what Angela Davis (1997) has termed the “Prison Industrial Complex.” According to an international movement to end the prison industrial complex (PIC), the Critical Resistance (Herzing, 2011) defines the PIC as “a term used to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that uses surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems.” Angela Davis and Cassandra Shaylor (2001) point out that the proliferation of prisons and prisoners is more clearly linked to larger economic and political structures and ideologies than to individual criminal conduct and efforts to curb "crime." Many companies with global markets rely on prisons for profit and benefit from their continuous expansion.

The PIC simultaneously produces vast profit and social destruction. For example, on the one hand it may be economically beneficial for state governments, corporations, and politicians involved in the PIC, but on the other hand, the PIC impedes prosperity for the poor, racially marginalized communities represented in the vast number of arrests – i.e., high volumes of African American male arrests are a devastation for the entire Black community. What it boils down to is in the case of the PIC, as imprisoned bodies of Color are released and transformed

into consumers and/or producers of commodities, there is also a transformation of public funds into profit (Davis and Shaylor, 2001). Public funds become profit as these bodies are returned to the PIC through recidivism; a recidivism that is somewhat unavoidable for formerly incarcerated men and women who want to overcome barriers erected, not only by incarceration, but also by poverty and racism. For example, after spending many years in prison, formerly incarcerated persons find that upon their release, instead of jobs, housing, health care, and education waiting for them, they are offered a small amount of release money, which may cover a bus ride and two nights in an inexpensive hotel (Davis and Shaylor, 2001). Further, out in the "free world," the stigma of imprisonment looms over their heads, which increases the difficulty for "felons" to find a job. Inevitably they find themselves tracked back into the PIC that is masked under the semblance of rehabilitation.

Angela Davis (1998) warns that the rehabilitative potential of "correctional" facilities is negated by the emergence of the PIC, as the PIC has become a first response to our nation's social problems. Ultimately, the costly nature of building and maintaining prisons takes monies dedicated to improving communities away from those communities that need it most; most often it is education that suffers. In California, Governor Jerry Brown's 2012-2013 budget allocated nearly \$1 billion more to prison spending than to higher education (Daily Sundial, 2012). Where, Louisiana does not have a prison budget higher than its education budget (\$8.7 billion), it is still quite costly with a 2010 fiscal year prison budget of \$698.4 million (Vera Institute of Justice, 2012). One major way that Louisiana has supplemented its prison budget and maintained a budget below that of education is through the use of prisons for profit. The state's largely private prison system has and continues to benefit from high incarceration rates, combined with tough



sentencing practices. For example, writing bad checks in Louisiana could possibly earn you up to 10 years in prison, as opposed to no more than 1 year in California (NYT, 2012).

To paint a better picture of the prison system in Louisiana here are few facts laid out in an arrest report in the New York Times (2012):

- One in 86 Louisiana adults is in the prison system, which is nearly double the national average.
- More than 50 percent of Louisiana's inmates are in local prisons, which is more than any other state. The national average is 5 percent.
- Louisiana leads the nation in the percentage of its prisoners serving life without parole.
- Louisiana spends less on local inmates than any other state.
- Nearly two-thirds of Louisiana's prisoners are nonviolent offenders. The national average is less than half.

Louisiana is a prime example of the PIC at work, serving as the prison capital of the world with 1,619 prisoners per 100,000 residents (NYT, 2012). Keeping beds filled with bodies is the way local prisons remain profitable and Louisiana is no stranger to bartering with overcrowded jails in big cities for prisoners. For the past five years LaSalle Correctional Center (LCC) – a prison-for-profit institution – has taken in inmates from Harris County jail in Houston, TX – third largest institution in the U.S. (Times Picayune, 2012). According to the Times Picayune, “LCC is one of 12 correctional centers in Louisiana and Texas run by LaSalle Corrections, a Louisiana-based for-profit prison chain that always needs bodies to fill its beds and can provide them at a very competitive price – pickup and delivery included.” Another issue for Louisiana inmates is most end up in local for-profit jails. The issue of education emerges as a PIC issue for Louisiana. Short-term facilities rarely provide much in the area of rehabilitation and education, but lifers at state prisons can learn welding, plumbing, or auto mechanical trades, which many will never have the opportunity to practice in the “free” world (Times Picayune, 2012). More simply, those with the opportunity to get back into the public sector will be released with little to no rehabilitative services, no skills and leave jails without any money,

where their cycle of crime often begins again. Thus, the PIC creates a secondary cheap labor force that is self-replicating; with the removal of many rights that “free” citizens enjoy.

Although laws vary across the U.S. in regards to former inmates, as a group they are the segment of the population that is at greatest risk of social isolation on numerous levels. Because of the variation between states, I will only briefly examine a few national restrictions that are basic rights in the U.S. and relevant to our dominant notions of citizenship and masculinity in America. Below, I discuss, how prohibitions on voting rights, difficulty with employment access and registering as ex-offenders compounds Black men’s lives post-incarceration.

### **Voting Rights**

The passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1869 during the Reconstruction period secured a huge gain for African American males providing them with voting rights that were constitutionally protected. This marked a period in which Blacks saw their first official African American congressmen. Senator Hiram Revels of Mississippi was introduced as the first African American to serve in Congress in 1871 (Office of History and Preservation, 2008). Senator Revels and the other 16 African American congressmen symbolized a new democratic order in the U.S. They demonstrated courage and relentless determination among African Americans by facing head-on elections that were met with violence, fraud, and hatred.

In Louisiana, the courts held that tests that required voters to interpret parts of the state or federal constitution as a prerequisite to voting were unconstitutional because the tests were being applied subjectively and in an arbitrary manner (Keller, 2006). Such gains were not accomplished without struggle. For example, as a source of Southern White resistance during the Reconstruction Era, to diminish Black voting strength, Southern conservatives used violence, voting fraud, corruption, gerrymandering, at-large elections, and statutory suffrage restriction

(Davidson, 1992). Of course, at that time this only applied to African American men because Black women did not yet have the right to vote. While currently voting is the “right” of every American citizen; convicted felons are prevented from exercising this right. During a prison sentence, citizens are barred from voting. Obviously, they cannot register to vote from a prison cell and polling stations are not allowed in any prison. With many states having either completely barred or placed restrictions on ex-felons from this most basic right, in any given election this is a large segment of the population that is barred from active participation in the most basic democratic activity. With Black males disproportionately represented within this group, Democratic participation is restricted more for them than other groups, as has been the case historically. In fact, in 2006, Congress renewed the provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, after finding that discrimination still exists and is very problematic in the south (Sherman & Reeves, 2012). This is still a concern and the validity and necessity of this act is still being challenged today.

### **Employment Restrictions**

Finding adequate employment is critical to reintegration in post-incarceration society. Yet, the majority of states impose restrictions on the hiring of ex-prisoners for lawful employment. For some states the restrictions are in fields such as law, education, real estate, nursing, and medicine, while other states bar ex-prisoners from working in any position handling money including being cashiers in a supermarket or working as bank tellers. Louisiana is among the few states that have eased barriers to employment for former offenders since 2006 by protecting the right to work under the state constitution. However, such a protection may come with higher scrutiny from employers. A few states permanently bar ex-prisoners from holding any public employment. For example, in Philadelphia, the two largest employers, the University

of Pennsylvania and Comcast (cable company), actively refuse to hire ex-prisoners. Studies show that time spent in prison lowers the individual's earning capacity (Kling, 1999). This is important because the role of provider or breadwinner is central to dominant constructions of masculinity.

Although they have paid their debt and served their time, individuals with criminal histories are often denied redemption and turned away from legitimate employment, which would help ultimately improve the quality of life for themselves, their families, and their community. This would also enable them to become productive members of society and live with dignity. Typically, ex-prisoners can only find low-paid unskilled jobs, if they can find any job at all. These conditions further isolate ex-prisoners from vocation-based earnings and support the temptation for illegal cash-earning activities.

### **Registering as Ex-Prisoners**

Increasingly, organizations are requiring applicants for work, housing, subsistence assistance, or even education to reveal any criminal history. Moreover, laws are being passed in various states that declare incomplete admission of past convictions an offense. Such laws reveal that some of these basic freedoms are not constitutional rights, but rather privileges of full citizenship.

In 2008, Cnaan, Draine, Frasier, and Sinha explored national legal restrictions faced by inmates and former inmates, highlighting that “in the past thirty years, the rights of prisoners in the United States and their inclusion in society are undergoing a process of erosion” (p.7). Moreover, they argue that the more a society excludes prisoners and ex-prisoners, the more likely it is to limit the rights of other marginalized members of that society. Such exclusionary policies suggest to inmates and former inmates that they are considered unworthy of full

membership in society and hence their rights are curtailed, despite paying back their debt to society. In doing so, we have curtailed not only the rights of many African American formerly incarcerated males, but indirectly the entire African American community. The harsh reality of Black male lives in America is that prison has become a staple in shaping Black masculinity. In my study, I explore the lives of some of these men as they constantly navigate such rugged terrain following incarceration.

### **Outside Insiders**

Black males' struggles took root in slavery. Black men's struggles are a cultural pathology, a menacing disease, wreaking havoc not only on the African American community, but the entire population. Thus, for, Black men, life already begins in a second class social standing. The experience of being Black and male in America often means unemployment, school failure, and violence and crime (see Wilson, 1987; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991; Garibaldi, 1988; and BJS, 1988). Such patterns are shaped by racism, discrimination, and poverty. By compounding this with incarceration, these men literally move into the status of non-citizen, losing basic American rights that have been put in place by our constitution. For these reasons, it has become critical to understand how social and structural constraints, primarily incarceration stigma, gendered expectations, racism, and economic inequality, has influenced self-concepts of masculinity and desistence post-incarceration for Black males. In this dissertation, I show how social, cultural and historical factors shape how contemporary Black men construct their masculine self-concepts before, after, and during incarceration.

In this chapter I have shown how the lives of African American men are situated in and are a product of demographic, historical, social, institutional, and cultural sentiments and changes. Over time, African American men's understanding and concepts of masculinity have been

immensely impacted by these changes. Because incarceration has continued to play a normative role in the lives of many African American men, it is important to understand how these men manage reestablishing themselves as men during reentry.

### **CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW/THEORETICAL ORIENTATION**

I use multiple theoretical perspectives to investigate how formerly incarcerated Black men construct, negotiate, perform, and sometimes redefine masculinity. Applying multiple frameworks provides for an in depth exploration of how these men come to view themselves and experience life post-incarceration. In addition to critical theories of gender inequality and feminist theories of masculinity, I draw on themes from symbolic interactionism (SI), identity theory, and structural role theory to contextualize, inform, and guide my research. I use these perspectives as theoretical lenses to structure my research questions, interviews, and analysis. My study is an analysis of formerly incarcerated Black men's self-concept formation that anchors personal thoughts, decisions, and experiences to the political, historical, economic, and social process that shapes them.

In this chapter I review the theoretical approaches that guide my research questions and analysis. I focus on the significance of this study to contemporary criminological literature, specifically the literature on criminal desistance and the gender-crime relationship. The primary focus is to shed light on the factors that influence understandings and performance of masculinity during reentry. The construction of the post-incarcerated masculine "self" is at the heart of this analysis. First, I provide an overview of gender theories, followed by a discussion of intersectionality theory. Then, I review the theoretical discussion about gender in the context of incarceration. Following this, I discuss symbolic interactionist approaches to the construction of the "self," both during and post- incarceration. Next, I explore the literature on gender relations in incarcerated settings. Finally, I detail how the prison environment shapes the identities of the imprisoned.

## **Theorizing Gender**

Sociologists agree that gender is a social construction based on perceived biological sex differences. Gender identity is ‘the sense of self associated with cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity’ (Newton 1994). Gender theories deal with the unequal power relations between men and women and among men and women (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Contemporary sociological perspectives on gender conceptualize gender as a set of cultural practices that construct women and men as different and advantage some men at the expense of other men and women (Martin 2003; West & Zimmerman 1987). Gender theorists have revealed a number of ways through which gender is produced and reproduced. Here I outline frameworks at the individual, interactional, and structural levels for understanding the production and reproduction of gender.

### **Individual Level/Socialization**

Functionalist theories of gender viewed socialization into sex-specific and complimentary roles (males as economic providers and females as homemakers) as normative and as a way to maintain stability within society. This perspective, referred to as sex-role theory conceptualized gender socialization as a unidirectional process requiring an internalization of social norms about how to feel, think, and behave. Feminist scholars in the 1970s began to challenge this idea of sex roles by exploring the unequal and oppressive nature of sex roles. They argued sex-role learning socialized girls and women to be nurturing, child centered, dependent on husbands and family, while boys and men were socialized to be work oriented, competitive, aggressive, and ambitious (West and Fenstermaker, 1995; Root Aulette and Wittner, 2011). It is also problematic that sex-role theory is primarily focused on White, middle-class Americans and according to functionalism, those who did not fit this mold were viewed as deviant. African



American families, where women and men had always worked, challenged this normative breadwinner-homemaker version of family, and thus, of resulting sex role socialization. When viewed through a functionalist lens, Black families were viewed as deviant, pathological, disorganized because they did not fit the breadwinner-homemaker arrangement (Hill, 2005). Furthermore, strong Black mothers were blamed for emasculating Black husbands and failing to provide Black sons with the authority figures that would allow them to learn appropriate masculine roles (Coontz, 1992). Despite critiques of individual-level socialization, individual theories are still relevant in helping us understand gender and racial differences at the structural, as well as individual level and their mutual dependence on one another. When situated in my study, individualistic theories of gender illuminate how gender is socially produced in the lives of formerly incarcerated Black men. For these men, as it is with others, cultural ideas about gender polarization – hierarchal organization based on sex differences (Bem, 1995) – are learned, produced, and reproduced through social learning.

### **Interactional Level**

Interactionist explanations of gender focus on it as a situated accomplishment, or how people “do gender” together in specific contexts that are grounded in shared cultural and interactional expectations. This approach sees gender as an ongoing process of everyday social practice (Glenn, 1990). This perspective maintains that how gender is performed is both situational and contextual. Interactionists posit that behaviors are shaped by our cultural histories, past experiences, and the communities within which we belong. Our backgrounds provide cultural scripts that elicit particular behaviors and identities in various social contexts (Aulette and Wittner, 2011). These cultural scripts create boundaries and meaning for behavior in different contexts, which requires that we understand the meanings of the actions of others to

respond appropriately. An interactionist view of gender allows us to understand how gender differences are constructed together by people through social interaction. By explaining gender as a performance and emerging through social interaction, interactionists theories reveal gender as omnirelevant – or present in all situations.

West and Zimmerman (1987) conceived of gender as an emergent property of social situations: both an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and a means of justifying one of the most fundamental divisions of society, rather than as an individual characteristic. Individuals *do* gender, or rather they do masculinity and femininity; they *are* not simply men and women. Viewing gender as an accomplishment reveals the mechanisms by which power is exercised and inequality is produced. Later, in their essay, *Doing Difference*, West and Fenstermaker (1995) integrate race and class into their analysis, arguing that conceiving of race and gender as ongoing accomplishments means locating their emergence in social situations, rather than within the individual or some vaguely defined set of role expectations. The underlying mechanism is accountability in producing difference (West and Fenstermaker 1995). To the extent that individuals know they are held accountable for their actions, they will behave in relation to how they might be seen and described by others. And because race (like gender) is omnirelevant to social life, it serves as an ever-present resource for interpreting those actions. Thus, the accomplishment of race and gender is unavoidable. It is through gendered, racial, and class interactions that social inequities are produced. The ways that formerly incarcerated Black men *do* gender is shaped both by the communities from which they came, and by their incarceration experience.

### **Structural, Organizational, and Institutional Forces**

Where interactionists focus on the everyday world and social actors' interpretations, structuralists emphasize the value of the institutionalized rules and resources that frame local action in their theories about gender. Social institutions refer to persistent constellations of practices, power relations, norms, interactional dynamics, and ideologies surrounding social phenomena (Wosner, 2011). This means that institutions are not “out there,” but are inside and around us. Conceptualizing gender in terms of social institutions illuminates how gendered practices, power dynamics, and norms will, and do vary within the contexts of various social institutions.

British scholar Anthony Giddens (1984) focused on how social systems of interaction are produced and reproduced through the interplay between structures and agents, without giving primacy to either. Giddens called this theoretical framework *structuration*. He viewed structures as both the outcome and the medium of acting subjects. Gender, racial/ethnic, and class inequalities create various structures for interaction. These inequalities are experienced in various ways by different persons and are so frequent throughout our lives that they can take the form of microinequities (Sandler, 1986). Thus, as we produce and reproduce these institutions, we can potentially change them and ourselves, sometimes consciously, but more often subtly without conscious intent.

Studying institutions involves understanding their history and the power structures within them. As institutions have changed, so have gender relations. We do not simply react to the world; we actively make and alter it. Institutions are social constructions that constrain their creators, but their creators also have the agency to change institutions. Variations in socially valued characteristics are vital to understanding diverse behaviors in social situations. Structural inequalities make it such that resources are not evenly distributed among all groups of people

and these inequities produce certain forms of behavior among and within different social groups. Thus, it is important to understand the differential resources available for how individuals are able to do and undo gender. In a gender-structured and gender-stratified society, what elite men do is more highly valued than what women, lower class, and lower status men do. Differential access to resources is critical to understanding how individuals can challenge gender norms, since not everybody has equal resources to do so. My research is situated at the intersection of the relationship between human agency and social structure, between the individual level of action, and the structural and institutional level of tradition, moral and legal codes, institutions and established ways of doing things, which constrains the choices of formerly incarcerated Black men.

### **Conceptual Lens: Masculinities**

Analyses of masculinities entered sociological conversations on gender in the 1980s. Connell's social theory of gender (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1987, 1995, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) emphasized the relations of power between men and women, and also between different categories of men. Connell argued that gender is structured relationally and hierarchically, and consists of multiple masculinities and femininities. Connell revealed how multiple femininities and masculinities are central to understanding gender and the way its structures are lived. The use of the plural forms 'femininities' and 'masculinities' indicates a belief that genders are not homogenous entities, but rather are multiple, shifting, and constantly constructed and negotiated in daily interactions.

At the core of Connell's theory of gender, and more specifically, his theory of masculinities is his concept of hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is, "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted

answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995, p. 77). Hegemonic masculinity is a configuration of practices constructed against a hierarchy of masculinities that maintains dominance not just over women, but also other masculinities, like those marginalized by race or social class, and subordinate masculinities such as gay or bisexual men. According to Connell (1987), the task of 'being a man' involves taking on and negotiating 'hegemonic masculinity'. Borrowing the concept of hegemony from Gramsci – power based on domination without force (Gramsci 1999, p. 20), Connell reminds us that the way hegemony works is that culturally constructed relations are presented to appear natural to justify present social positions. Hegemony does not mean violence is necessary, although it could be supported by force. Hegemony’s ascendancy is achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion and it is through complicity that hegemony is most powerful. Thus, hegemonic masculinity is not normal, but rather, it is the normative ideal form of masculinity that most men do not embody, but still highly value.

To recap Connell’s point, hegemonic masculinity is culturally idealized, but this form of masculinity is situated both historically and socially. Thus, it is always shifting, but it rests on two main principles: the domination of women and a hierarchy of dominance between men. It may include ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency, devaluation of women and any and all feminine attributes in men, homophobia, and etc. (Brittan, 1989). Hegemonic masculinity is intangible in the sense that most men are not hegemonic in their actual idiosyncratic ways, but even as they veer away from it they tend to worry that others will view them as unmanly for their deviations from hegemonic ideals. Men's identity strategies are constituted through their complicit or

resistant stance to prescribed dominant masculine styles. There is always a range of possible styles and identities present within the gender regimes found in different cultures and historical periods. Within these meadows of masculinities, some emerge as hegemonic and it is with these that men (and women) must engage. There are various forms of masculinity in communities that present alternatives to hegemonic masculine ideals, such as gay, bisexual, and transgender men; intellectual men; and sensitive men, but hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities and in relation to women (Connell, 1998). The idea that some men dominate other men makes it possible for multiple masculinities to exist simultaneously and distinguishes hegemonic masculinity from subordinate, complicit, and marginalized masculinities. Pascoe (2007) summarizes Connell's definitions of various forms of masculinity:

Hegemonic masculinity, the type of gender practices that, in a given space and time, supports gender inequality, is at the top of this hierarchy. Complicit masculinity describes men who benefit from hegemonic masculinity but do not enact it; subordinated masculinity describes men who are oppressed by definitions of hegemonic masculinity, primarily gay men; marginalized masculinity describes men who may be positioned powerfully in terms of gender but not in terms of class or race (p.7).

The concepts of subordination, complicity, and marginalization illuminate how different men are implicated within hegemonic masculinity. For example, in a given context, hegemonic masculinity might dominate a subordinate or marginalized masculinity while simultaneously leading these same men to engage in complicit masculinity. In other words, hegemonic masculinity and complicit masculinity have a positive relationship, while the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and subordinate masculinity is negative – and to complicate matters, all of these can converge within the same interaction. What differentiates these negotiations is the perceived legitimacy of power relations. Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985) argue that the differentiation of masculinities is multilayered - it is psychological to the extent

that it reflects the kind of people men are (marginalized or not) and who they want to become (hegemonic, complicit, or subordinate), and it is institutional – in that it is collectively practiced.

Employing Connell's formulation of hegemonic masculinity and men's complicity or resistance has a number of advantages for my study. First, this approach allows for diversity. Masculine identities can be studied in the plural rather than in the singular. Second, this is an analysis deeply attentive to socially constructed nature of gendered power relations. Finally, Connell's work notes the relevance of relations between men as well as relations between men and women for the formation of gendered identities. This approach has proved particularly useful for understanding the broad social context of gender relations. Furthermore, the concept of multiple masculinities and hegemonic masculinities illuminate how formerly incarcerated Black men are a socially defined group that are kept in inferior positions to other men (and women) by requiring that their criminal records be publicly acknowledged – yet, they are complicit in maintaining the hegemonic norm in that they still highly value American (white, middle class) cultural standards of masculinity.

Moreover, Connell's formulation of masculinities illuminates how men are active participants in the creation and re-creation of masculinity. As Kimmel (2001) puts it “men, both individually and collectively, can change” (p. 33). Thus, the very construct of hegemonic masculinity can also change. Leverenz (1991) argues that the manner in which men view and do masculinity depends on the ways other men understand masculinity. In essence, as men change with cultures over time, geographic location, and social settings, definitions of and adherence to standards of hegemonic masculinity can simultaneously shift. However, it is important to note that one key component of hegemonic masculinity that remains stable is a capacity to exert control (Johnson, 2005). To elicit the attribution of possessing a masculine self

thus requires signifying that one possesses the capacities to resist being dominated by other men and by women.

Kimmel argues that men perform their masculinity for other men, often times in homosocial settings. Other, more powerful men judge the appropriate performances of masculinity. Men develop rankings that vary within different interactions with other males. Their social location within the masculine hierarchy shifts through competition with the rankings of other men (Kimmel, 2001). Such rankings not only make it possible for the existence of masculine hierarchies among men, but also make it possible for men to move along the continuum of this hierarchy within each interaction. For the formerly incarcerated person, social mobility becomes difficult with the mark of an incarcerated history. This is vital because we are privileged by some statuses we occupy, while limited by others. For formerly incarcerated Black men, race/ethnicity is vital in the balance of power in their lives and in the formation of a masculine self-concept.

### **Intersectionality: Black Masculinity**

Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) theoretical framework of intersectionality exposes how the interplay between gender, race, class and sexuality produces interlocking systems of oppression and privilege. Even though Collins's work was primarily focused on the lives of Black women, her theoretical framework illuminates how privilege and oppression intersect in the lives of all persons. Moreover, Collins challenged the simplicity of viewing oppression in an additive form and opened the doors to understanding the problem of power and inequality in terms of varying levels of privilege or compounding, intersecting levels of oppression. Thus, privilege and oppression are best understood as context dependent, meaning that all of us are in some ways privileged and in other ways oppressed depending on the situation or social-historical context.



For example, in some settings, Black men might be oppressed by their race/ethnicity, but privileged by their gender. For the formerly incarcerated Black man, the stigma of incarceration intersects with racial/ethnic oppression creating a unique set of life circumstances that are worth exploring to better understand life beyond the cell walls. This theory is useful here because formerly incarcerated Black men's experiences are comprised by a complex web of identities that shape their lives and the ways that they view, experience, and see themselves in the world.

However, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) critique the intersectionality framework, as having an inherent irony with the concept of multiple masculinities. On the one hand, the concept of multiple masculinities reflects a desire to value diversity; however such a concept implies that there is an overriding desire for all men within a particular category – i.e., Black men, gay men, Latino men, etc. – to practice an identifiably unique form of masculinity. By using categories of sexuality, race, religion, class, etc., the concept of multiple masculinities ignores variation within categories of men. Within my research, I remedy this critique by exploring difference within the category of Black men who were once incarcerated. Even further, I explore life post-incarceration and the various ways in which incarceration experiences influence self-concept formation during reentry.

As discussed in the prior chapter, since slavery, Black men have been presented with conceptualizations of manhood that are generally at odds with the values of the dominant culture and have been portrayed in the media in derogatory ways (see Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). The media has and, to a large degree, continues to present Black men as lazy, violent, criminal, and/or hypersexual (Entman and Rojecki, 2000). The longevity of such images has been attributed to a rapidly reorganizing global economy set to increase productivity and profits through methods that require well-skilled workers (Castells, 1989). Castells argues that such

forces have placed African American and other inner-city minorities at the bottom of the informational and technological hierarchy. It is this consistent lack of access to technical skills that inhibits their potential for economic or status success in this information age. Brett Williams (1994) explains that this increasingly despairing situation, combined with media sensationalism of consistent birthrates, which has created the familiar public image of a Black underclass. Moreover, he argues that this image was a driving force that "bolstered totalitarian proposals in the Reagan-Bush years to jail the men and force the women to work" (p. 348). As a result, Jewelle Taylor Gibbs (1988) reports that today's young African American men are more likely today than they were in 1960s to be unwed fathers, unemployed, addicted to drugs, and involved in the criminal justice system, and to die from homicide or suicide. Only a fraction of African American men manage to succeed under worsening conditions, and from a mainstream perspective, most seem incapable of participating except at the lowest levels of occupation in what Castells calls "the informational mode of development" (1989:32). Thus, Black men experience their lives within a socially constructed power hierarchy that constructs White men as superior, and thus, it is difficult for Black men to demonstrate masculinity in ways that are comparable to Whites.

In order to achieve a more complete understanding of the process of forming masculine self-concepts post-incarceration, I also draw upon the theoretical contributions of sociologist, Elijah Anderson. In his 1999 book, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, Anderson maintains that the economic disadvantage, social dislocation and racial discrimination encountered by some African-American adolescents foster deviant, anti-social attitudes (i.e., a street code) and developmental pathways that are related to violent behavior. As a result, the formerly incarcerated African American male consciousness reported in this study

has been created and situated in a world in which conventional avenues of achieving masculinity are far removed; thus, leaving limited options for status attainment in a world where men have historically occupied positions of power. Anderson's work illuminates the extent to which formerly incarcerated Black men's conceptualization of masculinity is constructed within a world that privileges White men and White middle-class masculinity.

James Messerschmidt (1993) also addresses the impact of gender on crime. For Messerschmidt, masculinity is the key to explaining criminality. Accounting for differences among men, he argues that middle-class White men can use power structures, such as education and respectable careers, to establish masculinity and provide for themselves and their families. However, for lower-class males and men of color, fewer legitimate options are available, and thus they are more likely to use crime and delinquency to prove masculinity. Moreover, once gender differences are accounted for, Messerschmidt informs that it is far more important for males than for females to show power or to need to prove masculinity. This need to prove one's masculinity is partially due to accountability (Messerschmidt, 1997). Meaning, because individuals realize that their individual behavior may possibly be held accountable to others, they configure and orchestrate their actions in relations to how they might be interpreted by others in the particular social context in which they occur. More simply, they act as others may perceive them, Black-White, male-female, working class-middle class, etc. Accountability allows people to conduct their activities in relation to their circumstances. In essence, we "do" gender, race, and class differently – depending on the social situation and the social circumstances. In this view, gender, race, and class are accomplished systematically, not imposed on people or settled before hand, and never static or finished products. Rather, people participate in self-regulating conduct whereby they monitor their own and other's social action. Even though Black men's

concepts of masculinity may provide them with limited options outside of crime, Messerschmidt's work highlights room for their agency to play a part in changing gendered interactions and only focusing on crime as a viable option in certain social situations.

Even though Messerschmidt (1993) was largely responsible for the introduction of using the concept of structured action to help explain the gendered nature of crime with his book *Masculinities and Crime*, Jody Miller (2002) further elaborated on his work in her work exploring the doing of gender in the context of street crime. Viewing gender as *situated action* or as a *situated accomplishment* means recognizing that gender is much more than a role or an individual characteristic: it is a mechanism whereby situated social action contributes to the reproduction of social structure (Miller, 2002). According to this approach, women and men “do gender” in response to situated normative beliefs about masculinity and femininity. Consistent with Messerschmidt, Miller concurs that recognizing gender as situated action allows for recognition of agency, but does so in a way thoroughly grounded in the contexts of structural inequalities such as those of gender, sexuality, race, class and age. She cautions that we must conceptualize the complexities of agency and social practices. For example, Lisa Maher's (1997) exploration of sex work examined the impact of structures of racial and gender exclusion and differential allocation of resources in the drug economy, pointing out that any theory of agency must be placed in the context of structural, institutional or intersubjective constraints. In investigations of doing gender, Miller says that we must strive to disaggregate agency into its component parts and varied dimensions. The dimensions of agency include: (1) the iterative element, built upon past patterns, includes habitual, unreflected, and mostly unproblematic patterns of action by means of which we orient our efforts in the greater part of our daily lives. And (2) the projective element, or the imaginative generation by actors of possible future

trajectories of action in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future. With that being said, formerly incarcerated Black men may find themselves in positions to actively engage in altering habitual/normative social relations based on the future trajectories in which they see themselves.

## **Theorizing Self-Concept Formation in Former Inmates**

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

I use symbolic interactionism (SI) to understand formerly incarcerated Black men's negotiations and redefinitions of masculinity during reentry and to explore their reactions to and reflections on incarceration. SI rests on three premises: (1) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; (2) the meanings of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and (3) these meanings are created and modified through, an interpretive process (Blumer, 1986). SI relies on the crucial assumption that human beings possess the ability to reflect and infuse their worlds with meaning and action. In social interaction, humans learn the meanings and the symbols that allow them create and maintain impressions of themselves and to construct a sense of self (Mead, 1934) and create and sustain situational realities. Because masculinity is viewed as constantly shifting, Black male ex-inmates, construct their understandings of masculinity through relationships with themselves, the media, other Black men, other former inmates, and their social environments. Beyond the prison walls, the reactions of "law-abiding" citizens interact with prior incarceration experiences to create a new perception of the masculine "self" during reentry. From an SI perspective, masculinity is not static, but rather it changes through social interaction between different sets of men, or women, and in different social environments.

## **Identity Theory**

I use identity frameworks to examine the social-psychological transformation of masculine identities both during and post-incarceration. While identity theory focuses on social structural arrangements and the link between persons, social identity theory highlights characteristics of situations in which the identity may be activated (Stets and Burke, 2000). Both theories see the self as reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications. This process is called identification in identity theory (McCall and Simmons, 1978) and in social identity theory it is known as self-categorization (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell, 1987). Through the process of self-categorization or identification, an identity is formed.

Synthesizing identity theory and social identity theory, Stets and Burke (2000) argue that social context is vital because people's identities are mutually affected through interaction in different physical and social contexts. This is important because Stryker (2008) reminds us "although society emerges from social process, organized society exists before the appearance of all new members" (p.19). This view takes social structures as the starting point for patterned interactions and relationships, emphasizing their durability, resistance to change, and ability to reproduce themselves; thus, making social differentiation a continuous process. Despite the durability of social contexts, they are not stagnant, so taking a social psychological outlook makes the identity framework especially useful in studying transformations in masculine self-perceptions due to incarceration and reentry. Burke (1991) points out that the specific context (e.g., prison or jail) and the length of sentence serve to interrupt the identity confirmation process. Stryker and Psathas's (1965) work on bargaining in a coalition formation setting indicates that persons draw inferences about their identities consistent with assigned structural power positions and that emergent identities affect bargaining behavior. With reduced

bargaining power post-incarceration, due to legal restrictions, former inmates are prime subjects for exploring identity and behavior during reentry. Further, Smith-Lovin (2007) suggests that in social situations, as described by identity theory, persons with multiple identities (i.e. African American, male, former inmate, etc.) are potentially important sources of cultural and social change. Because of their unique social status as former inmates, my research sees my participants as a major source of potential social change.

In my research, I emphasize the influence of the social structure on identity transformation for my participants, as well as their agency for shifting the social structure and social interaction in their lives and the lives of others. Nonetheless, in focusing on agency, I do not overlook the extent to which social structure shapes and constrains personal agency. Identity theory informs us that behind cognitive organization lies social organization (Stryker, 2008). The self and identity are produced through personal experiences, which are not always randomly distributed. Rather, the content of and the meanings are shaped by a persons' location in the social structure, such as their social class, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, etc. Markus (1977) explains that if we think of identities as *schema* this implies that situations entered are more likely to be interpreted as calling for identity-relevant behavior and that opportunities for identity related actions are more likely to be recognized. Thinking of the self and identities as schema strengthens the identity theory argument that salient identities are likely to produce behavior consistent with expectations attached to those identities. My research takes a look at former incarceration as a salient part of the identity of these African American men exploring its ability to produce such expected behaviors in social situations. I ask, if former incarceration is a salient part of these men's lives, to what extent does it produce or reproduce behaviors that reinforce stereotypes about criminals, in particular criminals that are Black men?

## Stigmatized Identities

According to Goffman (1963), stigma discredits individuals or groups. It diminishes their full social acceptance and renders them tainted and inferior. Stigma is associated with what Goffman refers to as abominations of the flesh, the soul and the tribe (deviant bodily, mental/behavioral and ethnic/racial/national characteristics). These characteristics may be visible or invisible, controllable or uncontrollable. Goffman makes a distinction between ‘normals’ – individuals who do not stray from the expectations of society or their social group – and deviants (Goffman 1963, p. 5). Normals generally experience their bodies and identities as unproblematic. Further, Goffman distinguishes between the discredited and the discreditable. While the former refers to individuals with visible deviant or different characteristics, the latter refers to persons who have invisible or unknown characteristics. Individuals with discreditable characteristics often worry that they will suffer rejection from ‘normals’. If they control and manage their discreditable attribute they can pass as ‘normal’. Discreditable individuals can therefore manage stigma. Their central concern is deciding how to manage the risks that could lead to them becoming discredited. Life for my participants began stigmatized due to their racial/ethnic background and is exacerbated by their incarceration status. However, because former incarceration is not something that is visible it becomes discreditable information that these men must find ways to *manage* in order to live *normal* lives.

By suppressing unwanted or undesirable characteristics, stigma reinforces social norms. Stigma also confirms the moral superiority of the stigmatizing group, and reinforces their claim to normalcy (Goffman, 1963). This process of stigmatization becomes an identity-producing practice for both the ‘normal’ and the stigmatized individual(s). In my research, the stigmatizing group encompasses those persons who have not been incarcerated, as well as those that are outside of the African American community. The stigmatized refers to the formerly incarcerated



Black men here. This is not to imply that all persons interact with these men differently because of incarceration; however they are grouped together because of the “justification” available to them if they decide to do so. Likewise, being African American does not imply that all persons outside of this group, including formerly incarcerated persons from other racial/ethnic groups, will stigmatize these men because of their race/ethnicity.

Though it emerges from and is most strongly associated with a particular attribute or practice, once stigma is acquired it diffuses outward to contaminate an individual’s entire identity and it is difficult to remove (Diken and Lausten, 2005). Stigma can lead to a movement downward in social mobility of the stigmatized individual (Link and Phelan, 2001). This social relocation can encourage direct and indirect social and economic discriminatory behaviors by others that substantially reduce the life-chances of the stigmatized individual (Jacoby, Snape, and Baker, 2005). This pattern of rejection is enabled by fact that the stigmatized individual is seen ‘not quite human’, as dirty and dangerous, or as risky, each depending on the stigma associated with the person; thus, providing a justification for the way stigmatized persons are handled.

Stigma is profound in the way that persons view themselves and their identities because the psychological and emotional consequences of such rejection can be severe. Stigmatized persons often see themselves as lacking (Goffman, 1963). As a member of a particular culture (i.e., American culture), the person internalizes that culture’s standards and judges him or herself by them. The consequences can be exacerbated by the negative reactions of others. Labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination can all occur at the same time from others and are considered components of stigma (Link and Phelan, 2001).

For former inmates, even among well-adjusted, incarceration can have enduring detrimental effects because of the “contagion” of stigma (Goffman, 1963). For example,

incarceration produces shame and anger within families (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999) and diminishes trust among close friends (Braman, 2004), making social reintegration difficult for former inmates. Clear and Rose (2003) report that reintegration is more difficult for ex-inmates that return to the communities from which they came. Furthermore, incarceration reduces the economic stability, the marital stability, and even the health of the formerly incarcerated (see Pager 2003). Sampson and Laub (1993) have shown that prison records are known to lead to unemployment, slow wage growth, and poor social integration, all of which are related to poor health. Schnittker and John (2007) report, that any contact with prison is more important than the amount of contact for the former inmate. Incarceration is common in the lives of African American men and may be especially detrimental to their health, suggesting a quite literal deadly relationship between incarceration and socioeconomic disadvantage (Wacquant, 2001). Incarceration effects become particularly damaging physically, psychologically, and emotionally, especially during reentry, making this a particularly intense and vital time to understand how these men experience reentry and view themselves.

### **Structural Role Theory**

A third framework, structural role theory, is also used to examine identity transformations post-incarceration. Stryker's (2002) discussion of structural role theory defines "roles" as fixed behaviors expected of persons occupying a status. Underlying roles are norms rooted in a particular culture – in this case, I consider the interplay of U.S. culture and the prison subculture. Roles derive from the accumulated experience of past occupants of statuses (i.e. men and women, victims and offenders, both masculine and feminine alike) and exist prior to interaction between persons occupying statuses. From research on past occupants of these particular statuses in the prison context, scholars have learned that deviation from the norm attracts

harassment and victimization (Seymour, 2003). Using ex-inmate sentiments toward imprisonment and reentry, the current study examines formerly incarcerated Black men's perspectives on navigating reentry. This is especially important because former inmates come out of prison with a loss of privileges greater than they had prior to incarceration such as limits on voting rights or occupational attainment, and so forth. Here I look at the impact of the stigma of incarceration on self-perceptions and the implications for successful reentry and/or recidivism.

Socialization is the process by which norms are transmitted, how persons learn expectations for others and for themselves that attach to statuses (Stryker, 2002). The regulation of inmates' activities and interactions serves to re-socialize them to the correctional institution setting. In light of understanding identity formation and structural role theory, prison conditions and policies could potentially exacerbate the isolating effects of incarceration or potentially create a new set of roles expected of men under various conditions. Thus, I use identity theory to conceptualize how different prison experiences influence the manner through which formerly incarcerated Black men form masculine self-constructs and navigate reentry.

### **The Self-Concept**

Cooley's (1902) concept of the "looking glass-self", elucidates how intersubjectivity, or seeing ourselves as we imagine others see us, is vital to understanding the process of self-construction. This implies that to the extent that we accurately understand how others see us, we internalize self-conceptions that are versions of others' conceptions of us. Cooley stressed that some persons are more impressionable than others and there is a gendering to impressibility. Furthermore, "in the presence of one whom we feel to be of importance there is a tendency to enter into and adopt, by sympathy, his judgment of ourself" (Cooley 1902, p. 206). It is important to highlight here that because our levels of impressibility vary, primarily with a

decrease in impressibility with increasing power. Cooley stressed that influences flow top-down. Because the masculine hierarchy is grounded in the unequal distribution of power among various categories of men, some men have what Cooley calls a “greater power of standing alone” (p. 203). Lending this interpretation to interaction beyond the prison wall, the influence is from persons with greater freedoms and control over their circumstances, or “law-abiding citizens” as we know them, down to the ex-inmate, who is at the mercy of legal restrictions and stigma placed on them because of their social statuses as formerly incarcerated persons. Thus, those persons with lesser power of standing alone are the most malleable through this process. Cooley’s conceptualization is applicable both inside and beyond the prison walls for this research.

It becomes imperative that as “free” members of society, we realize our roles in the lives of formerly incarcerated persons and manifest them in ways that are conducive to ex-offenders’ recognition of him or herself as a “worthy” individual. Cooley (1902) contends that one’s self-concept is influenced by the view others have of he/she. Michael Argyle’s The Psychology of Interpersonal Behavior (1967) explores the development of the self-concept. He points out that how we think of ourselves depends on our self-esteem, our self-image, and our ideal self. Among the factors that affect our self-concept are our life experiences, our appearance, our gender, our culture, our age, and our education. We may use the reactions of others to us, compare ourselves to others, identify with certain others, or have particular social roles that contribute to our self-satisfaction. The consequences of working to meet the approval of others depend on this view. Wicklund (1979) informs us “the person who becomes self-aware is more likely to act consistently and be faithful to societal norms.” Thus, “free” members of society

who recognize their role in manifesting positive outcomes for formerly incarcerated persons become pertinent to successful criminal/delinquent desistence.

While I support Cooley's argument that our self-evaluations are affected by the evaluations which others have of us, and more importantly, by how we perceive those evaluations, this line of thinking contributes to an overly passive and conformist view of human beings. Mead (1934) argues:

If a given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense, it is not sufficient for him merely to take the attitudes of other human individuals toward himself...", but rather, one must consider "... the answer with which the individual makes to the attitude which others take toward him... because this attitude that he is taking toward them is present in his own experience. (p. 100)

In this sense, the person has freedom, initiative, and individual agency in the construction of him/herself. Returning to SI, Cooley and Mead's arguments further exemplify the interactive process in the creation and displays of self-concepts. My research is situated at the intersection of ex-offenders' freedom and individual agency, the stigma of incarceration and the role of social structure in the formation of self-concepts among formerly incarcerated Black men.

### **The Prison Experience Through a Sociological Lens**

Sociologists have been studying the impact of prison culture on inmates for over half a century. As early as 1958, Clemmer employed the concept of prisonization to discuss the impact of prisons on inmates. He concluded that inmate subcultures manifest norms, codes, myths, and dogmas about the prison and the outside world that worked in opposition to rehabilitative efforts of "Correctional" institutions. At the core, prisonization called for inmate loyalty to each other and opposition to prison staff, who serve as representations of the outside world. Ultimately, the inmates become immune to conventional norms because they have been socialized into the prison culture. Clemmer and his participants felt that the degree of prisonization was most

critical in affecting adjustment after release and no inmate could be completely “unprisonized” (Clemmer, 1958). To be unprisonized would mean that correctional facilities actually accomplished the goal of rehabilitation.

Prison sociologist Sykes (1958) found that prisoners formed cohesive groups in order to cope with the deprivations of incarceration. This solidarity that existed between inmates derived from an unwritten code among inmates. In their research looking at the inmate social system, Sykes and Messinger (1960), develop a theory of the structure and functioning of the inmate social system based on the pervasive value system that researchers have discussed across institutions. They detailed the following rules within the prison code: (1) ‘Never rat on a con . . . Be loyal to your class’; (2) ‘Don’t lose your head . . . Play it cool’; (3) ‘Don’t exploit inmates’; (4) ‘Be tough . . . be a man’; and (5) ‘Don’t be a sucker . . . be sharp’ (Sykes and Messinger 1960). My research, while peripherally taking into consideration all aspects of this code, specifically looks at transitions from this code post-incarceration and how this transition impacts the transformation of the “self” during reentry.

### **Prison Sociology and Masculinity**

Although feminism has critiqued the prison system and its effects on women (Carlen, 1983), the impact of gender within prisons and post-incarceration is only now becoming a growing area within Criminology and Sociology. Newton (1994) argues that prison sociology is better understood when gender is problematized. My research problematizes gender in that I emphasize transitions in gendered expressions and conceptualizations post-incarceration, specifically focusing on the impact of incarceration on masculinity during reentry into mainstream society.

Inmates bring with them diverse, complex cultural histories, far broader than a criminal subculture, which is central to their prison experiences. Reigning conceptualizations of masculinities are among the most important of these influences, and may be one of the main reasons for the similarities between prison cultures across male prisons. Examining masculinities in early prison sociology illuminates how this adaptation to a culture that excludes women and ‘weaker’ men promotes physical toughness, endurance and male bonding – the macho solidarity that is a remnant of the working class Black male, which makes up the majority of the prison population (Segal 1990). American culture produces a masculinity, which provides advantages for men who embody approved masculine characteristics. Kate Seymour (2003), in her focus on group relations within prisons, informs that prisons are characterized by a hierarchical and antagonistic institutional culture, in which violence becomes normative. The culture in violent organizations such as the prison, incorporate an explicit focus on authority and compliance with rigid rules and procedures. In such contexts, she argues that difference attracts harassment and victimization. Also, in their research on the inmate social system, Sykes and Messinger (1960), after examining much sociological research on prison life, observed that only those prisoners that passed the test of “manliness” gained the advantages of solidarity. Homosocial bonding – specifically used here to refer to male bonding – in prisons and elsewhere, re-affirms masculinity not only by excluding women, but also by preying on weaker men. This male solidarity helps ensure male inmates a more secure presence within the dangerous world of ‘other men’. By juxtaposing the gendered nature of crime and the impact of gender in prisons, we are made aware that the actual functions of prisons may be actively and significantly counterproductive to their proclaimed task – reducing of crime (Seymour, 2003).

## **Black Feminist Criminology**

I integrate Potter's (2006) Black feminist criminology (BFC) into my conceptual framework because a detailed analysis of formerly incarcerated Black men's self-concept motivations and experiences must be differentiated from a collection of uniform thoughts that generalize all formerly incarcerated persons'. Black Feminist Criminology requires a closer look at how various institutions and the social structure complete with racism, classism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity shape and construct these processes. Potter's theoretical paradigm highlights the extent to which traditional feminist criminology still has much work to accomplish in theorizing from intersecting identities. Feminist criminology has improved understandings of gender variations in criminality, victimization, and of the criminal justice system's dealings with both male and female victims and offenders. Feminist criminology has significantly expanded attention within the field of criminology beyond simply exploring female criminality and victimization (Britton, 2000). Although gender is crucial to considering involvement in crime either as victims or as offenders, other inequities must be considered central, not peripheral, to analysis. This includes incorporating key factors such as race and/or ethnicity, sexuality, and economic status into any examination. Daly (1997) argued that understanding how gender, race, and class intersect is absolutely necessary in criminology. Because traditional feminist criminology emerged from the theoretical underpinnings of second wave feminism (Daly and Chesney-Lind, 1988), which historically placed issues of race as secondary to gender (hooks, 2000; Lewis, 1977), it is vital that this inquiry take into account Black men's position in Western culture, in their communities, and in their familial and intimate relationships to investigate and explain the source of and reactions to crime. Such considerations do not, and should not be taken to, devalue feminist criminology. Instead, this analysis extends beyond both traditional feminist criminology and Black feminist criminology to view formerly incarcerated African



American men (and conceivably, other formerly incarcerated men of color) from their social locations in culture, community, and families.

Black Feminist Criminology incorporates interconnected identities, social forces, and distinct circumstances to better theorize, research, and inform policy regarding criminal behavior and victimization among African Americans, which Potter points out may have applicability to other groups. The interconnected identities to be considered among African American individuals include, but are not limited to, race and/or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class status, national origin, and religion. Such axes of oppression and privilege shape how certain individuals maneuver through life, including how they respond to events and opportunities with which they are confronted. Using intersectionality as a starting point can help us begin to improve our explanations for the experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men's negotiations and reorientations of masculine selves during reentry and how the social structure of both prisons and Western culture contribute to the ways Black men navigate reentry.

These interconnected identities are greatly shaped by larger social forces that produce and perpetuate conflict, competition, and differences in merit between various groups. Formerly incarcerated Black men's realities are shaped by a combination of (a) the impact of the social structure, (b) the community or culture, and to (c) familial and intimate relationships. Within American culture, social institutions and interaction are affected by intersections of hegemony, patriarchy, and racism. Thus, their lives are unique from the lives of other formerly incarcerated populations.

Incorporating ideals found in Collins' (2000) *Black Feminist Thought*, Black Feminist Criminology expands our understanding of how consciousness is a social product of personal experiences (Potter, 2006). I do not treat the self-concept merely as a social product, but one that

emerges through action and embodiment. The connection between formerly incarcerated Black men's awareness of themselves as "worthy" individuals is limited due to their former incarceration status. It is the stigma of this status more so than its occurrence that shapes interactions between these men and "law-abiding" members of society, and in turn, negotiations of self during reentry. Formerly Incarcerated Black men's self-concepts are social accomplishments conditioned by their gendered, racial/ethnic, and sexualized identities. Although these identities exist in variation for all men, I explore how the experience of incarceration is connected to the lives of these men. The question of the major factors that influence positive and/or negative change in formerly incarcerated Black males is fascinating in and of itself, but is somewhat beyond the scope of this study. Thus, I do not attend specifically to what factors bring them to points of change from offending to conforming. I begin this research focusing on how the process of change manifests itself both inside and outside the context of prison.

The connection between prison sociology and gender studies can provide further understanding of how men sometimes attempt to establish power and masculinity in situations where they have been deprived of more conventional means to them (Segal, 1990). Further, studying men as gendered beings in the specific contexts of prison and reentry is important because the conditions are unique. Moreover, the qualitative approach I propose is uniquely designed to target the residual effects of incarceration and their intersections with societal reactions to formerly incarcerated Black men. Furthermore, this approach generates theoretical and practical insights about the social psychological processes Black men experience due to incarceration and post-imprisonment experiences with multiple groups in society, such as employers family members, the courts, other formerly inmates, etc.

My dissertation advances knowledge in criminology and gender studies by applying multiple theoretical lenses to view the experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men, with particular emphasis on how they understand what it means to be a man post-imprisonment. Moreover, I advance research on social inequality, by using the data given by research participants as a guide to provide a critical lens on the extreme problem of incarceration in the U.S. My research advances gendered paradigms of criminal desistance by building on existing theory and on the growing body of work on gender; and by proposing a series of recommendations for future studies. The existing literature that I present here guides my discussion of the findings resulting from this project.

## **CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter I provide an overview of my research methodology. I detail my sampling methods, including a brief description of the demographic characteristics of my sample (for a detailed chart of the demographics of my sample, see appendix A). Then, I discuss my data collection and analysis processes. Finally, I consider how my own position as a Black male shaped the research process, from my research questions to my analysis.

This dissertation advances knowledge in the areas of prison sociology, gender studies, race and ethnic relations, as well as social inequality by undertaking an exploration into how formerly incarcerated Black men construct masculinity during reentry. Because this is a qualitative project, my goal is not to estimate the distribution of similar or dissimilar attitudes towards masculinity post-imprisonment. Such inquiries are best left for studies based on large statistically representative samples. Whereas this study is limited in its ability to generalize results with confidence to all formerly incarcerated Black men, it is important because it explores the inner worlds of these men with respect to negotiating gender norms during reentry. A qualitative methodological approach is most appropriate to study issues relating to the self-concepts of formerly incarcerated Black men because it involves understanding the conditional and interactive nature of meaning-making that is at the core of how these men construct their sense of self and negotiate dominant scripts about masculinity.

The knowledge from this study has emerged through interplay between myself and participants throughout every phase of the research process. Since the methodological strategy was intensive interviews, information emerged through conversation and dialogue. Consistent with grounded theory, this research project was a loosely structured, evolving process whereby theoretical development was generated from the conversations and my analytic strategies and interview questions were altered as core ideas developed.

## **Data Collection**

A research proposal was submitted and approved by both my dissertation committee and the Louisiana State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I began this project by using a number of sampling strategies. If there is one thing that I have learned about qualitative sampling, it is that there is no one "best" sampling strategy because which is "best" will depend on the context in which you are working, the nature of your research objective(s), and, ultimately, what does one want to know. I began with the most common sampling technique, purposive sampling, also known as purposeful or judgment sampling (Marshall, 1996; Johnson and Christensen, 2004). Purposive sampling techniques "dictate selecting individuals or cases that provide the information needed to address the purpose of the research" (Johnson and Christensen, 2004, p. 220). The researcher actively seeks the most productive sample to answer the research question(s). Because there are many objectives that qualitative researchers might have, there are various types of purposive sampling strategies available. For this research, I used criterion sampling, a purposive strategy that involves searching for cases or individuals who meet a certain criterion. The criterion applied here included sampling Black formerly incarcerated men in Louisiana.

In addition to criterion sampling, I incorporated convenience sampling, which is the least rigorous sampling technique. Convenience sampling involves the selection of the most accessible subjects. It is the least costly to the researcher, in terms of time, effort and money. Convenience sampling has been criticized for resulting in poor quality data and lacking intellectual credibility; however, this form of sampling is advantageous for my research because it allows the researcher to select a random sample of persons when no list of persons is available (Marshall, 1996). Additionally, this technique is the most cost efficient and as a graduate student that has been a major benefit while conducting this research. The selection of this state provided

geographic convenience and a context that paralleled the relationship of the U.S. incarceration rates to those of the global incarceration rates.

Because incarceration is not something that is readily visible on the faces of former inmates, snowball sampling was also used and especially helpful in recruitment for this project. Also known as chain referral sampling, snowball sampling is a method that yields a study sample through referral made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics related to the research objectives (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). It is especially useful when studying sensitive issues or private issues and thus, may require the knowledge of insiders to locate people for the topic.

Because I base this research in grounded theoretical techniques, I could not have completed this research without using theoretical sampling, since the central focus of grounded theory is the development of theory through constant comparative analysis of data gained from theoretical sampling. Glaser (1978) defines theoretical sampling as:

The process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides which data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal (p. 36).

In my data analysis process, I used theoretical sampling to revisit particular themes (i.e. pressures to be “men”) with men that were previously interviewed. This technique allowed me to further gain insight to how these men managed such pressure and from whom they faced these pressures. Thus, the use of grounded theory bears direct influence on data collection procedures.

### **“Louisiana: The Sportsman’s Paradise”: Contextualizing the Study**

Global incarceration rates reveal that the U.S. far outnumbers every nation. The Bureau of Justice Statistics, a branch of the US Department of Justice, calculates that as of December 31, 2010, nearly 2.3 million persons were incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails, giving the United

States the largest incarcerated population in the world (Minton, 2010). China, which is four times more populous than the United States, is a distant second, with 1.6 million people in prison, according to the New York Times (Liptak, 2008). These alarming rates uncover our “lock ’em up and throw away the key” sentiments in the U.S. No state follows this line of thinking better than Louisiana. Within the U.S., Louisiana has the highest rate of incarceration, nearly five times that of the lowest state, Maine (BJS 2010). Louisiana also disproportionately incarcerates African-Americans, with more than 60% of the Louisiana prisoners being African-American. Such rates are interesting considering that Louisiana’s total population consists of 64% Whites, 32% African Americans, and 4% made up of other groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). These figures are alarming with Louisiana only having 12 prison institutions, compared to the largest U.S. state, Texas, having over 50 prisons and being second in number of prisoners to Louisiana. Our “southern hospitality” allows us to smile, while at the same time lock away those we consider lawbreakers because it’s “the American way.” Comparatively, Louisiana is to the U.S. as the U.S. is to the world, when it comes to incarceration; making it a prime state to explore the impact of incarceration on the human condition.

### **Sampling Criteria**

My analysis draws on 20 audiotaped, in-depth, information-rich interviews with a sample of 17 formerly incarcerated African American men in Louisiana. Information-rich cases are those from which the researcher can learn a significant amount with regards to issues of central importance, depending on the purpose of the researcher (Patton, 1990). I began this research unwittingly and indirectly focusing on the manifestation of social dysfunction as a social problem –e.g., the degradation and mistreatment of formerly incarcerated men.

Because the participants in this study are former inmates, they are in a sense a “hidden population.” Most think of hidden populations as comprising individuals who engage in illegal and/or stigmatized behaviors (Sifaneck and Neaigus, 2001). However, from a practical standpoint, being a former inmate is not something that is easily observed and requires that the researcher actively seek out persons willing to identify as such. I used a multifaceted approach to sample building in order to gain access to formerly incarcerated populations and to develop rapport and trust. In a sense, my research problematizes the term *hidden population* by seeking out persons that are “hidden” due to the invisibility of identifying symbols – i.e. a mug shot or prison jumpsuit – rather than seeking out persons that are actively engaged in illegal and/or stigmatized behaviors.

As part of my criteria, I aimed for participants to have had at least 2 years of consistent incarceration experience and at least five to six months of reentry. Most men far exceeded my request, with some having decades of incarceration behind them and/or multiple years of post-incarceration reintegration. Compared to men just entering prison or being just released, men who have had more time to experience life incarcerated and life post-incarceration would have had a chance to reflect on both experiences. I had no racial/ethnic criteria, but my sample was primarily African American for a number of reasons. First, although the racial/ethnic make-up of the U.S. population is majority White, in the prison population, the majority of inmates are African American. Women are less than a quarter of the prison population. Thus, it is not surprising that the organizations that I came in contact with were primarily organized by African American administrators and the persons whom they served were African American men.

At first, I was a slightly disturbed that my attempts to find a more diverse group of individuals were not successful, but over time I came to find this not as a weakness to my



research, but rather could be used as an advantage. It was beneficial to me because it allowed for me to blend in with greater ease because of my own phenotypic features. I am a young African American male; other than lacking the former incarceration experience, I fit the description of most of the men that the organizations targeted and I shared the characteristics of the majority of the prison population. I conducted initial data collection with a fairly “random” group of people, who were formerly incarcerated men. Because Charmaz (1990) suggests theoretical sampling when some key concepts have been discovered, after seven interviews and preliminary analysis, I moved toward theoretical sampling to engage in further conceptual development. Theoretical sampling provided me directions on deciding whom to interview (African American men) and which themes to continue to focus and build on throughout the research process. For example, I engaged in theoretical sampling to further explore core themes. For example, one participant insisted that he felt greater pressure from the African American community to be a “man”, which led me to want to understand if others felt that way and why such pressures existed. Ideally, I would have interviewed other members of the Black community to ask about such pressures, but because of time and resource constraints for this project, I limited it to exploring this topic with a three of the men that I already interviewed. Thus, I used theoretical sampling to generate further data to confirm and/or refute original categories. After much deliberation, I realized that it became essential to have African American men as the primary targeted group for my research. The final sample resulted in 17 formerly incarcerated African American male participants – three of whom were re-visited to further explore core themes, for a total of 20 interviews. All participants were born and raised in Louisiana. There was only one who had spent his childhood in Michigan. However, this participant also constantly traveled back to Louisiana to spend time with his father because his parents were separated. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 77.

Most of the men included had limited educational backgrounds (high school diploma or below), only two had attempted college, with one of those men reaching and receiving a graduate degree [M.A.]. There was also a wide range of incarceration lengths ranging from two years to 27 years.

In addition to in-depth interviews, I used multiple observations and textual analysis to answer my research questions. I conducted field work over 17 months from June 2011 to January 2013, which included both limited observation as well as semi-structured interviews. I integrated quantitative data to contextualize pictures of the prison population and general population, which consisted of information on both population demographics, such as age, gender/biological sex, and racial/ethnic differences. All of this supplementary data notwithstanding, the bulk of the information for my analysis comes from 20 interviews with 17 formerly incarcerated Black men.

### **The Interviews**

The interviews were conducted in private and comfortable settings such as quiet, private rooms where their organizations met and, for some, public spaces such as coffee shops and public parks. The interviews that did take place in coffee shops and public areas were conducted in alcoves or semi-private areas of the establishments. While conducting these interviews I would always offer the men the opportunity to refuse to answer any question that they did not feel comfortable responding to.

I utilized a standardized open-ended interview guide (see Appendix B). This type of questioning allowed me to ask all participants the same questions in the same order; however, the questions were open-ended and enabled me to further investigate in-depth information regarding their —thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, reasoning, motivations, sentiments, and negotiations about

their self-concepts and life post-incarceration. The interview questions were designed and evolved from themes from the literature, theoretical frameworks, from responses of participants, and my personal experiences and observations.

Srivastava and Thomson (2009) caution researchers about the use of face-to-face interviews because they have the potential to result in lower rates of disclosure of troubling experiences. However, because of the embarrassing nature of public acknowledgement of those horrific occurrences, I find them a useful methodological tool to answer my research questions. Because I am not directly inquiring about personal victimization of any sort, but rather about the ways in which incarceration and community reactions post-incarceration affects their self-images and behavior and their subjective outlooks on reentry and changing their lives, I believe that face-to-face interviews are well-suited for my research.

I employed the active interviewing approach during my research because interviews are “unavoidably collaborative and interpretively active” – implicating the agency of both the interviewer and respondent in the meaning-making process (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). The active interview highlights the interplay between constructivism and the interpretive resources available. In other words, the active interview is a way to understand how meaning is created through individual interpretive constructs. In this approach, the participant is not a passive vessel of knowledge, but instead “consults repertoires of experience and orientations, linking fragments into patterns, and offering theoretically coherent descriptions, accounts, and explorations” making s/he somewhat of a researcher in his/her own right, (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 29). The participant is the narrator or the storyteller of his multi-faceted experience and calls upon different stocks of knowledge depending on which experience or position is activated. Active interviewing techniques ensure that both the researcher and the

respondent have a common understanding of how questions and answers are to be taken and interpreted, which, in turn aids in creating more stable, uniform interpretations of interview questions and responses between the researcher and the participant. Of course, there is no guarantee that communication is always clear; however active interviewing minimizes the occurrence of miscommunication. For example, when asked to reflect on his incarceration experience, Carlito<sup>2</sup>, a 66 year old former college student and former inmate of 20 years responded “Angola affected me, but I never allowed it to infect me.” I was somewhat unsure of what he meant by that; however, I understood it to mean that he did not allow it to change him as a person and I asked for clarification. He responded:

I use this analogy whenever I’m speaking or traveling. Three guys and all three of us in Angola about the same time. Three men all men. One guy within 72 hours got into the homosexuality. The other guy mentally could not handle it and went through a help unit; he hung himself. I’ve never seen anybody hang himself. Some people just can’t handle it. No matter how bad you think you are, I tell these youngsters now. When you are out here, AK 47 you got your boys, you a bad dude. You get to Angola, everybody bad. Everybody’s bad. No homeboys, no momma, ain’t nobody. You gotta be a man. Here you are 17, 18 years old, you got a life sentence, you ain’t no man. Now you really ain’t no man. Now it shows on your face it shows everywhere because momma might not come see you. You think you making it rain. But you ain’t got nothing now. You workin in the field. People telling you what to do. A lot of guys are rebellious. I defended guys because they would do a write up. When everybody else on the weekend is watchin tv, you out in the field working for the man. So here’s three guys: one hung himself, one’s a homosexual. He’s still in prison and one is sitting here talking to you.

Using active interviewing methods, I was able to better understand that Carlito was informing me that he did not allow prison to “infect” him or take over like a disease and kill the person that he was – physically or emotionally; however, it did affect him in a way that has prevented him from going back.

During each interview, prior to the transcription process, I verified each participant’s statements for clarity and to ensure mutual understanding of information provided. I did this as

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<sup>2</sup> I use pseudonyms and have altered identifying details to ensure anonymity and protect the privacy of my participants. As for racial/ethnic background, all participants are African American men.

the interviews progressed. For many, this method of increasing validity would be problematic, but I found it to be helpful in a number of ways. First, because of the limited education and resources of my participants, it helped to have things verbally mentioned and/or read back. Also, because the question and response was fresh on their minds, if I misunderstood, they could immediately clarify for me and I would have it in the audio recording of the interview. Second, it was time efficient in that I would not necessarily need to send out transcribed interviews and hope that the participants were able to check email and responded promptly with their reflections. Third, it was cost efficient by avoiding the printing of lengthy interviews. Also, because many of the men that I interviewed were from other parts of the state and may have needed to have interviews read to them, so this method of validation reduced travel costs as well. I do want readers to keep in mind that this does not hold true from all participants, because educational levels ranged from 6<sup>th</sup> grade to Master's level education achievement. I first utilized this method during my Master's research on female reentry, where I was not allowed to audio record interviews and found it to be a great strategy to take on for this research as well, especially because I had audio recordings. During later re-visits to the data, colleagues both within and outside the disciplines of sociology, criminology, and gender studies were consulted to explore my interpretations of the data.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Grounded Theoretical Techniques**

Grounded theory is a popular and enduring methodology for qualitative research that developed in the 1960s with its founding fathers, Glaser and Strauss. It has seen the development of multiple renditions since that time, but here I primarily follow Kathy Charmaz's (2006) work that incorporates social constructionism into the approach. Constructionism denies

the existence of an objective reality and emphasizes that realities are social constructions. Moreover, there are as many constructions as there are individuals (although many constructions are shared) (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

Grounded theory consists of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data used in theory construction (Charmaz, 2006). Researchers using grounded theory may start with individual cases, incidents, or experiences and move toward developing more abstract categories to synthesize, understand, and explain data. Charmaz (1995, 2002) identifies a number of distinguishing features that all grounded theories have: (1) simultaneous collection and analysis of data; (2) creation of analytic codes and categories developed from data and not by pre-existing conceptualizations (theoretical sensitivity); (3) discovery of basic social processes in the data; (4) inductive construction of abstract categories; and (5) theoretical sampling to refine categories; (6) writing analytical memos as the stage between coding and writing; and (7) the integration of categories into a theoretical framework.

Scholars have argued that this method of analysis is especially useful because it is comprehensible by laypersons, researchers, and policymakers. Grounded theory involves the construction of abstract theoretical explanations for social processes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Charmaz, 2006). Because the grounded theory analytic method looks at explanatory conceptual categories generated from the everyday social world; and because the categories generated reflect the experiences of the participants under investigation, it serves well here as a process of data collection and analysis.

I use grounded theory to expand on existing concepts and to generate new concepts and their properties about the process of masculine self-reconceptualization for formerly incarcerated Black men. I am not attempting to produce a complete grounded theory, but rather, my goal is

simpler. I aim to create a conceptual framework that accounts for ways that formerly incarcerated Black men construct and negotiate their masculine self-concepts and behaviors, prior to, during, and post-incarceration. Furthermore, I use this framework to understand the impact of social structure on successful reentry and/or recidivism.

Following the grounded theoretical method, no pre-constructed coding system was applied to the data, thus allowing the categories of the analysis to be shaped by the data, consistent with the emergent nature of qualitative research (Charmaz 2006). As the number of interviews progressed, the interview guide evolved as well. To ensure that all topics of interest were addressed in the interviews, I structured the interview guide (see appendix A) around various “sensitizing concepts” that developed over the interview process (Van den Hoonaard, 1997). Sensitizing concepts are theoretical tools that emphasize the distinctive properties that may be associated with a category of data—in this case, formerly incarcerated Black men’s masculine self-concepts and behavior, mattering/having a purpose, inequality, and recidivism. These concepts offer researchers and readers a general reference point and orientation without constraining new paths for theoretical discovery. The use of sensitizing concepts helps with the comprehension of the multi-layeredness of the social contexts being studied, in this case the interplay of self-construction post-incarceration, social inequality, and reentry. The use of sensitizing concepts does not indicate definitive concepts nor do they not create closure, but rather they provide a general source of guidance and refer to concepts that may have been generated from other research or theoretical speculation.

I borrow some sensitizing concepts from Adams’s (1992) work on inmate adjustment to incarceration including; maladaptive psychological and behavioral responses, stress-coping. Further, I used concepts such as hegemonic masculinity, multiple masculinities, toxic

masculinity, and cool pose. I expanded these concepts in such a way as to explore how self-concepts and behavior are constructed, evolve, and are negotiated prior to, during, and post-incarceration. I advance understandings of psychological responses to incarceration by exploring the extent to which acceptance or rejection of incarceration experiences are tied to self-identity and changes in behavior post-incarceration.

### **Coding**

Following the transcription of interviews, the data underwent various levels of coding and constant comparisons for the development of major themes and/or sensitizing concepts. For grounded theorists, coding from the data is the fundamental analytic tool that helps uncover an emergent grounded theory from the phenomenon of inquiry. Coding refers to the process of attaching labels to segments of data that describe what that section is about (Charmaz, 2006). It allows for the demarcation, organization, and comparison of data. Using thematic coding strategies enabled me to classify meanings into themes that resulted from significant initial codes and meanings. Significance emerged from the frequency of codes, as well as their relevance to the research objectives and questions. Codes from the initial coding process were reviewed and then categorized in relation to the significant and most frequently appearing codes. This allowed for a reduction of themes for the organization and management of data. I used three coding processes in my analytic process: open, focused, and theoretical coding.

Open coding is the initial step of theoretical analysis, developing codes directly from the data. This form of coding ends when it locates a core category. Focused coding permitted me to separate, sort, and synthesize large amounts of data (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical codes are “conceptual connectors” that develop relationships between categories and their properties (Glaser, 1992, p. 38). One example of how a code developed in my research is in the following



response that one participant gave during my interview with him when asked what it meant to be a man before incarceration:

I didn't know. I had no idea. [**Clueless - open**] I was a child. I learned through experience and I'm still learning as we speak [**learning to become a man - focused**]. I know now that masculinity and being a man are different [**Masculinity vs. Manhood - thematic**]. Because being a man is being in control of your responsibilities, not only for yourself, but also for the people that you are surrounded by. And masculinity is totally different because in my opinion and in my definition a woman can be a man. You don't have to be masculine to be a man, in my opinion. Hey, I could be wrong, but that's how I see it because we have so many single mothers out here playing momma and daddy. And for that reason alone being a man is not described by being a male.

With this sample, an open code would be something as simple as being “clueless” or not knowing, or learning. I move to further abstraction in focused coding. An example would be taking the concept of “learning” and making it “learning to become a man”. At this point I am able to discuss individual constructions of manhood. From there, I examined interviews to understand how that process unfolds and to what extent incarceration and reentry influences how these men engage with cultural constructions of masculinity in the outside world. Lastly, this coding process aided in my interpretation of how these men individually are impacting cultural notions of masculinity. These and other themes are elaborated further in this project.

Constant comparative methods aided in the development of codes for this research. Constant comparative techniques involve a constant comparison that infuses both open and theoretical coding (Mills, Bonner, and Francis, 2006). The constant comparative method is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting (not provisionally testing) many properties and hypotheses about a general phenomenon, e.g., the distribution of inequality among various different groups of formerly incarcerated persons (Glaser 1965). This method enables the generation of theory through systematic and explicit coding and analytic procedures.

Glaser (2002) lays out three types of comparison involved in the constant comparative coding method. First, incidents are compared to incidents to establish underlying uniformity and its varying conditions. While coding an incident for a category, I compared it with the previous incidents coded in the same category. For example, I compared how these men learned ideas of masculinity as young boys, which ranged from being around older brothers to being around street hustlers at a mother's job. These are two very distinct environments, however, both are individual-level environments used in teaching masculinity.

Memos were also recorded during this phase for reflection on data, to relieve conflict in thought, and to develop theoretical notions about categories. The uniformity and the conditions become generated concepts and hypotheses. Then, concepts are compared to more incidents to generate new theoretical properties of the concept and more hypotheses. For example, in understanding reorientations to masculinity, I examined how various men reached a point where they realized that their lives were not improving with current definitions of masculinity, but steadily declining. For some, experiencing deaths played a major part in such transitions, while others missing milestones in the lives of their children weighed heavily on their decisions for change. The aim is theoretical elaboration, saturation and verification of concepts, densification of concepts by developing their properties and generation of further concepts.

Finally, concepts are compared to concepts. The purpose is to establish the best fit of many choices of concepts to a set of indicators, the conceptual levels between the concepts that refer to the same set of indicators and the integration into hypotheses between the concepts, which becomes the theory. The discussions in the memos provide the content behind the categories, which are the major themes of the theory (Glaser, 1965; 2002). The coded data are

used to validate points made, support conclusions, and fill literary gaps with examples of happenings.

Using the constant comparative method does not mean there is an attempt at universality, but rather comparisons in qualitative data analysis lead to research that are more general ideas within categories. Because the constant comparative method may be applied to various forms of qualitative information, including observations, interviews, documents, articles, books, and so forth, it is a perfect fit for this research.

I urge readers to understand that Grounded Theory is a perspective-based methodology and to remember that people's perspectives vary. Using the multiple perspectives of my participants, I attempt to raise these perspectives to the abstract level of conceptualization, hoping to see an underlying or latent pattern, which is another perspective. According to Charmaz (2000), "constructivism assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings" (p. 510). Constructivism points out that it is impossible for a researcher to tell the whole story, in that a whole story exceeds anyone's knowledge; however this mutually interpretive process allows them to uncover a particular story (Stake, 2005). The story that follows is *our* story.

### **Characteristics of the Interviewer and Reflexivity**

Qualitative inquiry designates the researcher as a central element and required component to the research instrument. The researcher becomes heuristic in that his/her interests and personal experience becomes entrenched in the phenomenon under study. Thus, I now briefly discuss how my social location as a young Black man influenced the interview process. Because the racial/ethnic makeup of the organizations that I was able to locate was primarily formerly

incarcerated African American men, it aided in the recruitment of respondents for my research; it helped in two ways. First, when approaching the leaders of these organizations, it was my being a young, African American male that helped my endeavour because I was of a demographic that they rarely saw in academia, but were happy to see there. I fit the description of most of the men that their organizations worked with. As one stated, “we don’t see too many young, Black men come through here that we are not trying to help turn their lives around.” In my mind, they were helping me just as much as they were helping these men reach new levels. Second and in a similar vein, my racial/ethnic background allowed for me to blend into the organizational meetings well. In addition, I also dressed down to do my research. Many people when picturing researchers see them in suits, ties, etc., but besides allowing myself the comfort, dressing in t-shirts, jeans and/or shorts made me more approachable and helped ease any anxieties that may arise when I approached the men in these organizations about interviewing.

Many of the people that I had the opportunity to speak with, both research participants and organizational leaders alike, inquired about why I cared to do such research on formerly incarcerated persons. This was primarily a question I got before the interviews even began. Before getting into my analysis stages of this research, I just thought of this as significant to understanding who I was and my passion for such a demographic. So, I explained that incarceration has been something that has been around the men in my family for a number of years. My stepfather, uncle, and my younger brothers had more years of incarceration experience combined than the number of years I have lived. After explaining that to the men, as well as letting them know that I had a strong desire to help break down some of the social barriers between formerly incarcerated persons and “law-abiding” citizens, I felt it helped

remove any apprehensions that participants had and it put them at ease when discussing their lives with me.

As I grew closer to my research data through the analysis process, I thought about this question of “why I am doing this research?” This reflection was a major step in the interpretation of my research. For many of these men, having someone care anything about them or the lives they lead was rare, especially someone without experience on the other side of the law or behind prison walls. I also began to think about my own life experiences and the feeling that comes over people when you really feel that someone is genuinely interested in us as people. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) see mattering as a personal resource, where “others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension” (p. 165). It was this reflection that culminated a different manner of thinking about my research and guided my discussion of the data.

I now take a moment to briefly touch on the advantages and disadvantages to studying a population to which one does not belong and address how I negotiated my involvement in the collection of data. Because I am not a former inmate, there was always the risk of being an outsider or being regarded as “the other” by the men I interviewed. I was consciously aware of the possibility that these men might not trust me, and because of the sensitive nature of this study, men might feel as if I was judging them. Thus, to counteract these potential risks, I attempted to make the men as comfortable as possible by using strategies common to qualitative researchers.

First, I tried to conduct interviews in private and comfortable settings, such as quiet, private rooms where their organizations met, and for some public spaces, such as coffee shops and public parks. The interviews that did take place in coffee shops were conducted in alcoves

or semi-private areas of the establishments. While conducting these interviews regardless of the spaces, I always offered the opportunity to refuse any question that they did not feel comfortable responding to. For those interviews that took place in public spaces, I also encouraged participants to speak in a low voice. The men were surprisingly comfortable regardless of the location of the interview, so all interviews were completed. Also, it was rare that they would lower their voices when speaking on the subject matter.

Second, in my attempts to ensure that the interview setting was regarded as a safe space for these men to tell me their stories, all participants, regardless of the interview location were given time to read over informed consent and were encouraged to ask questions about my study. To ensure that the all information was covered, information on the informed consent was reread and/or further interpreted for clarification for all participants. I always provided my participants the opportunity to ask me questions and at the end of the interview I asked them to share their thoughts about their reactions to our conversation and to me as a researcher. None of the participants replied that they felt uncomfortable talking to me about these issues. When I specifically asked if they would have felt more comfortable speaking with an interviewer of a different gender, race, or sexuality none mentioned that any of my personal characteristics hindered the interview or their disclosure. Many of the men encouraged me to remain as I was other interviews because they felt comfortable with my approach. Interestingly, one interview that did not take place at a coffee shop, the respondents jokingly said as he left, “maybe you should have some coffee for your next interview!”

While having no personal experiential knowledge of life as a formerly incarcerated person was a significant advantage, our partial similarities allowed for me to relationally empathize with the participants’ outlooks on racial/ethnic inequalities, as well as gendered social inequalities.

Although I will never know for sure, I believe that I received a more detailed explanation, with an unbiased interpretation, of these men's lives than another interviewer would have because of my personal characteristics. Although my race/ethnicity and gender certainly influenced the outcome of my interviews, I believe that this effect was minimal and to some extent, beneficial. Moreover, I maintain that my personal characteristics, in particular, my ability to facilitate trust, rapport, and open dialogue in the interviews helped to mitigate my potential status as an "other."

### **Peer Review**

As a method of providing constructive feedback, I encouraged peer review. As the name might suggest, peer review involves discussing researcher interpretations with peers, in this case academic colleagues. I discussed findings and methodological techniques with major advisors and committee members, as well as others both within and outside my home department, who do qualitative research and/or study closely related subject matter. Using this technique aided in identifying possible miscoding, inconsistent coding errors, and/or misinterpretations. In addition, peer reviews helped in the development of new themes, the reduction of related themes, the incorporation of supplemental theories and literature that allowed for greater explanation, critique and analysis of the data (e.g., masculinity over the life course), and reassurance that themes were consistent with member checks and other studies on self-conceptualization, reentry, desistence, and the experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men.

## **CHAPTER 5: A “NEW” MASCULINITY**

The process of becoming a man is influenced by many experiences. My participants’ negotiations with socially constructed norms of masculinity have led each of them to incarceration at some point in their lives, which, in turn, has shaped the way they understand and embody manhood today. In this chapter, I expand on how formerly incarcerated Black men’s masculine identities are created and shift throughout their lives. First, I discuss definitions of masculinity prior to incarceration. Second, I explore the channels through which these men learned to become a man and do masculinity. Next, I move into understanding the prison as a consequence of early definitions of masculinity. I move toward an analysis of how prison is a turning point with both negative and positive aspects that have influenced current definitions of masculinity for these men. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on how newly formed masculine identities are contingent upon incarceration experiences and what these men take away from their incarceration experience. Furthermore, beyond how these men learn to be men, their pathways to masculinity are filled with outside influences that both enhance and inhibit their journeys.

### **It’s A Man’s World**

Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue:

Becoming a man is a matter of constructing oneself in and being constructed by the available ways of being male in a particular society. It is a matter of negotiating the various discourses of femininity and masculinity available in our culture, those powerful sets of meanings and practices which we must draw on to participate in our culture and to establish who we are (p. 46–47).

Yet, as many of us go about our daily lives we rarely take the time to really focus on what it means to be men and women, to be masculine or feminine and the available resources we have to present ourselves as such. Not surprisingly, when I asked participants to talk about what it



meant to be a man, many struggled with how to articulate a definition. For example, when I asked Shane, a 38 year old former inmate of 20 years, what masculinity meant to him he responded, “I didn’t know. I had no idea. I was a child. I learned through experience and I’m still learning as we speak.” Because of his incarceration at the early age of 16, Shane had limited knowledge of available resources to establish his manhood. Nonetheless, after the initial shock of the questions and despite rarely thinking about it, my participants were able to formulate definitions of what masculinity was to them at earlier points in their lives.

Participants held to definitions of masculinity not far removed from mainstream cultural beliefs. As early as 1976, Robert Brannon wrote that “traditional” masculine ideology is multi-dimensional with four major components: (1) that men should not be feminine (No Sissy Stuff), (2) that men should strive to be respected for successful achievement (The Big Wheel), (3) that men should never show weakness (The Sturdy Oak), and (4) that men should seek adventure and risk, even accepting violence if necessary (Give’em Hell). Black male violence fits right into these tenets of “traditional” masculinity. In “Code of the Streets” (1999), Elijah Anderson offers a first person yet analytical account of life in the inner city, noting a disturbing world plagued by violence and a general lack of decency. He observed that economic disadvantage, separation from mainstream society, and racial discrimination encountered by some African-American adolescents may lead to anti-social attitudes and to violent behavior. Furthermore, Anderson explains that the circle of deprivation in ghettos regenerates itself through “the code of the street.” The code is a hierarchy of values that exalts impudence, machismo, and regular displays of violence while it denigrates manners, responsibility, and compassion. My participants drew upon dimensions of masculinity consistent with Brannon and Anderson’s work. Participants’

definitions of masculinity included four major themes: physical embodiment, hypersexuality, fitting in with other men, and displaying toughness.

### **Physical Embodiment**

Men experience themselves simultaneously in and through bodies (Lyon & Barbalet, 1994). Turner (2000) reports that the social and material practices through which, and by which, boys' masculine identities are defined are generally described in terms of what they do with/to their bodies. Consistent with this, Connell (1995) argues bodies are both the "objects and agents of practice, with the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined," and he calls this 'body-reflexive practice' (Connell, 1995, p. 61). Bodies in this view have moved beyond biology and play a crucial role in how people construct their masculinity and how they behave in their social surroundings. Within this framework, the centrality of bodies and physicality are clearly of relevance in understanding the discursive function of the body in constructions of masculinity.

Because the body has been shown as vital in constructing masculinity (Connell, 2000; Dowsett, 2003; Lindegger and Maxwell, 2007), it was not a shock that some of my participants emphasized the body when they defined masculinity. Broadly, the terms of masculinity require men to have a high level of muscular strength. This suggests that men should be physically fit and well built (Klein, 1999). As Carlito, a 66 year old former inmate of 20 years, defines it "masculinity is, you know, being pumped up." Muscles are traditional symbols that have been used for displaying hegemonic masculinity (Bordo, 1997; Klein, 1993). To both boys and men, a muscular physique can portray traits that include power, dominance, strength, sexual virility, and self-esteem (Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, and Striegel-Moore, 1986; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia, 2000).

Boys who are marginalized because of class and/or race are taught that a masculine self can be established and deference elicited by evoking fear in others (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). A large and muscular physique is one of the ways that men can evoke fear through their bodies. When I asked Christophe, a tall, in-shape 41 year old former inmate of two years, what masculinity involved, he emphasized “Muscles you know what I mean? I was the kind of person that always kept myself physically fit. I weigh right now like 202LBs. and I was like 232 or 235 in prison. And for some reason, muscles kind of intimidate.” Empirically supporting Schrock and Schwalbe’s work, Christophe relied on his muscle mass to display masculinity through intimidation. This narrative fragment echoes Majors and Billson’s (1993) critique of cool pose as a “ritualized” expression of masculinity that involves speech, style, and physical and emotional posturing. They documented that many Black males use these things to evoke distance from, contrast to, and superiority over others, which Christophe did. Coolness demonstrates a level of strength and control.

For these men, understanding masculinity in terms of physical embodiment is a representation of “coolness,” but also at this point in their lives there is a realization that it is much more than that. What masculinity entails and how some men feel about its components is a different story. According to Marcus, a short, very welcoming 68-year-old former inmate of five years, “masculinity is a lot of bullshit to me because your muscles ain’t gone get no bills paid.”

Consistent with Marcus’s feelings, Michael, a single, 77 year old former inmate of three years, concludes that men, especially those in prison, only think one dimensionally when it comes to masculinity. He says, “I think the biggest thing with men, especially in the prison environment, is equating manhood to being this physical guy, this physical person, who can

protect yourself. That's one." Michael's issue informs that many inmates and men in general, do not realize that there are multiple types of men and their problem is trying to fit this particular mold of man, rather than recognizing the existence of different types of masculinity. Children are socialized to accept society's definitions of appropriate behavior, personality characteristics typical of different types of people, and the relative worth of different groups (Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross, 1972). According to White and Cones (1999),

White males have constructed a society in which they have empowered themselves in positions of wealth, decision-making, and prestige. They exercise controlling vetoes over aspirations and choices in most of the political, economic, and legal areas of American life. In empowering themselves, they have reduced the opportunities and choices of Black males (p. 142).

With limited images of what Black men could be, Black males are trapped. Michael understands this and sees them as being stuck in understanding manhood one-dimensionally.

To sum it up, many of my participants emphasized physique as essential to definitions of masculinity. Looking masculine is just as important as "doing" masculinity (Connell, 1983). Historically the archetypal heterosexual male body has been one that has displayed muscularity. Not only is the perceived physique identified as being powerful and athletic, it is also seen as being sexually virile (ibid.).

### **Hypersexuality**

Learning to be men, boys are taught that they should feel, or at least express, sexual desires for girls (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009); however, this form of sexual expression can be exacerbated for some groups. For example, to compensate for feelings of powerlessness, guilt, and shame that result from the inability to enact traditional masculine roles, many African American males, especially within low-income communities, have redefined masculinity to emphasize sexual promiscuity, among other traits (Harris, 1995). Hypersexuality is a part of the

dominant conception of manhood, especially in poor inner-city communities and it is seen as a by-product of the pathology and despair of the Black underclass (Anderson, 1990). Some participants conceptualized masculinity as reflective of hypersexuality. For example, Lorenzo, a widowed former inmate of ten years responded:

I thought that a man was just a man as long as he go out and, you know, collect him a few women you know, get what he want. You know you can go have sex with anybody you want to or you can go beat up somebody or you can go run the street or you go hop from bar room to bar room, you know. I thought at that time a man was just being a whore.

A fundamental element of hegemonic masculinity is that women exist as potential sexual objects for men and men are negated as sexual objects for other men (Donaldson, 1993).

Further, women provide heterosexual men with sexual validation and men compete with each other for this (ibid.). Gendered performances that involve displays of heterosexual appetite and prowess exude this form of sexual ownership or objectification of women. In these acts, which are often competitive, women become props that men use to affirm a heterosexual identity (Quinn, 2002). Using phrases like “collecting women” and “getting what he wants” and “having sex with anybody he chooses,” Lorenzo denotes masculinity that privileges him with ownership and control over women, making them sexual objects.

Black masculinity, while providing hypersexuality as an alternative measure of personal achievement and self-respect (Majors and Billson, 1992; Harris and Majors, 1993), does not come without costs. Hypersexuality is among the short list of images that Black men have to learn what it means to be a man. Among the conventional norms associated with fatherhood is an expectation that fathers will mentor their children. Randall, a 48 year old, married father of three, and former inmate of 16 years, described his “mentor”, or father rather, as a “whore monger” and unfaithful. Similarly, Nicholas, a married father and former inmate of 7 years, learned about women from working in his mother’s restaurant where the “pimps never sat with

their whores.” My participants learned to see women as currency to be collected to in their ongoing quest to become men.

Hypersexuality is intimately intertwined with physical embodiment. Mankayi (2008) looked at the relationship between masculinity and the male physique for military personnel, finding that the military male body is a more desirable sexual body which links to the pressures on men to conform to hypersexual masculinity. In more general terms, it was easy for soldiers to impress and receive favors from women because of their bodies and their environment. Hypermasculine contexts, such as the military and prisons, and other aspects of the lived experience facilitate a particular vulnerability to unsafe sexual practices (Okee-Obereng, 2001). Thus, for my participants’, this hypersexuality, a major aspect of definitions of masculinity, can easily become toxic to their well-being.

### **Fitting In**

The existence of the category “men” depends on the collective performance and affirmation of manhood acts (Schrock and Schwable, 2009). Also, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) remind us that hegemonic masculinity is maintained through complicity by both men and women. My participants were both innovative and complicit in the masculine behaviors they incorporated in their lives. On the one hand, their definitions of masculinity included behaviors associated with the cool pose which were innovative strategies to overcome marginalization and just fit in. These behaviors can create “favorable” pathways for young, impoverished Black males. Not only does the cool pose bring them to new levels of success, but also it brands a sense of individuality for Black males that White males could never achieve without humiliation (Majors and Billson, 1993). Majors and Billson find that the cool pose contributes to a masculinity that includes dynamic and positive qualities, such as dignity, respect, control, self-

esteem, and social competence. However, these men can find that they are borrowing from and supporting traditional ideas about masculinity.

While critically analyzing hegemonic masculinity and outlining an alternative expansive psychology of masculinity, Margaret Wetherell and Nigel Edley (1999) identified three specific imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices that men engage in when negotiating hegemonic masculinity and their identification with the masculine. These are: heroic positions, ordinary positions, and rebellious positions. In the first, men align themselves closely with conventional ideals. In the second, men distance themselves from conventional or ideal notions of the masculine by describing themselves as normal, moderate, or average. In the third, men focus on their “unconventionality” by boasting about going against social expectations. Indeed one of the subtleties of hegemonic masculinity is its elusiveness and the difficulty of reducing it to a set of fixed positions and practices. The men in my study provided testimonies oriented towards the third position. While their behaviors helped them in their efforts to fit into their immediate groups of males in their home communities, such behaviors also promoted unconventional masculinity. For example, Fred, a 25 year old married father of 5 with a huge afro and former inmate of 3 years said that he,

Thought that everyone had to have a reputation. And the people that I was growing up around, you know, they tell you if you didn't fight or, or you didn't curse, you know, not around my peers, but I'm talking about in the grown up crowd. If you didn't fight, or you didn't smoke cigarettes, or smoke weed or something like that at the time, you was a wimp. You know what I mean, so I done that. I got into the inner crowd.

The rewards for conforming to social expectations significantly impact behavior and identity formation (Heilbrun, 1964). In order to gain the respect of others as a man, as well as show social competence and build his self-esteem, Fred did what his social surroundings called for – i.e. fighting, being aggressive, and involving himself with drugs. Being *bad* or overtly

embracing symbols of deviance is regarded as a good thing in many youthful circles – i.e. among young Black males (Katz, 1988). By using such behavior as a way to gain acceptance and respect, Fred’s experience provides empirical support for Wetherell and Edley’s theory, as well as Brannon’s third characteristic of traditional masculinity – the Big Wheel, or that men should strive to be respected. The social rewards he received impacted who he was as he continued to develop. Following the examples set by others created a pathway to acceptance, respect, and the ability to fit in for Fred.

For some men, fitting in can go beyond just picking up bad habits. It can further stifle their trajectories in life. For example, Andre, a 48 year old former inmate of 10 years, said “I was skipping school and hanging out with the wrong people and because of that I didn’t graduate on time.” Some scholars have argued that Black men’s social status is diminished by their disproportionate absence in obtaining educational degrees (Cuyjet, 1997). Because of the crowd that Andre found himself surrounded by, he fell into the number of Black males absent from educational rosters.

Further elaborating on efforts to fit in and follow the crowd, Steven, a 29-year-old, unemployed, but single former inmate of two years recalled:

I was incarcerated in ’02. Having to go through a couple of experiences as far as aggravated fighting and being rebellious towards the officers, which doesn’t pay and you know just wanting to live the jailhouse luxury life. And trying to fit in and trying to be, you know, what I’m not. Make myself comfortable and happy when I’m not in the atmosphere that I want to be and that’s not good.

High social acceptance in males is associated with sex-appropriate behavior as perceived by peers (MacKinnon-Lewis, Rabiner, and Starnes, 1999; Gray, 1957). Where Steven came from, incarceration was commonplace, so he saw incarceration as a place to look forward to in the community in which he had spent his life. To him, it was glorified as “the jailhouse luxury



life.” However, in trying to fit in to his surroundings, Steven admitted that he was trying to be something he was not and was uncomfortable in the process. He was complicit in attempting to live up to the standards of masculinity that he had learned growing up, which involved rebelling, fighting authority, and the “luxury” of incarceration as a part of daily life. However, in living up to those standards he found that this form of masculinity did not actually fit who he was as an individual, yet he tried to go along with them. This is consistent with Bird’s (1996) research on homosociality. Bird explains that even though many men do not always agree with socially valued aspects of masculinity, they still go with them to avoid being seen as less of a man by other men. Similarly, drawing on research from various disciplines, Noguera (2003) explored the influence of environmental and cultural contexts on the academic performance of African American males. He also examines the ways in which environmental and cultural forces shape the relationship between identity, particularly related to race and gender, and school performance. My participants’ stories also support Noguera’s argument that Black males often adopt behaviors that make them complicit in their own failure.

### **Toughness**

“It’s different for different people. And in my perspective, I can speak for me because I can’t speak for every man. I can say for me, I was an arrogant person, there wasn’t no understanding.”

- Christophe, 41 year old former inmate of two years –

What is included in definitions of masculinity varies, depending on who you ask. For some, it may be an emphasis on aggression or autonomy, but for others it may be an emphasis on toughness and arrogance, as in Christophe’s case. Christophe’s arrogance as involving an attitude of superiority and stubbornness and is consistent with Kupers’ (1999) notion of toxic masculinity. Toxic elements of masculinity involve the need to aggressively compete and dominate others and encompass the most problematic proclivities in men (Kupers, 2005). Yet,

as Schrock and Schwalbe's (2009) assert, some elements of toxic masculinity can yield seemingly positive results – at least temporarily because survival and human quality of life depend on controlling our environments. For Christophe and some men, the practice of toughness and violence provides pathways toward achieving and/or maintaining status and respect, which is a part of the hegemonic masculine norm. Take Lorenzo; he explains that his aggression got him a nickname and made others revere him. “I hit a guy so hard that everybody start calling me payow, from the sound [simultaneously].” In the pursuit of power and privilege, men are often led to harm themselves (Clatterbaugh, 1997) and as Lorenzo's recap shows, they may harm others as well. Consistent with Brannon's “Give'em Hell,” Lorenzo showed an acceptance of violence in his definition of masculinity.

While Lorenzo's violence echoes Brannon's conceptualization of masculinity as Give'em Hell, other respondents emphasized both the first and third dimensions of Brannon's multi-dimensional masculinity, also known as “No Sissy Stuff” and “The Sturdy Oak,” respectively. *No Sissy Stuff* highlights that men should not be feminine and *The Sturdy Oak* describes men's air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance, especially in a crisis. For instance, Justin reflected that “back then it was man-up, you don't cry, you don't lean on nobody. Don't ask for nothing.” He places an emphasis on independence, autonomy, and emotional control. Relying on others and seeking help or even just admitting a need for help, or recognizing and labeling an emotional problem, conflict with the messages men receive about the importance of self-reliance, physical toughness, and emotional control (David & Brannon, 1976). Doing such things are associated with the feminine (Johnson, 2001) and the first dimension of Brannon's theory reminds us that masculinity is partially based on a separation of males from the feminine. Men's acquisition of power requires that men suppress their needs and refuse to admit to or

acknowledge their pain (Kaufman, 1994). The social practices that undermine men's health are often the instruments men use in the structuring and acquisition of power.

### **Recapping Definitions**

In many ways, the different aspects of my participants' definitions of masculinity are connected. For example, hypersexuality is associated with the notion of toughness. Toughness is valued and associated with conquest (Manyaki, 2008); whether that conquest is of a sexual nature or just simply to dominate another person. Willingness to accept and take risks is a key feature in masculinity. It can be seen in men's willingness to engage in needlessly risky behavior, such as unprotected sex (ibid.) and/or unnecessary fights.

The sections above highlight the centrality of physical strength, toughness, hypersexuality in concepts of masculinity. My findings also reveal, how hegemonic masculinity and particular forms of idealized male bodies are central to masculine identity development, and can have both positive and negative consequences.

Participants engaged in toxic performances of masculinity, which include fighting, sexual indulgence, having and using muscles to do whatever they choose, and a lack of consideration of others (selfishness). Furthermore, their masculine definitions are also demonstrations of "coolness." By emphasizing the use of muscles, emotional control, autonomy, and independence, my participants created examples of Majors and Billson's definition of cool pose as involving physical and emotional posturing. Furthermore, these acts of masculinity form a distance between my participants and others by not allowing them to let others in nor depend on others to get what they wanted. My participants used their muscles to display strength and to exhibit control of their emotions and lives. Cool pose was used to demonstrate a level of

strength and control, yet it also strained relationships as it shielded these Black men from intimacy and commitment in caring relationships.

### **Learning Masculinity**

Behavior in a given situation can serve to satisfy different needs. For example, after being as children mature they may use behavior to persuade their parents that they can handle greater responsibility by demonstrating the ability to make mature decisions on their own. Specifically, focusing on gender appropriate behavior, Kimmel (1994) explains that men do masculinity for other men. My participants' narratives reveal how other men serve as gatekeepers of masculinity. In this section I focus on how other men serve as role models for young boys and other men. The process of learning to establish a masculine identity is situational and continues throughout life. Therefore, men learn to do masculinity differently depending on social and cultural contexts and where they are in their life course (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). I now detail how and where these men say they learned what it means to be a man.

### **All in the Family**

While there are different socialization processes and agents for learning gender, the family is arguably where individuals learn gender first. Much of the early literature on gender socialization usually implicitly assumed a nuclear family as the normative ideal through which gender socialization occurred (Phoenix, 1997). Also it was assumed that the lessons learned about "gender-appropriate" behavior are uniform. However, there are differences in gender socialization that arise out of various social circumstances in the lives of different groups. For example, African American families have been influenced by a number of forces, such as West African cultural histories, structural adaptations to slavery, as well as past and current

discrimination and economic inequality (Barbarin, 1983). This does not mean that Black people automatically reject dominant ideological gender stereotypes, as they are subject to the same ideological forces as mainstream groups. Indeed, African Americans also accept dominant ideologies of gender (see Staples, 1985). Phoenix (1997) argues that this happens for a number of reasons. First, because of their marginality and powerlessness, they may espouse the attitudes of those who are perceived as more powerful. Second, acceptance of dominant ideology may compensate for a stigmatized status in this culture. Thus, efforts to reduce social distance include acceptance of dominant ideologies. And third, because of the pervasiveness of White-centered patriarchal structures, individual subjectivity cannot help but be affected by them (see also Thompson, 1977).

Participants emphasized that models for masculinity were presented to them daily within the primary agent of socialization – the family. For example, Lorenzo prefaced his earlier definition of a man proclaiming, “By me not having my father close to me or somebody in the house, it has changed my view of what being a man meant.” Lorenzo cites that his lack of a father figure resulted in his skewed understanding of what a man was supposed to be. Further, his word choice of “a father... or somebody” recognizes that any other positive male figure in his home would have sufficed, even if it was not his biological father.

Echoing Lorenzo, Randall explained that he thought that “a man was just, a man as long as he go out and collect him a few women, and get what he wanted.” He further explained that his dad was what he described as a “whore monger” or unfaithful and absent. Yet, it was from his dad that he learned what a man was supposed to be.

Social acceptance for males is associated to a greater degree with the role model provided by their fathers, more than the importance of the mother’s role for girls (Gray, 1957). Rather

than depending on others for approval, psychological literature reports that childcare workers confirm that children of active fathers were "more secure" and "less anxious" than the children of non-active fathers (Seidler, 1988). Other studies have revealed them to be better developed socially and intellectually (Hochschild, 1984). The results of active fatherhood seem to last. Focusing on what he learned from his father David, a short and stocky 47 year old former inmate of 12 years, reflected that,

I was told by my oldest sister, when my parents got married, something like that, daddy used to come home from work after a hard day and mom used to wait on pay day and when he goes in to take his shower, she'd take his wallet and she'd run off with his wallet. But my mom never used to do any drugs or nothing like that. So that caused separation, that's what they tell me. But not only that, my dad was unfaithful. That's the part I know from him. Even though he didn't go in bar rooms or nothing like that I know, but I knew he was a whore. That's why I can depend on him for certain things now at his age of 72 that I couldn't depend on him when he was young, like at my age, the age of 47.

Family background is an important—if not decisive—factor influencing the masculinity of young Black males (Staples, 1978; Benjamin, 1971). Randall clearly pointed out the importance of his father's role in his construction of masculinity and David's father exposed him to hypersexuality, absentee, and mistrust for women.

Scholars have argued that the practice of involved parenting by men may actually undermine hegemonic masculinity because many men have impoverished ideas about what fatherhood involves (Hochschild, 1984). Nurturing and care-giving behavior is simply not manly and notions of fathering that are acceptable to men concern the exercise of impartial discipline from an emotional distance. This results in many children having abstract and impersonal relations with their fathers. Divorce severely compounds this issue for children with them having extremely little emotional contact with their fathers. Men and women in the South have higher rates of divorce than in other regions of the country, 10.2 per 1,000 for men and 11.1

per 1,000 for women, according to a new report from the U.S. Census Bureau (2011). More importantly, the U.S. Census Bureau's Five-Year American Community Survey polled 3 million households between January 1, 2005 and Dec. 31, 2009 to determine statistical portraits of smaller communities within the United States--including races and ethnic groups--based on a variety of factors, including divorce. Coming up just below Native Americans, African Americans ranked second in divorce, with an 11.5% divorce rate.

Parents are not the only source of socialization (Langlois and Downs, 1980). Even in the absence of fathers, Black boys learn about masculinity from a variety of sources. Staples (1978) argued that the content of the male role may not be adequately conveyed to Black youth because of absent or weak father figures. Negative images of Black family life with absent fathers are nothing new. However, because of variance within African American family structures, social networks of significant others for socialization are more than just the immediate family. They include a rather large and extensive network made up of parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, peers, adult friends, media, and White society (Shade, 1983). Consider my conversation with Jarred, a young 33 year old guy and he is the youngest of five boys. He recounted his childhood:

Jarred: I was going to the garage one day to carry the garbage out. I smelled something, when I put the garbage down, it caught me by surprised. I smelled a lil smoke, and I said, it's weed and I looked around to see where I was smelling the smoke from. By the time I turned around, I see my brothers up in the garage top where my momma had made the tree house. I had one brother behind the door. He was watching for me, but he didn't know I was coming through the other door. I sort of snatch off to go run and tell my momma, but by that time, one of my brothers caught me. They caught me. They convinced me to take a hit of it.

Myself: How old were you?

Jarred: I must have been bout 13, something like that. And they convince me to take a hit. I wiggled and I squirmed, but I couldn't get away. So, they convinced me to take a hit and I did. And for me, the way my life is, that was the change in my life. Because when I took a hit of it, I laughed, and not only that, I felt like I was a part of something because my oldest brother was doing it and now they like, I got accepted.

Siblings, in particular older siblings, are unique agents of socialization. In a study comparing older sibling to older peer influence on young children, Azmitia and Hesser (1993) found that older siblings were more likely than older peers to provide spontaneous guidance than older peers were to younger children. Moreover, younger children were more willing to observe, imitate, and consult their older siblings than their older peers. For Jarred, his brothers served as first-hand walking and talking instruction manuals for masculinity in the absence of his father.

Illustrated, more explicitly, here than in the prior section on fitting in, Jarred highlights that learning masculinity is often accompanied by initiation rituals. Initiation rituals serve as a means of motivation for role commitments and acceptance of future role obligations (Schwartz and Merten, 1968). Corneau and Shouldice (1991) argued that this generation marks a critical phase in the loss of the masculine initiation rituals that in the past ensured a boy's passage into manhood. Jarred's brothers not only served as role models for him, but also they are an example of young men creating new initiation rituals for other males' passages into manhood. Jarred's feelings towards engaging in drug use were profoundly shaped by his desire for acceptance in his older brothers' world. He wanted his older brothers to accept him into the group and to stop viewing him as kid. His desire to be a part of a group and the lack of other more socially acceptable initiation rituals were significant reasons as to why he indulged in activities that he knew would not be tolerated by his mother.

### **Street Life**

"I play the street life because there's no place I can go. Street life, it's the only life I know." The Crusaders – 1975<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Crusaders are an American music group. They also are known for recording under the name The Jazz Crusaders (1961-2004).



The “streets” refer to the network of public and semipublic social settings that are primarily frequented by lower and working-class Black males (Oliver, 2006). Such places include, but are not limited to street corners, bars, clubs, convenience stores, drug houses, pool rooms, parks and public recreational places, etc. Recent works have analyzed identity, culture, and violence in Black communities, which portray a “street code” that influences identities and behavior of residents, particularly focusing on the ways in which violence is rendered sufficient and normative (Anderson, 1999; Krivo and Peterson, 1996; Kubrin, 2005). Many lower and working class Black men conform to mainstream standards of legitimate behavior in response to adverse structural conditions that tend to limit their competitive edge in the areas of politics, education, economics, and stability in family life (Anderson, 1999; Hunter & Davis, 1994; White & Cones, 1999). However, there is a substantial number who lack the resiliency and resources to cope effectively with the adverse structural conditions facing them (Madhubuti, 1990; Taylor-Gibbs, 1988). Consequently, these are the Black males who are most prone to construct their identities as men in the social world of “the streets” (Anderson, 1999; Hannerz, 1969; Perkins, 1975; Staples, 1982). It is during adolescence that they learn that an important step toward social recognition and respect as a man involves developing the ability to successfully navigate life in the streets (Anderson, 1999; Perkins, 1975). The streets are an important institution for many, if not all of my participants’ masculine socialization in terms of the magnitude of influence on my participants’ development and their life course trajectories and transitions. Some men acknowledged that they learned to be men by watching other men outside of their homes in the absence of immediate male family. For example, while discussing memories of his childhood, Nicolas, a 66 year old, but athletic-build, former inmate of 7 years who has spent time in prison in both the Midwest and the South recalled:

I remember during the time in Michigan when you had prostitutes. You see women walking outside. They walking down the streets. That was during the time when you had pimps and they called them whores. In Michigan, that was a reality for me, you know what I mean. I would go downtown and I see whores and I see pimps, you know what I mean, and I see people actually getting killed. See my mother, not only did she own real estate, my mother owned, a café called Halls Café. I used to work in the café to carry the pimps' and the whores' food. The whores sit on the left side and pimps sit on the right side. See pimps never sit with their whores.

Nicolas' story highlights several important aspects of what he learned and from where he learned. One, acknowledging death as a part of "normal" street life speaks to research that has noted that the lives of street life-oriented Black men are filled with a plethora of life-threatening risk factors, with homicide being the leading cause of death for Black males ages 15 to 34 years old (Boyd-Franklin and Franklin, 2000; Franklin, 2004). Two, observing the dynamics between pimps and whores is important since masculinity often entail the sexualization of women as a way to signify heterosexuality, to demarcate gender boundaries, and to challenge women's authority (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). The pimps and whores Nicholas saw so frequently during his youth on the streets are a representation of heterosexual relationships for Nicolas, in which male dominance and gender inequality reign.

Lessons learned from the streets can be vast and extremely important and should not be confused with lessons learned in books in the lifelong socialization processes. The streets have taught the men here more than just inequality between the sexes and sexual prowess as pathways towards masculinity. Men learned to distinguish between street smarts and book smarts, and acknowledged the different value placed on each. For example, Andre, a 48 year old store shelf stocker and former inmate of 10 years informed:

I make more money than the average guys around here that don't have an education, that work at these plants around here, but what I'm saying is it's sad because I'm a very talented guy and I got everything I knew from the streets. But now a days technology's steady booming. You have to have book sense. You understand. And I can't go in a book and tell you about biology and tell you math and all that. I can't do that, but I can

tell you what's going to happen in the streets. I can tell you that this the way to go and this is how it is.

In her 2007 article *Street Smarts vs. Book Smarts: The Figured World of Smartness in the Lives of Marginalized, Urban Youth*, Beth Hatt uncovered differences in the ways poor and racial/ethnic minority students define smartness. She distinguishes between book smarts (intelligence as it operates in school) and street smarts and finds that street smarts are more important because they provide the ability to be able to maneuver through structures relevant to their lives like poverty, the police, street culture, etc. Moreover, for many, book smarts are a representation of those structures that they rebel against. Andre's understanding of street life provides empirical evidence for Hatt's work, as he highlights reasons that street smarts are valuable because they serve as a survival mechanism and compensate for what some men lack in book smarts.

Close attention to how masculinity is actually performed shows variation in changing social contexts. My participants so far have shown that even as they learned early definitions of masculinity they performed masculinity differently depending on the social and situational context. This variation provides support for the multiplicity of masculinities. However, even if masculinities are displayed in various manners their actions are not far removed from currently valued ideals of "traditional" masculinity. However, these forms may manifest in alternate forms. It is important to remember that those men whose gender performances come the closest to the ideal are likely to be advantaged (Acker, 1990).

## **Consequences**

The irony of Black masculinity is that it is not far removed from mainstream cultural definitions of masculinity. The tendency of Black masculinity to include this hypermasculine façade is not a unique, nor a new idea. However, Black male images have become an

exaggerated mirror of the power of the American macho (Ross, 1998). The Black man has become a reigning symbol of aggressive American manliness. Sports players, rappers, and other hyped up imagery of Black men have made Black men “the embodiment of U.S. arrogance, extravagance, and aggression” (Ross, 1998, p. 599).<sup>4</sup> I argue that the issue is not that Black men are depicted as physical manifestations of American hypermasculinity, but rather it is not seeing the implications of this that is troublesome for many African American men. Ross (1998) argues that on the one hand, the imagery of Black supermanliness is inspiring because of African American historic survival; but on the other hand, it sublimates the tendency to cast Black men as self-destructive, self-castrating, and self-paralyzing.

Doing *Black masculinity* can come with great consequences. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, due to the vast range of historical and contemporary powerful negative influences on the development of young Black males, they have learned to cope and resolve problems differently from White middle-class men. African-American men learn to succeed in modern day culture through the use of violence, impatience, and alienation (Majors, 1998; Majors and Billson, 1992). For my participants, masculinity is exhibited through a limited range of emotions like anger and aggression. With limited opportunities for self-expression, masculinity is manifested through self-destructive behavior like consuming alcohol, drugs, and/or engaging in an over-indulgence of sex. Thus, my participants found themselves incarcerated for a number of reasons related to the toxic nature of their concepts of masculinity. For example, Christophe informs men that he got arrested when he was “riding through the French Quarter one night looking for cheap sex and picked up somebody and wound up with an

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<sup>4</sup> Media influences were not discussed in this dissertation as they did not come in interviews; however, I do want to acknowledge that the mass media has been found to be significant in the socialization process.

aggravated kidnapping charge. I had a mandatory life sentence and I thought I would never ever come out.”

Similarly, Jacob, a 51 year old warehouse worker and former inmate of 8 years, says that the thing that got him in trouble is that:

I was reckless, gun hold, and reckless, reckless, reckless when I think back over it. I think sometimes people with a little money or a little power think they can do things they can just get away with, I got to the point especially with illegal drugs that you can do anything you want to do and that’s not true and then you put yourself in a position that when you become reckless your life can change on you. Anybody you read about in the paper, they can be good people but they make some dumb choices. And I made some dumb choices by getting involved with stuff I couldn’t control.

Echoing similar sentiments, Carlito explains that he “lived in NO [New Orleans], had a great job, wife, family, business. I worked for the clerk of court. In 1983, I got in trouble, made a bad decision, got involved in alcohol and drugs.” For these men, by performing the concepts of masculinity developed early in life, they found themselves paying dearly with lost time behind bars.

With the problems Black men encounter today still being just as serious with grave consequences as they were in the past, it is very easy to view them as victims. In fact, Stewart and Scott (1978) argued that we should be leery of “institutional decimation of black males,” which they define as the “coordinated operation of various institutions in American society which systematically remove black males from the civilian population” (p.85). Since their warning in the 1970s, African American male incarceration rates have not decreased, but rather have continued to rise, as the incarceration boom began in the mid-1970s. Additionally, in her new book Invisible Men: Mass Incarceration and the Myth of Black Progress, Beck Pettit highlights that people who are incarcerated are excluded from most surveys by U.S. statistical agencies. She warns that since young, Black men are disproportionately likely to be

incarcerated, the exclusion of penal institutions from the statistics makes the jobs situation of young, black men look better than it really is. Because penal institutions have been key players in this removal of Black men from the population, it is important to understand the role of incarceration in shaping the way that Black men understand what it means to be a man; more importantly what it means to be a Black man with an incarcerated history.

### **Turning Point: Incarceration**

The idea of turning points is an important concept in studying human experience and life stories (Clausen, 1990). Turning points are helpful in understanding change in human behavior because they are linked to role transitions. I adapted this perspective in exploring turning points in a sample of formerly incarcerated Black men. Research has explored turning points as both positive transitions – such as marriage and meaningful work – as well as negatives – such as incarceration. Because change can and does occur, the more important question is why it occurs in some people and not in others – especially in the transition from prison life back to community life. In this work, I take a different approach to turning points, examining incarceration as a turning point with both negative and positive applications in the lives of formerly incarcerated Black men.

### **Incarceration as a Negative Turning Point: Consequences**

Incarceration significantly alters the life course of the incarcerated (Petit and Western, 2004). Typically, going to prison is viewed as a negative turning point wherein convicted criminals acquire diminished life chances and an attenuated form of citizenship. For example, ex-prisoners earn on average lower wages and experience more unemployment than similar men who have not been incarcerated (Western, Kling and Weiman, 2001). Former inmates are also

less likely to get and stay married (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999). With such eroded options, incarceration can be a pathway back to crime (Sampson and Laub, 1993).

I now look at incarceration as a turning point in the lives of formerly incarcerated Black men. I examine how incarceration is a consequence of “doing” the forms of masculinity that my participants learned early in life. I explore events that occurred during incarceration that may have impacted significant shifts undergone by these men in the way they reflect and behave with regards to their future masculine identities. I emphasize the subjective nature of viewing incarceration as a negative in these men’s lives, outside the obvious stigma of a prison record that accompanies incarceration and creates legal barriers to vital resources, such as skilled and licensed occupations, rights to welfare benefits, and voting rights (Hirsch, Dietrich, Landau, Schneider, Ackelsberg, Bernstein-Baker, and Hohenstein, 2002).

For my participants, incarceration triggered changes in the way they thought about masculinity. Incarceration brought along with it specific moments and experiences, that were sometimes occurred simultaneously with other major life-altering events in these men’s lives. Such negative consequences of incarceration that I now explore are the exacerbation of toxic masculinity, losing autonomy/independence, and the weakening of social support/relationships.

### **Masculinity turning Toxic: Becoming Desensitized to Violence**

Toxic masculinity is a collection of socially regressive traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence (Kuper, 2005). The prison environment exaggerates toxic masculinity. This is evident through daily fights, assaults on prison staff and administration, as well as through sexual assault (Kunselman, Tewksbury, Dumond, & Dumond, 2002; Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson, 2000), and other competitive and violent interactions. Masculine behaviors associated with toxic masculinity

include extreme competition, greed, insensitivity to the experiences and feelings of others, domination and control, an incapacity to nurture, a dread of dependency, a readiness to resort to violence, and the subjugation of women and some men to marginalized statuses. I have already discussed all of these characteristics earlier in this chapter when I detailed how participants defined and performed masculinity. Here, I focus on how these characteristics manifest in their lives within the context of prison and to what extent they induce change in the lives of these men.

There has been debate on the extent to which inmate culture is either a product of the prison environment or an extension of external subcultures; however, the discussion has not reached a consensus (see Sykes and Messinger, 1977; Cloward, 1977; Leger and Stratton, 1977; and Irwin and Cressey, 1977). Hunt, Reigel, Morales, and Waldorf (1993) insist that a more fruitful question to look at is how changing dynamics within prison life shape inmate experiences and outcomes. Their research pointed out that a key discrepancy in prison routines is that some institutions allow the formation of prison gangs for various reasons rather than stopping inmate congregation, which can backfire. Supporting this finding, Nicholas, who spent time in multiple prisons inside and outside of Louisiana, comparing Louisiana prisons to Michigan prisons, informs “it’s [prison] totally different down here. In Michigan, inmates run the prison, down here, police run prisons. In prisons in Michigan it’s so violent that police might not make it home. Just like you might not make it home.” While not specifically pointing out gang activity, Nicholas does insist that there is variation in prison life depending on location.

A distinct feature of the prison culture is the prisoner’s code, which is transmitted to each new convict and consists of habits, behavior patterns, customs, and inmates’ sentiments towards the penal system and prison administration (Caldwell, 1956). This code prohibits fraternization



with guards and other prison personnel (ibid.); however, there is always the possibility of collusion with guards for benefits. For example, in Jarred's experience:

Sometimes you have officers who will become friends, or good buddies with an offender. And you may be affected because you never know what offender is close to an officer and how close they is. You may be sleep at some point, which I got evidence to prove it. And you will wind up with something happening to you bad, which you may not be able to live with for the rest of your life.

There is an image of uncertainty and unpredictability in participant experiences. The assumed clear division between inmates and the authorities is called into question by stories of disintegrating demarcations. In their attempt to control convicts, authorities introduce a series of measures to contain inmates that may unexpectedly create problems for both prisoners and the daily functioning of institutions (Hunt, Riegel, Morales, and Waldorf, 1993).

However, there are changes in behavior that surfaced in my participants' descriptions, particularly centered around violence. Hunt et al. (1993) found how using convicts to control other inmates may lead to the alignment of other groups for survival, but they do not explore how prisoners individually cope with the prison violence. Men in my study discussed survival changes caused by violence. For example, explaining the impact on him, Randall recalled, "you could see a person get killed and you don't see. And if I happened to see somebody get killed, it didn't disturb me like it do today. That was just a way of survival: what I seen I didn't see." Not only is there extreme violence, which is characteristic of toxic masculinity, but the presences and threat of such violence was often dismissed by other inmates as simply a means of survival.

A complete disregard for the experiences of others is a dimension of toxic masculinity (Kuper, 2005). Overlooking a person's murder is a pretty straightforward example of a complete disregard for others. Others also shared similar experiences. For example, Justin revealed, "I didn't focus on it [violence/victimization] I didn't look. What do you do? I go in showers and

see somebody getting raped or something like that and I didn't see it. But I saw it, but that wasn't my business." Such desensitization to violence becomes so commonplace in prisons that it becomes a way of life for inmates. Echoing this sentiment, Steven elaborated:

I learned that I didn't see nothing and don't ask me nothing, you know. You don't ask, it's common sense. You either going to live in here or you going to die in here. So, I had common sense and I'm out here now. So, to stay alive, I did change my behavior because I humbled myself to know that if I said something I might get killed.

Desensitization to violence can take other forms beyond a lack of sensitivity to the victimization of others. Some men found that a willingness to engage in violence helped them survive their incarceration. For example, Carlito referred to himself as a "one man gang," recalling:

I protected me, you know and a lot of people knew that to take my life, they might have to give up theirs, you know. I wasn't the weakest link so, I didn't have that kind of trouble in prison. I gave my respect and they gave me mine back.

Black males are in a constant struggle for identity, power, respect, and understanding (Nedhari, 2009). Resorting to violence is a tactic used by Carlito in his struggle for respect, as well as a method of survival used during incarceration.

Toxic masculinity is useful in discussions about gender and forms of masculinity because it delineates those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are socially destructive, such as misogyny, homophobia, greed, and violent domination; and those that are culturally accepted and valued (Kupers, 2001). On the one hand, incorporating muscles, violence, and gaining respect shows that my participants' earlier definitions of masculinity were a necessity for their well-being and survival in the prison context. On the other hand, the negative exacerbation of toxic masculinity in their lives provided a vehicle for change in their behavior as they began ignoring, or becoming desensitized to, violence and sexual assault – all elements of toxic

masculinity. However, for my participants it became a way of life, or more importantly, a way of survival as these aspects of masculinity were in fact enhanced during incarceration.

### **Losing Autonomy**

Tropes of masculinity are represented in men's talk about independence (Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Witter, and Warin, 2007). Within hegemonic masculinity independence assigns privilege to self-reliance and autonomy (Gerschick & Miller, 1995). Consistent with Smith et al.'s (2007) perception of sustained personal autonomy as a measure of successful manhood, participants' perspectives on masculinity were closely tied to the ability to maintain independence. Although autonomy is a broad concept similar to other terms such as self-reliance and self-determination; for my participants, control over their own lives was challenged both institutionally and culturally.

### **Institutional Control**

A major challenge to the autonomy is the institutional control exerted over inmates. Autonomy refers to independence and self-determination; therefore, a lack of autonomy is a key aspect of incarcerated life (Osgood, Gruber, Archer, and Newcomb, 1985). The prison is by definition a place where inmates lose power, privilege, privacy, personal identity and are reduced to a number (Goodstein, MacKenzie, and Shotland, 1984; Singer, 1972). Some men challenged anyone who thought they could dictate how and what they were going to do. For example, Jarred emphasized, "I was a rebellious person. I hated to listen. So, you (referring to both officers and other inmates) was not going to tell me anything and he wasn't going to tell me anything." Similarly, Fred, added, "If the officers not going to tell me nothing, I know dogon well I'm not going to let a inmate tell me nothing." It has been argued that personal control is a basic human need and a key dimension of hegemonic masculinity (White, 1959; Phares, 1968). However, the

experience of incarceration is in opposition to this idea. In fact, the admission procedures – performed by prison staff – and the obedience tests – performed by inmates in some institutions are elaborated into a form of initiation rituals where staff and veteran inmates go out of their way to provide a clear notion of the plight of the new inmate, a ritual sometimes called “the welcome” (Singer, 1972, p. 669).

What happens after “the welcome” is the important question. A continued loss of autonomy can have adverse effects on the individual and for this reason prisons can present as negative turning points for inmates. On the one hand, Wheeler (1961) has shown that prisoners become more “prisonized” the longer the incarceration; prisoners are more likely to make decisions on the basis of criminal rather than law-abiding values. When inmates enter prison, they enter an institution which, in its lower reaches, is dominated by men wedded to criminal values (ibid.). Studies of prisons have shown that inmate society is dominated by the perspectives of the most influential prisoners with stable criminal orientations (see Cressey, 1961; and Cloward, Cressey, Grosser, McCleery, Ohlin, Sykes, and Messinger, 1960). On the other hand, according to the Environmental/Learned Helplessness model of personal control, in times when there is inability to exert autonomy, individuals develop a “learned helplessness” (Seligman, 1975). Helpless individuals react passively to situations because they have learned that attempts to exert outcome control or choice or to obtain predictability are futile. To qualify as learned helplessness, a phenomenon has to meet all three of these conditions: (1) the person has to become inappropriately passive; (2) this change has to follow exposure to prolonged uncontrollable events; and (3) there is a change in the way the person thinks about their ability to control similar future events. For inmates, all three of these conditions are possible and in many cases present. So, inmate reactions to the prison environment can make them either more

criminally aggressive (Wheeler, 1961) – or more passive (Seligman, 1975). Either way, both of these are viewed as negative turning points.

My research stands in contrast to this in that I found that a loss of personal autonomy produced positive cognitive and behavioral changes for my participants. The increasing challenges to autonomy that arose sparked a turning point in my participants' minds prompting them to realize they no longer had complete control over their circumstances. After facing the reality of his loss of autonomy, Jarred elaborated on how the prison met his challenge to authority and how that affected him.

That's where it changed at because once you get wrote up, which they call RVRs, rule violation regulation. Uh, once you get that it becomes a problem because that's when you go up in lock down, which is administrative segregation. Once you start seeing you losing your good time, which is something you earn, then it becomes a difficult time.

Consistent with Seligman's (1975) findings, Jarred realized that his efforts to maintain control actually caused those problems that he preferred to avoid. In a national survey of state prison inmates, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1990) reported that the majority of male inmates were charged with rule violations at some point during their stay in prison. Rule violators were defined as, "inmates who were formally charged with or written up for breaking prison rules or regulations" (p. 138). The type of behavior exhibited by an inmate, while in prison, is as important to the prison system as it is to the inmate due to economic concerns as the inmate is faced with the possibility of increasing time actually spent in prison or additional punishment.

Indeed, the loss of autonomy can be a negative in the immediate lives of inmates, however, for some men, it can be a vehicle for long-term positive changes in their lives. Andre's narrative fragment sheds light on this phenomenon:

Going into it [prison], I found out I couldn't keep the same attitude that I had before I left the streets. Well, I had a don't give a damn attitude and you not going to tell me anything because I don't want to hear it and I who I am. I'm gone be me and if you don't like it

get the fuck away from me. Well, in jail you have to adapt and adjust because you're around thousands of different attitudes and if one offender's attitude don't get to you, you best believe an officer's attitude will. And they make an attitude adjustment!

Becker (1964) argues that in order to survive in prison, new inmates discover that they must make peace with the criminally oriented social structure – just as my participants discussed adopting more toxic elements of masculinity in the prior section. As inmates approach release, however, they realize that the world they are returning to is dominated by people who respect the law and that the criminal values which have served them well in prison will not work as well beyond the cell walls. Thus, they become more law-abiding. Nicholas reflected on the beginning of changes to how he responded to challenges:

In order to know what your reality is going to be like, you have to go through something. So, I believe me going through it led me to be more prosperous and more understanding. Because I had to go through it at first to know how to carry myself at the next institution. So, once I got there I never had big problems again.

For Nicholas, this shift began well before his sentence was coming to a close, but rather as he was transferred to another institution.

Seligman's *learned helplessness* has been critiqued for its incompatibility with humans. He first studied and described it as it applied to animals in the early 1970s. As it applies to people, the theory describes what happens when a person comes to believe they have no control over their situation and that whatever they do is futile (Seligman, 1975). As a result, the person will stay passive in the face of an unpleasant, harmful, or damaging situation, even when they actually do have the ability to improve the circumstances. Seligman even critiqued the original theory. According to Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978), the original theory did not consider that some people possess feelings of contingency, or a feeling that something can be done to improve their situations. In the prior section, I emphasized that one characteristic of toxic masculinity is the desensitization to violence. So, in situations where my participants

overlooked victimization, rather than step in, that is empirical evidence for the original learned helplessness. In this section, I have highlighted how these men's changes provide empirical support for Seligman's new version of his theory, or that individuals are agentic beings who can in fact change their situations. Jarred, Andre, and Nicholas all felt that their behavioral changes helped them survive incarceration.

Of course, change is not always easy and these men are not just passively experiencing such changes. Andre indicated that change takes a lot of effort and sometimes must start within the individual. He recalled thinking while incarcerated; "now when I have a problem with an inmate, I could walk away from the inmate, but you can't walk away from the officer. This is where the problem come in at because that is hard, but I did it." While Andre's response indicates that change may difficult, but not impossible, it is also not the same for everyone. For example, Irwin and Cressey (1962) argue that the behavior of prisoners, both during and post-incarceration, varies depending on whether the person was previously a member of the criminal underworld. Perhaps because none of my participants indicated a history of extremely criminogenic conditions, their ability to maneuver their self-concepts and behaviors came easier.

### **Cultural Control: Post-Incarceration Challenges to Autonomy**

There is difficulty in the transition from incarceration back into the community. In Punishment and Inequality in America (2006), Bruce Western explores lowered human capital in former inmates. He points out that rehabilitation traditionally has included counseling, psychotherapy, probation, parole, drug treatment, education, and vocational training. However, the increase in the prison population has only resulted in more prisons, without the accompaniment of additional dollars for rehabilitative resources. Former inmates are at the bottom of the social totem pole and they are aware of it. According to Randall:

When it comes down to filling out an application, sadly I already know that I have to take the left overs. I already know that. But I also know that I have to have the job. I'll take the leftovers rather than have no job.

The mark of incarceration makes it difficult to obtain access to resources for survival.

Even though Randall did not go into detail about what he brings or does not bring to the labor market, he did speak to the lack of enthusiasm that the labor market has for former inmates.

Incarceration can undermine economic prosperity in the labor market on both the supply and the demand side. Workers may be made less productive by serving time in prison or employers may be more reluctant to hire job applicants with criminal records (Holzer, Raphael and Stoll 2003).

Using the Fragile Families data, Geller, Garfinkel, and Western (2006), examined the effects of incarceration on the earnings and employment of poor fathers reporting that time incarcerated prevents the acquisition of work experience and job skills to compete with other applicants for former inmates. Direct barriers, found in various statutes and occupational code licensing requirements, require employers to exclude applicants with criminal convictions and, in some cases, arrest records. Under Title VII, indirect barriers allow some employers to exclude applicants with arrest or conviction records if they can prove that the applicant's criminal history prevents the latter from satisfying certain job requirements (Harris and Keller, 2005). Simply because of a lack of options, there is the possibility that some men feel that prison is a viable alternative to reentry struggles, which is another way that incarceration can present as a negative turning point. David, who had been released for about two years, elucidates this point when he said:

When I come home it was rough not being able to get a job and not having the correct money I need to support what I have (his family). It's rough and sometimes it drives me to want to go back to jail because I don't have bills there. But at the same time, even though you don't have bills there, you having other issues.



Recidivism rates are extraordinarily high in the American criminal system, consistently remaining above 60 percent (U.S. Department of Justice, 2004). Steven, whose release took place, nearly 8 years ago, shared a narrative that sheds experiential light as to why recidivism rates are as high as they are:

The stigma of being on probation that stuck with me for years. It was hard to get a decent job. The things that you need to move forward in your life and be a member of society. Well I couldn't get a place to live and I couldn't get a job, so how can I be productive. All I can do is go back to the corner and sell drugs or go steal stuff to try and make ends meet. I'm not justifying for those people that do that, but I can understand the stress behind them doing it.

The restricted circumstances that former inmates return to as they re-enter communities can be excruciating. Consistent with research, my participants experienced, in post-incarceration, reduced access to resources and diminished citizenship. However, social support can be a mitigating factor in the lives of inmates (Carlson and Cervera, 1991; Clear, Rose, and Ryder, 2001) – a theme to which I now turn.

### **Weakening and Losing Relationships**

One of the most prominent resources for social support is the family. Yet, the effects of incarceration on families are drastic. Though rarely mentioned in discussions about family integrity or family values, there is a growing body of evidence that incarceration has been pulling apart families in our society. Incarceration not only removes family support, it also significantly alters coping strategies for incarceration and the way these men conceptualize masculinity. Quite simply, incarceration is a powerful tool in the dissolution of families. Incarceration can create practical hardships such as lost income and childcare, legal costs, and telephone expenses (Braman, 2002). Because inmates lack the ability to cover such expenses, their families are not only materially impoverished, but relationships are eroded. Another negative aspect of incarceration is that it can further diminish the safety net of social support like family and

friends. Many participants mentioned the loss of significant relationships in their lives due to incarceration. Edward remembers feeling:

You don't have a chance to really suck your thumbs so to speak. You have to suck it up because right now most of the help you had it stops. You hear a lot of folks that make a well with the lawyers. We may cross that bridge when we get there, but when you get to that bridge you may be there by yourself.

Men, women, and children in poor and minority neighborhoods value family and family support no less than do other Americans, but as Edward found out there can be great difficulty maintaining strong familial support while incarcerated. Also sharing a huge loss, Steven, separated from his wife, said:

That was like a wake-up call for me. I lost my wife behind it (incarceration) and I lost a vehicle behind it. It disturbed me, to lose the things that I loved the most. I guess it might sound simple, but it woke me up to realize the problems that I do have are not going to go away. When it comes down to me using drugs or alcohol or different things like that, I now have sobriety under my belt. I feel good about that.

Steven's loss of his wife and material possessions made him take a look at how he could change his life. This re-evaluation of his life, although caused by a negative life event, may have been Steven's saving grace. Strong family bonds are major aspects of life that restrict opportunities for antisocial behavior and offer conventional life, especially for men (Hirschi, 1969). For some, conventional roles offer a pathway out of crime (Warr 1998; Sampson and Laub 1993; Hagan 1993). It is well documented that those who fail to secure the markers of adulthood are more likely to persist in criminal behavior. The impact of prison to potentially dismantle these bonds is yet another way that prison disrupts men's lives. However, research has not adequately explored the intersection between the loss of strong relationships and the mourning of such relationships. I argue that at this intersection, inmates are sometimes able to turn negative life events into positive changes. For Steven, the loss of his wife presented as a negative event with positive manifestations. He mentioned his new sobriety in all aspects of his

life. Taking this negative and manifesting it in positive ways does not support the current and past arguments in similar ways. On the one hand, the development of strong bond did play a part in creating this feeling of remorse in Steven. However, on the other hand the loss of such a bond did not send him back into a life of crime; but rather, regretting the loss of that relationship and support inspired a positive change in his life.

A critical understanding of why one lost social support can also mitigate the potential negative impact of incarceration. Just as Steven understood why he lost his wife, Michael felt that his sentence was a sentence for all the significant others in his life. He described:

All the contacts you had, your friends, your family they drop off after two or three or four years because they realize that ‘I haven't done anything, but I'm serving time just like you.’ Because I am the one that has to get up early in the morning you know, make preparations, get the kids ready and bring them to come see you. And this is like a ritual that people do. And you realize then that this is gonna last, but for so long.

Michael understands the burden that family and friends undertake by making constant visits. It is not surprising to him when visits begin to slack off, and even stop completely. The societal trend over the past few decades toward harsher punishments seems to indicate the lack of importance of family in rehabilitation for the incarcerated. However, the frequency of visits between family members and prisoners has been linked to positive outcomes, both in prison and post-institutional release (Bennett, 1987). A significant number of studies have indicated a positive correlation between family visits and the reduction in recidivism (Holt and Miller, 1972; Brodsky, 1975; Fishman and Alissi, 1979). Moreover, “the maintenance of contact between the inmate and his spouse, children, extended family members, and friends assists in [positively] adjusting to the prison environment” (Carlson and Cervera, 1992, p. 36). Anthony, an organizer for Opportunities Through Reentry, attributed his strength and adjustment to the contact he maintained with his children. He recalled:

My whole mindset became I had to get out of this before my kids got six years old. Time kept rolling so I would say I'll get there before you get finished with elementary school. Then it was like I got to get there before you take it out of junior high school. I definitely have to get be there before they finish high school. Then it was like man, I done watched my kids grow up right in front of my eyes. So watching their mama, watching my daddy bring them to see me and then to them walking through the door on their own; I realized I've been here too long. When they got old enough to start calling and writing on their own and seeing them, that became the real driving force for me.

My participants paid close attention to the importance of family visitations in their lives and also understood the impact that incarceration had in constraining the frequency in those visits. However, for some, visitations were impossible as they suffered lost lives during their incarceration. Shane, a very recently release former inmate of 20 years, remembers:

While I was incarcerated I had a tragedy. I lost my mom when I was like 25 years old. I got 2 younger sisters. I didn't take it very well; however, I grew from it. It was harder to come home and not to be able to go to her because I left her at such an early age (16). So, it was basically like starting all over as a grown man, but not having the knowledge of the streets as a grown man. I started like I was a child coming back into the world in a grown man's body.

Many marginalized groups – like the poor, the incarcerated, the homeless, etc. – are left out of the growing body of research on coping with death. For the incarcerated, the discussion of death seems to be centered on either suicide or death row. Participant's stories, like Shane's and to a degree Steven and Anthony's stories introduce a scant area of research: inmate grief and coping for the loss of significant others. Hendry (2008) reports issues of masculinity and culture have a strong impact on the ability of incarcerated men to resolve grief issues. The prison as an institution embodies the masculine ideal of toughness and hardness. There is limited opportunity for friendships, it is difficult to trust others and show emotion other than anger and aggression. Exhibiting feelings of grief is often seen as a weakness and can lead to perceived vulnerability.

The common grief responses that have been associated with men are largely a product of cultural and social conditioning (Staudacher, 1991). Thus, men tend to keep thought and

emotions about death to themselves where it is safer, especially during incarceration (Hendry, 2008). According to Toch (1992), confinement may amplify the processing of sorrow when a loved one is lost because security and cost always takes priority and overrides other issues including grieving the death of a loved one. So, the attendance of memorial services is nearly impossible. Grief is faced alone because inmates are not able to grieve with others and mourn publicly. Because grief does not always manifest in positive ways, especially when experienced alone, this is potentially detrimental for these men as well.<sup>5</sup>

In sum, the experience of incarceration changes participants. First, upon initial entry into prison, they found that prior ways of behaving were not sufficient for survival in prison. For most, incarceration increased the toxicity of those behaviors that got them arrested in the first place. However, it is important to remember that changes, both positive and negative, were used as tactics for survival. Second, my participants suffered loss: both institutionally (autonomy/independence) and personal loss (relationships through slacking visitation and/or death). As Anthony summed things up “man I had given away so much for so little in return; losing this time with my family.” I now show how it is precisely the weight of these significant losses that began to impact change in the lives of participants.

### **Incarceration as a Positive Turning Point**

From reduced life chances to lost relationships, imprisonment can be a destructive force especially for Black males. However, my research highlights how incarceration can provide a chance to re-evaluate and change life trajectories (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Edin, Nelson, and Paranal, 2001). According to the life-course view, people begin relationships and behaviors that

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<sup>5</sup> The death of a loved one was mentioned by one other person, but not discussed in detail. Also, it did not surface until closer to the end of my data collection process, as it was not a major focal point in this study. However, I did find it significant to discuss here because it is not a topic that has been explored in great detail, but should be considered for future studies on the grief process and incarceration.

will determine their adult life course (Sampson and Laub, 1990). For example, childhood antisocial behavior, such as juvenile delinquency and violent temper tantrums, is connected to many troublesome adult behaviors including criminality, general deviance, educational failure, and employment instability, just to name a few (ibid.). This relationship occurs independently of social class and race/ethnicity (Hagan and Palloni, 1988). Furthermore a life-course perspective draws attention to the powerful connection between a person's adult life trajectories, present circumstances, and past histories.

When viewed through the lens of a life course perspective, we can see how incarceration significantly alters the pathway through adulthood that can have lifelong effects (Petit and Western, 2004). The passage into adulthood follows a sequence of stages that affect life trajectories, involving moving from school to work, then to marriage, to establishing a home and becoming a parent (ibid.). The completion of this process is supposed to ultimately influence success in fulfilling adult roles and responsibilities by promoting a stable employment, marriage, and other positive life outcomes. Crime and incarceration impede successful completion of this process. Life course theory typically looks at successful navigation of these events. My work departs from and expands on this as I focus on the potential impact of prison to increase cognitive shifts towards the acquisition of these different stages. I now detail the impact of prison in the life course of formerly incarcerated Black men and their definitions of what it means to be a man.

### **Possible Selves**

Over their life course, people construct and strive to implement normative projections of themselves and their future. Normativity is relative and for young Black males, the image of the hypersexual, hyperaggressive, sexist, tough guy may be *normative*. However, for the men in my

sample, the experience of incarceration shifted their perceptions of their selves and motivated them to transform their life trajectories.

Possible selves are defined as conceptions of ourselves in the future (Erikson, 2007). Miller (2002) argues there is a projective element to agency in which thought processes and patterns of behavior may be significantly reconfigured in relation to one's hopes, fears, and desires for the future. Possible selves enable this to take place. Possible selves provide the construction of "a bridge of self-representations between one's current state and one's desired or hoped for state" (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989, p. 211). For some, this construction of how the end state can be realized is very clear and concrete, whereas in others it can be very vague. Much of the research related to possible selves and incarceration focuses on fatherhood possibilities for inmates. For example, Meek (2007) argues that for young fathers in prison, there are three primary categories for possible selves of inmates: the hoped-for, which are related to employment; the expected selves, which are parenting; and the feared selves, which are related to offending or a return to prison. Moreover, she suggests that parenthood is a key component of present and future representations of fathers in prison. One participant, Justin, a 59 year old grandfather, expresses the consequences of missing a lot of time with his children while incarcerated:

Due to me missing my kids, my biological kids. That's why I'm so respectful to my grandkids. My wife's grandkids. You know, that's why I want to raise them so bad. I want to tell them the stories that I went through. I want to tell them the right and the wrong way to go because I feel in my heart that I don't want them without some strong person behind them letting them know the right thing to do.

Justin's change was prompted by infrequent and inconsistent contact with his own children. He realized the detriment that his absence was causing in the lives of his children, which caused him to want to be a better father in the future. Because his children are adults now,

he is making up for lost time with his grandchildren. Meanwhile, Justin is also introducing change by helping break the cycle of incarceration that troubles African American communities. He is using himself as a positive role model for his stepchildren and grandchildren. His actions point to how formerly incarcerated men can draw upon their own mistakes and use these lessons to prevent crime and delinquency in minority youth communities.

For some men possible selves function as goals, having an incentive power pulling them toward a desired end state, sometimes helped by an undesired negative possible self to be avoided. The concept of possible selves has been further enriched by the emphasis on its function in motivation (Erikson, 2007). However, Oyserman and Markus (1990) argue that a negative possible self is not in itself motivating except in the role of balancing and boosting a positive possible self. When asked about events that made him want to change for the better, Jarred responded:

In prison I done seen people get killed, people raped. I done seen young men 17, 18 get life sentences; ain't coming out. I'm talking about life sentences, ain't no way! When they say life without the eligibility of parole, ain't nothing can bring you out, but death. You can come out in a box and that's it. Not gonna be me!

Visualizations of negative possible selves has been shown to be an important tool for behavior control (Oyserman, Gant, and Ager, 1995). Motivated by the hope of freedom and the fear of being in the same shoes as inmates with life sentences, Jarred realized change was necessary. Erikson (2007) cautions that hopes and fears are not necessarily possible selves; however, they can give rise to possible selves. The distinguishing factor is that possible selves include experiences of what it could and would be like if a situation becomes a reality, making them more than abstract notions of future states. Possible selves are the link between cognition and motivation, as the function as incentives for future behavior (Markus and Nurius, 1986), or create drives to manifest fantasies of future selves into authentic beings. As opposed to



generalized shapeless goals and fears, possible selves are personalized representations that give meaning and form to these broader conceptions (ibid.). I argue that by emphasizing that this was “Not gonna be me,” Jarred’s fears and hopes created images of himself in those positions in the future as he evaluated where his life is headed and shifted his behavior to take him in the direction he wanted to go.

Future-oriented expectations, fears, and strategies are constrained by feedback in one’s sociocultural context, suggesting a relationship between support in one’s immediate context and the development of strategies for the achievement of desired future selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Feedback that guides an individual’s possible self is likely to come from several potential sources, including (a) social and religious institutions; (b) media; (c) significant others, including peers, family, and teachers; and (d) from the individual’s own interpretation of environmental feedback and past experiences (ibid.). Randall felt that he just needed one person’s support – his wife. He elaborated:

She gave me something that at my age that I know it had to be God because out of all the people in the world, they couldn’t give it to me. She showed me the care and the love, even though I was incarcerated. She wrote me every day. And I had a choice when I got out. I could’ve ran this way or that way, but she trusted me. She believed in me enough to change my life and all I ever wanted in my whole born life was for somebody to believe in me. Somebody to say, “Well I trust you.”

Randall’s strength to change came not only from the support of his wife, but also from religion as he feels that his wife was sent by God. Similarly, Lorenzo connects the love for his wife with the will of God:

I’m married to a beautiful woman. I tell you she is very delicate. I tell you she is very sweet, and I thank God she’s a God-fearing woman. Even though like I was telling you about the drugs and stuff like that, they say once a alcoholic or once a drug user, always a drug user or alcoholic. She is a big reason for me. But if you don’t have somebody, we all have God. That’s our best friend, God. But if we don’t have someone to help us, to keep us on that right path, by us being born in sin, it’s easy for us to fall off track. So, I thank God for her and I don’t think I could live without her.

For Randall and Lorenzo, their wives and their religion worked together to help them to see themselves in a different light and transform their lives. Furthermore, by acknowledging that they just needed someone to trust in them and be there for them, they highlight other ways that society can intervene to minimize recidivism among formerly incarcerated men.

In one of the first studies investigating the relationship between marriage and desistance, Sampson and Laub (1993) found that marital attachment significantly increased the chances that an offender would desist from criminal involvement. Since then numerous other studies have found similar findings using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (see Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006; Blokland and Nieuwbeerta 2005; Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005; Li and MacKenzie 2003; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995).

Religion has received less scholarly attention than marital attachment in the literature on desistance. Sampson and Laub (2003) did briefly touch on religion in their research on desistance. The authors cite an example of a spouse insisting that her formerly incarcerated husband get help for his alcohol problems and threatening to leave him if he did not (Laub and Sampson, 2003:139-140). A religious group was that help that he needed. Even in their research, the spouse was connected to religion. Others have also briefly touched on religion as it relates to crime and the baseline idea is that as an individual obtains bonds to religion and religious institutions, these bonds will deter the individual from realizing his/her natural proclivities to criminal activity (Hirschi, 1969; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).<sup>6</sup>

In brief, possible selves are cognitive processes representing self-knowledge about what a person would like to become, ideally; who he could become; and what he would like to avoid becoming. In thinking about their current identities, these men remember thinking of people that

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<sup>6</sup> Religion can be viewed, not only as a source of external control over individual conduct, but as a catalyst for new definitions of the situation and also as a cognitive blueprint for how one is to proceed as a changed individual. However, it was not a major focus in this dissertation.

they wanted to be there for, the support received from significant others, as well as people what they did not want to become. It is these images of who they want to be, how they see their futures, and how others see their futures that have had a significant impact on how they conceptualized themselves today.

### **“Redefining” Masculinity**

Because gender is so taken-for-granted, it is rare that men consciously think about what it means to be a man. As Paechter (2003) argues:

It is only when we find ourselves performing, or attempting a masculinity that for some reason fails to ‘fit’ a particular social situation that (the) performative aspect is recognized as we subtly, or not so subtly, change our behavior (p.69).

For participants, pre-incarcerated masculinity was not ‘fitting’ their lives because it contributed to their troubles prior to and possibly during, incarceration. During and following the incarceration experience, participants gained a new perspective on their lives and decided to reorient their definitions of masculinity in an effort to alter their life trajectories.

In this section, I discuss the how participants redefined masculinity. I show how their new conceptions of masculinity encompassed positive elements that diverge somewhat, but not completely, from definitions held prior to and during incarceration. Changing their outlook on what it meant to be a man created a demarcation between positive and toxic elements of current valued definitions of masculinity; prompted new visions of what a man could be; and disconnected masculinity from male bodies. I now detail how these three separate themes surfaced in men’s personal experiences and transitions.

The implications of Black masculinity and Black male identity have been established as “imagined social constructs with real consequences” (Johns, 2007, p.1), meaning race and gender are social constructions, albeit with very real implications for how Black men experience their

day-to-day realities. As discussed earlier, the concept of Black masculine identity was fashioned and codified during and after the formal collapse of slavery. Thus, Black masculine identity is a product of narrowly defined understandings of White maleness. Understanding the interaction of incarceration with current conceptions of Black masculine identity is important because of the widespread incarceration rate of Black men in contemporary society. In my interviews, I listened as participants revealed new orientations to masculinity and what it meant for them to be a man that developed after their incarceration experience. For example, Anthony, a 60 year old former inmate of 27 years, said, “I tell people all the time that prison, for me, was a bad experience with good results. I don’t think I could chart a better course, than the one I have been on.” Anthony’s sentiments summarize the outlook of many of my participants, wherein they turned poor circumstances into positive results. These men transformed their lives through learning from their incarceration histories, and redefined how they constructed and performed masculinity in their own lives. Masculinity is simultaneously a personal and social matter. How people choose to define it and whether they align with conventional conceptions depends on their individual and cultural upbringing (Wetherell and Edley, 1999). For example, when asked what it meant to be masculine and to be a man, Shane, who grew up in a single-parent home, explained:

They are different. Being a man is being in control of your responsibilities, not only for yourself, but also for the people that you are surrounded by. That’s not just kids, a wife, and family or something like that, but you kind of like have to be responsible for your entire surroundings, whether it be on the job, at the house or wherever you are. And masculinity is totally different because in my opinion and in my definition a woman can be a man. You don’t have to be masculine to be a man. Hey, I could be wrong, but that’s how I see it because we have so many single mothers out here playing momma and daddy. And for that reason alone being a man is not described by being a male. That’s how I look at it.

Shane sees masculinity and manhood as distinct, albeit related entities. His narrative exposes the ways that masculinity is neither uniform nor unchanging. The cultural and demographic shifts that contribute to the absence of so many African American men in homes, had led Shane to distinguish masculinity from manhood. He recognizes that one is not a necessity for the other, and has revealed his reverence for women who take on what would have been previously been qualities and responsibilities reserved for men. Yet, in his definition, he still incorporates control, a core element of hegemonic masculinity and one that distinguishes hegemonic masculinity from other masculinities – i.e., the ability to have control over one's time, over women, and for very few men, control over other men, etc. (Donaldson, 1993). For Shane that sense of control comes in a form that would allow him control over his own responsibilities, not necessarily only for himself but for the good of his family. Even though the meanings of, and adherence to masculinity change with culture and with time, the capacity to exert control is a key component of hegemonic masculinity that remains stable over time and space (Johnson, 2005). Possessing a masculine self requires signifying that one possesses the capacities to resist being dominated by others. Ultimately, in Shane's new definition of what it means to be a man, the necessity of some prior masculine traits is challenged, while others are maintained. Moreover, the variation in who has access to manhood is expanded, since in his reference to single-mothers, he disconnects masculinity from male bodies.

Masculinity scholars argue that popular views of contemporary manhood in the United States express two types: the emergent emotionally-expressive New Man, who is heavily involved in parenting, and the inexpressive, hypermasculine Traditional Man (Messner, 1993). The New Man is viewed optimistically as the wave of the future, while the Traditional Man is an archaic throwback. However, Kimmel argues that the New Man is said to be more style than

substance, self-serving, and no more egalitarian than the traditional man, and thus does not represent genuine feminist change (Kimmel, 1993). Another issue with the *New Man* is that this cultural image is based almost entirely on the lives of White, middle, and upper-class, heterosexual men (ibid.). So, the focus of the shift has been in the personal styles and lifestyles of privileged men that eliminate or at least mitigate many of the aspects of traditional masculinity that men find unhealthy and/or emotionally constraining. However, these shifts in masculinity do little, if anything, to address issues of power and inequality for other groups of men, as well as for women.

A major similarity that binds the transformations experienced by my participants is their affiliation with organizations that work with formerly incarcerated people, i.e., Opportunities Through Reentry (OTR) and Adult Mentorship Academy (AMA). The men in my study have all been exposed to an institutional script that they then use to construct their narrative selves. For the men in my study, they have begun to see themselves as “new” men, who have turned imprisonment into a positive turning point – a distinct institutional narrative of these support groups. Gubrium and Holstein (2001) refer to this as “institutional selves,” a pattern that emerges when an image of a type of self is discursively created by, an organization. The pattern of institutional selves have been documented in battered women support groups (Loseke, 2001), co-dependents (Irvine, 1999), as well as dysfunctional families (Gubrium, 1992). Miller (2001) finds that they can also emerge from individuals engaged in therapeutic sessions. The conceptual framework of institutional selves is a useful tool to understand the emergent self-concepts of my participants. As Travis and Visher (2005) of the Urban Institute have argued, prisoner reentry is a process, rather than a legal status. It is not the result of a singular program but rather the culmination of every aspect of correctional operations and involvement in

programs both within and outside prisons. Petersilia (2003) agrees and argues prisoner reentry includes all activities and programming used to prepare ex-convicts to return safely to the community and to live as law abiding citizens. Simply put, reentry encompasses how they spent their time during confinement, the process by which they are released, and how they are supervised after release. For my participants, participating in OTR and AMA has provided them a narrative script to draw upon in the creation and maintenance of their self-concept. For example, OTR is a grassroots organization, funded and run by formerly incarcerated persons (FIPs), that uses civic engagement to train formerly incarcerated prisoners to be strong reformers and leaders. Thus, participants draw upon these discursive resources to reformulate their definitions of masculinity, better enabling them to be in leadership positions – i.e., as fathers, protectors, and providers of their families. Similarly, AMA is an organization that prides itself on “restoring hope” for ex-offenders. They aim to “make an impact within jails and prisons by creating relationships as mentors for men and women.”<sup>7</sup> This illuminates why so many of my participants stressed the importance of relationships and a desire to be role models for their children and grandchildren – the young people they readily have access to.

OTR and AMA have not only provided these men with help in finding resources for successful reentry, they have helped the men see incarcerations experiences differently and find hope in surviving those situations. I argue that this is why incarceration, or rather, the institutionalized support they received post-incarceration has lead participants to see their prison experience as a positive turning point, shifting the way they see themselves as men and changing how they conceptualize and embody masculinity.

Messner (1993) argues there are significant shifts in the cultural and personal styles of hegemonic masculinity; however, such shifts do not undermine conventional structures of men’s

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<sup>7</sup> This is language taken directly from the organizational brochure.

power. In other words, “softer” and more “sensitive” styles of masculinity are developing in contemporary times, but these styles do not necessarily negate traditional hegemonic masculinity. For example, the way Edward, a 38 year old former inmate of five years, sees it, “A man is a provider, a support system; a man is a person that would take his last just to see his family happy. That’s what I think a man is.” Edward’s description is multifaceted and incorporates new aspects that did not surface in pre-incarcerated definitions of masculinity. Although he still conceptualizes the man as the provider – a throwback to traditional masculinity, the fact that he peppers this with a support system is also characteristic of a softer masculinity.

When asked the same question, Jarred responded that being a man is, “understanding, working, being respectful, learning to be about the family. It’s so much. It’s just so much!” In addition to other characteristics of a man, Jarred brings up something that is very important: the ability of men to handle the many tasks associated with masculinity. Around the globe anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and other human researchers have studied masculinity and femininity, finding that different cultures universally construct a model of appropriate manhood that is usually difficult for men to achieve and, once achieved, can be precarious (Gilmore, 1990). Thus, for men, Like Jarred to be able to maintain stability while performing masculinity, he is anchoring his position among *men*.

Moreover, these men have not just constructed a singular version, but rather they are envisioning multidimensional and dynamic masculinities in which there is room for variation among men. Anthony discussed some of the complexities of men:

The man is also the guy who can think himself out of the same situations that sometimes will result in physical altercations. The man is also the person who is responsible to his family, especially if you got kids. And he is able to absorb responsibility. I think that the man is all of this in one.



Similarly, Justin explains:

Sometimes when we see people, we get pieces of them. You don't get that whole person. You get the person who is this guy for a reason. The guy who tries to take care of his family is also a man. He may not be as strong as this other man. And then you get the intellectual guy over here, who is not as physically strong or courageous, he's not weak, he don't take care of his family, but the intellectual, this guy knows how to do the things that need to get done. He can do the right thing. He is a man. You don't have to be the guy who goes and puts on a coat of metal and slang iron to say I'm a man. Yeah, you a man, but you're a damn fool!

My participants invoke tropes of hegemonic masculinity in their narratives of what it means for them to be a man, for example, they discuss the importance of being the economic provider, being physically strong, and having control. Yet, alternative and multidimensional definitions of masculinity, like that of emotion, are strategically woven throughout their narratives as well. Ultimately, their narratives are consistent with the more current pluralist interpretation of multiple masculinities.

My findings highlight the extent to which incarceration, or more specifically the institutionalized support that inmates received upon reentry can be positive cognitive and behavioral turning points in the lives of these formerly incarcerated Black men. Unifying their positions on incarceration is their connection to reentry programs that build hope in their lives and reorient their focus away from the negatives of incarcerated pasts. Binswanger et al. (2011) advises that we reach out to former inmates, just as OTR and AMA are doing. Thus, incarceration is both a negative and positive turning point, or as my participants put it “a bad experience, with good results!” These men have come to terms with the negative circumstances that they found themselves in and rearranged their focus towards the positives lessons taken from their incarceration experiences, which they now use in improving their lives. It is noteworthy, that what distinguishes these men from other former inmates who repeatedly return to prison, is that they actively have found motivation for positive change – very likely through OTR and

AMA. Whether through the desire to improve in fathering, to regain social support, or simply to overcome static views of what Black men are or should be, they have reoriented the way they see themselves as men. While their current definitions continue to incorporate many hegemonic traits, they have intricately intertwined progressive, emotionally-oriented behaviors. Moreover, they open masculinity to variation among men and expose phallocentric fallacies about what it means to be a man.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Over the past four decades the United States has relied on imprisonment as a response to all types of crime. This has made the United States the world's leader in incarceration. The US has less than 5% of the world's population, but over 23% of the world's incarcerated people (Harney, 2006). This increase is less the result of changes in criminal behavior (Blumstein and Beck, 1999), and more so the consequence of policy shifts and increases in the use of prisons for drug crimes (Western et al., 2001). What is more, evidence shows that this mass imprisonment is ineffective in reducing crime. Evaluations of the effectiveness of incarceration are measured in terms of recidivism and reductions in the aggregate crime rate (Blumstein et al., 1978; Nagin, 1998). Results have not been positive with re-arrest rates consistently remaining between 50 and 60 percent of those released returning within 3 years over the past 3 decades (National Institute of Justice, 2010).

Prisons are hypermasculine environments. Yet, their effects on gender are rarely the topic of discussion, in particular post-incarceration. It is noted that those who work with prisoners – i.e. therapists, counselors, clergy members, educators, corrections officers, etc. – do not give enough energy to understanding the ways masculinity patterns influence how, when, and what men end up in prison, how they function inside prison, and what the effects are during reentry (Sabo, Kupers, and London, 2001). Using theoretical perspectives that draw from gender theories, symbolic interactionism, and identity theories, I expand on conceptual frameworks of masculinity. Questions guiding my research include, but are not limited to: (1) how do formerly incarcerated men respond to the demands of hegemonic masculinity despite their marginalization due to imprisonment? (2) How do they reconcile the disjuncture between manhood expectations and general criminal mistrust? And, (3) how do they define masculinity and what are the sources for doing masculinity post-incarceration? I stress how the formerly incarcerated Black men in

my study have reconstructed and negotiated their ideals of masculinity during reentry. My qualitative analysis with a sample of formerly imprisoned African American men explores how respondents construct and define their own experiences of what it means to be a man. Further, I examine the connection between cognitive and behavioral changes, as well as identify some events leading to experiencing incarceration as a turning point with both negative and positive benefits and how such factors are associated with masculinity. Despite living in the “borderlands” of mainstream acceptance and support, these men develop a “new” set of masculine principles. Whereas for many law-abiding persons, these principles may seem axiomatic, because former inmates are limited in access to resources for doing gender, these reorientations to masculinity are interesting and important to understand.

Because they are marginalized by racial/ethnic background and stigmatized due to prison, these men are in a unique position for researchers to better understand the intersections of marginalized and hegemonic masculinity. Black men are well aware that they will not have the same respect, support, and access to resources as their White male counterparts, especially those that have not ever experienced incarceration. Due to the restricting impact of imprisonment, these men are not at the same liberty to control their circumstances and daily activities as other males do with greater freedoms post-release. Thus, to reestablish their lives is a difficult task, to do this with their masculinity still intact is near impossible.

Interviewing former inmates who are African American men provides a way for their stories to be heard. My sampling strategy of including a wide age range of men captures experiences over the life course. Including both younger and older men turns the spotlight on the extent to which masculinity does not remain static with age, but rather shifts with new

experiences and life events. An analysis of formerly incarcerated Black men's masculine self-concepts must be understood temporally with prison being a pivotal event in the life course.

My findings reveal how my participants understood, learned, and performed masculinity prior to incarceration. Based on interviews, my findings suggest patterns of reorientation in masculine definitions. Learned primarily through family association and street experiences, early masculinity concepts included emphasis on physical embodiment, hypersexuality, fitting in, and acts of toughness. These men are implicated in reigning definitions of hegemonic masculinity and oftentimes reinforce current gender norms. During incarceration, masculine ideals were amplified and in fact aided in inmates' survival, in that incarcerated participants experienced desensitization to and increases in violence, which came in handy as both a protection as well as survival mechanism. However, men ultimately experienced cognitive and behavioral shifts in their understandings of masculinity. I suggest that prison is a turning point that can provide both positive and negative outcomes in one's life, depending on an array of factors, such as how one understands what it means to be a man, one's openness to reorient the way one understands what it means to be a man; and more importantly the resources available to perform *new* conceptions of masculinity. My participants have developed positive outlooks on their prison experiences and have manifested more fluid and permeable boundaries to masculinity. Such outlooks are products of the organizations – Opportunities Through Reentry (OTR) and Adult Mentorship Academy (AMA) – in which they hold memberships. These organizations both provide healthy models of masculine leadership and my participants have drawn upon such resources for reorientations toward masculinity. Conceptions of masculinity have moved from actively engaging in behavior that supports hegemonic masculinity to a “new” masculinity that integrates traditional masculinity with a greater variation of permissible

behaviors. Ultimately, “new” orientations to masculinity are more complicit versions of masculinity. My research shows that institutional and social scripts play a large role in the formation of self for participants of various organizations. They empower individuals to enact change as a self-help mechanism. Thus, these formerly incarcerated Black men are actively creating change, not only in their own lives, but in the future generations of young Black males.

### **Sociological Implications**

We need to theoretically understand how “new” men are reoriented versions of *old* masculinity – that is, how they remain complicit, rather than oppose hegemonic masculinity. In a 2000 lecture *Understanding Men: Gender Sociology and the New International Research on Masculinities*, prominent gender scholar Raeywon Connell emphasized that patterns of masculinity are constantly in transition due to globalization and increasingly fluid patterns of gender. Men's positions, according to Connell, are "under challenge," and underlying assumptions of male power must be rethought (p. 1). I agree that there is a strong need to reexamine structures of male power and with this research I present a group of men that have begun to challenge power dynamics.

Connell explores the possibility of challenging current gender norms on a wide scale basis in the US, as well as other places. At first glance, it appears that formerly incarcerated men would not be a prime group to take on such a task. However, because they are the largest group of persons affiliated with incarceration, I believe the ex-offender population is the best group to take such action. Not only are they large in number, 7.1 million at yearend 2010 (Glaze, 2011), but they do not primarily consist of a group that stands to gain from hegemonic power – i.e. White middle-class men.

My participants have shifted the way they conceptualize masculinity in efforts to improve their circumstances. They have deemphasized toxic elements of their prior held definitions of masculinity and have begun focusing on positive elements, some of which are grounded in mainstream conceptions of what it means to be a man. Next, by continuing to stress many of the basic tenets of hegemonic masculinity – e.g. control, economic proficiency, being a protector, etc. – and coming to terms with limited access to them, these men recognize that not only are they among the groups that are not equally viewed as men, but also that they are a part of the groups that are actively dishonored. Following this, and also what sets these men apart from other former inmates, these men recognize the necessity for taking action, if change is going to occur. Visions of positive possible selves without agency to match, simply yields a image without concrete results, or rather what Erikson (2007) notes as *hopes*, which are not possible selves. Additionally, because none of these men share uniform incarceration and developmental histories, they do not share a unified definition of masculinity post-incarceration; however, there are similar elements to the way that each now conceptualizes masculinity and navigates life during reentry. With that, their stories support Connell's argument that there are internal complexities in what is masculine behavior. Finally, as participants have provided various reasons and ways that changes occurred in their lives, this research explores dynamics in masculinity.

Masculinity is constantly constructed and maintained through our everyday social patterns and institutions. According to Connell, one of the ways masculinity is constructed is through the structure of organized sports; she asserts that these competitions, based on whether the athlete wins or loses, create a form of "aggressive" masculinity (p. 4). In this view, prison can be seen as arenas for the development of aggressive masculinity. The very organization of

prisons require a masculine presence from inmates – at the very least for protection as respondents pointed out. Moreover, prison staff and administration must also contribute to this hypermasculine atmosphere, even in women's institutions (Denborough, 2001; Zimmer, 1987).

While gender inequality remains a constant struggle, intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and citizenship matter. Black men's male privilege is buttressed by their racial disadvantage. Prior research discussed earlier in this dissertation has made it clear that the problems caused by the legacy of racism are paramount. Formerly incarcerated Black men, more than other groups of African American men, must continue to confront the challenge of economic survival. Social forces have placed Black men among the lowest of men on the masculinity hierarchy (Staples, 1978). The former inmate is even lower on this totem pole.

What will happen in the future is difficult to determine. For the men here, they were able to find ways to create positive changes in their outlooks towards masculinity and in their lives. Their new orientations towards masculinity were not necessarily entirely different versions of masculinity. However, unfortunately many formerly incarcerated Black men find it difficult, if not impossible to even view a bleak future as positive due to the structural, legal, and cultural circumstances that they return to upon reentry. Therefore, they will likely continue to fall back into old habits and will remain behind other groups in educational and economic progress; consequently, remaining behind in access to resources for successful accomplishments of positively valued masculinity. As a consequence they will remain a disproportionate majority of the incarcerated, as well as recidivating populations. Some segments of White society may even be pleased with this result because Black men in prison are less threatening to hegemony. At the same time, large numbers of Black men – and women – will continue to occupy the bottom rung of the socioeconomic strata.



## **Policy Implications**

The Prison Industrial Complex has developed unstoppable momentum in the US and continues to produce extreme profits, while maintaining social destruction, particularly in African American communities (Davis and Shaylor, 2001). Many groups serve to benefit from its continuance. For example, politicians, both liberal and conservative, use the fear of crime to gain votes; private companies accrue around \$35 billion per year from prison spending, and impoverished rural areas are benefitting because prisons in those areas are the cornerstones of development (Schlosser, 1998).

Law enforcement agencies, policymakers, social support groups, and individuals alike want to prevent and reduce crime and recidivism. Efforts have been made to reduce drug circulation and use, with the “War on Drugs”, as well as implementing programs to promote rehabilitation for criminals. However, such strategies need revision as we are not seeing any reduction in the inmate population, especially for African American males. It may be that the public equates rehabilitation with softness, but you do not have to be soft on crime to believe in rehabilitation.

Historically, voting rights have been a way to maintain White superiority (Kousser, 1974). With imprisonment continuing to infiltrate the Black community, disenfranchisement of former inmates presents a legal method for the ongoing racial “caste” system in America.

Another major distinction between the men in my study and other former inmates that constantly return to prison are the agencies that they are affiliated with, such as Opportunities Through Reentry and Adult Mentorship Academy. Part of the goals of these agencies is to help these men learn from their experiences and use what they have learned to help others. More interesting is that the organizations are founded and run by Formerly Incarcerated Persons in partnership with allies dedicated to ending the disenfranchisement and discrimination against

formerly incarcerated persons. So, these men, along with others who support and believe in them, are creating ways for them to reestablish resources for doing masculinity and seeing themselves as real and capable men. For example, the job opportunities that have been created make a way for these men to find unbiased employment. Also, they are working with other former inmates, a dynamic which exponentially increases the number of men who are learning these positive reorientations and aids with successful reentry. Ultimately, implementing similar programs in prisons and increasing the resources for those post-imprisonment programs would greatly reduce recidivism.

Revisiting my findings, one of the ways that young men learn masculinity is through other men in their communities, outside their homes. Given that incarceration is a plague in the African American community, then the men that they interact with daily have a high likelihood of being involved with crime in some form, whether directly or indirectly. It appears to be inevitable to shield young Black boys from former inmates. So, by creating and supporting these aforementioned programs, the government would be participating in a movement of social change. If started now, such programs would first combat the issue behind bars catching these men and reorienting them prior to release, which would aid efforts put forth by programs outside prisons. Also, for those men that are currently released, it will help reorient them to also add to the reduction in recidivism.

In recent years, federal, state, and local governments have worked to combat juvenile crime and delinquency. I believe my earlier suggestions also work towards this goal in a number of ways. First, investing in programs to help reorient these offenders and ex-offenders, would change the images that these young Black males have to look to for learning masculinity. Ultimately, this would work as a crime prevention strategy rather than a crime reactive strategy.

I would go so far as to suggest implementing programs in low-income areas, maybe an afterschool program, where these men actively engage with young boys to teach them better ways of doing masculinity than the troublesome methods that they may be engaging. This not only prevents crime before these boys make bad choices, but it also opens other employment opportunities for these formerly incarcerated Black men.

My findings have empirical implications for Hirschi's Social Bonding theory. Hirschi (1969) asks "why do some people conform?" If other men in these programs reorient themselves by emphasizing that they want to be better fathers, family members, and employees, this provides evidence that these programs open the floor for strengthening social bonds. First, rebuilding family support and wanting to be better fathers strengthens the *attachment* bond because it will build connections to other persons. Second, by creating jobs for these men, we can strengthen the *involvement* and *commitment* bonds by taking up time and energy to commit crimes and providing legitimate pathways to manhood, giving the men reasons to commit to conformity.

My analysis suggests a rehabilitative feature that is virtually eroded from current prison settings as laws continue to move in more punitive directions, rather than toward rehabilitating inmates. However, it is imperative to note, although briefly mentioned and not explicitly discussed by participants, these men were able to find self-motivations to engage in this process of change. As Edward explained, "Everything gets hard when you try to do right and you've done wrong so long." So, it is not my intent to give a false idea that everyone will have a similar prison experience and take the same positive attitude from the experience. However, my findings point to the need to reformulate rehabilitative strategies to increase inmate abilities to self-motivate and to see a different self in the future, one that is still a "man" and find ways to

make that possible post-incarceration. Also, there is difficulty in the transition from incarceration back into the community. Former prison inmates are at high risk for death after release from prison, particularly during the first 2 weeks (Binswanger, Stern, Deyo, Heagerty, Cheadle, Elmore, and Koepsell, 2011). These researchers urge us to reach out and intervene to reduce the risk of death after release from prison. So, my findings also point out the need to eliminate the stigma of incarceration, along with racism from our lives and increase support to aid our former inmates in their transitions back into communities safely and successfully.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research contributes to the existing body of literature on race, gender, and criminology because it focuses specifically on the voices of formerly incarcerated Black men. Moreover, my findings expose how microlevel, or individual conceptions of masculinity are shaped by interactional and institutional forces. Like any study, my findings and contributions should be viewed in light of their limitations.

Qualitative research has been criticized for lacking scientific rigor and its inability for reproducibility, but it is imperative to realize that quantitative and qualitative approaches are fundamentally different in their ability to ensure the validity and reliability of their findings. All research depends on collecting particular sorts of evidence through the prisms of methodological variations, each of which has strengths and weaknesses. Qualitative interviews were the most appropriate methodological tool to understand how formerly incarcerated Black men construct, negotiate and perform masculinity and to better understanding those factors that affect reentry and recidivism. Furthermore, qualitative methodological approaches involve understanding the conditional and interactive nature of meaning-making that is at the core of how these men construct their sense of self and negotiate dominant scripts about masculinity.

However, my findings are limited in that they are not generalizable to the larger population of formerly incarcerated Black men both locally and nationally. The objective is to understand social processes (e.g., reorientations in masculinity, reentry, and recidivism are all social processes); however, some may view my relatively small sample as perhaps the most glaring limitation. There is always some guesswork involved in specifying the assumptions for sample size, especially when determining the effect and generalizability (Hacksaw, 2011). While there is nothing wrong with conducting well-designed small studies; however, result interpretations must be careful and it is important not to make strong generalizations. Therefore, I use this study to provide a snapshot into the lives of a small group of formerly incarcerated Black men. This serves as an introductory exploration of ways gender can be reoriented in beneficial ways to aid in reentry. Future studies should include larger confirmatory studies that will increase evidence for support of programs similar to OTR and AMA to continue such change on a larger scale.

The participants were primarily drawn from a convenience sample of Black men affiliated with two community reentry programs in Southeast Louisiana; this is another limitation of this project. This form of sampling is advantageous for my research because it allows the researcher to select a random sample of persons when no list of persons is available (Marshall, 1996). Future studies should include greater emphasis on theoretical sampling to gain better insight into other themes. Although both programs are open to work with men and women of all races/ethnicities, their current membership is comprised solely of African American men. Louisiana's population is made up of 63.8% White and 32.4% Black, yet, recall that African American males make up almost 70 % of the total adult correctional population (LeBlanc, 2012). Thus, despite the homogeneity of my participants, they represent a large portion Louisiana's

population with significantly difficult social realities. Nonetheless, future research should consider the experiences of White men, as their experiences will provide a look into a group that by physical appearance are quicker to benefit from hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, the experiences of other ethnically marginalized groups like that of Latinos, could also shed light on the malleability of masculine identity within the context of incarceration.

Another limitation of my study is that I assumed that the sexual identity of all participants was heterosexual. There were no questions directed toward sexual orientation, nor did any respondents share stories related to same-sex intimate-partner relationships. Future studies should consider the experiences of gay and bisexual former inmates, as those voices would surely illuminate how masculinity orientations are similar or different for this subgroup of (heterosexual) Black men.

Some may acknowledge my racial/ethnic and similarly gendered identity as a limitation. However, it is my position that this allowed me access to an understudied population that is often distrustful of White men. Nonetheless, as a young, African American male, who has never been incarcerated, it was important to recognize my potential to hold cultural biases that may have shaped my analysis and interpretation of the data.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Reimagining Black Masculinity in the Context of Mass Incarceration**

Because incarceration of African American males is so commonplace in America, this culture continues to assume that many Black males are unworthy of our attention. Further, we continue to valorize a hegemonic masculinity that it is virtually impossible for the vast majority of Black men to live up to. However, as the number of Black males who are released from prison continues to rise, access to resources for survival will demand attention, especially we if continue to hold these men to the same standards of masculinity as we do all other groups.

During 2010, prison releases (708,677) exceeded prison admissions (703,798) for the first time since the Bureau of Justice Statistics began collecting jurisdictional data in 1977 (BJS, 2011). Black males are the majority of the prison population. Because of the numerous legal restrictions we place on former inmates, the resources for doing masculinity or the roles we expect males to fulfill will need to be addressed, if we are aiming to address American crime issues for this group. Under current circumstances, formerly incarcerated Black men must reconstruct how they negotiate dominant standards of masculinity in their interactions between the former inmates and law-abiding persons during reentry. In my findings I discuss the impact of incarceration in activating an image of a possible self that is capable of a positive masculinity. These men reorient from toxic to positive aspects of masculinity. The reorientations arise out of incarceration experiences, desires to change, and to reestablish themselves as men. As cultural shifts in ideas around race/ethnicity and gender continue to occur, individual attitudes and behaviors shift and are shaped by these changes. Structural, institutional, and cultural barriers limited participants' life choices. Racial stereotypes, combined with a general mistrust of criminals create obstacles for the doing of positive masculinity. Participants' discussions of masculinity are nestled within mainstream discourses around masculinity. The trouble is they are isolated from this arena, yet they are expected to perform within it. With limited access to citizenship, these men are viewed as deficient and unworthy, an assumption that also penetrates much of the research on former Black male inmates.

In the future, it is my hope that my work will extend beyond the current project. However, my exploratory research provides a unique outlook on Black masculinity post-incarceration. Although it is difficult to make a direct comparison between masculinity prior to and post-incarceration, it is important to attempt an understanding of the impact incarceration

may have on Black males, as they are the primary statistic within our prison gates. Each of my research participants highlighted changes – both cognitively and behaviorally – characterized by the significant role of incarceration as a turning point in their lives with positive outcomes, with difficult circumstances.

The existence of dominant and often negative images of Black males is undeniable with various forms of media attending to, contextualizing, or simply highlighting the litany of problems associated with and attributed to Black males. With a few exceptional images of some that become media super stars and hyper-visible public figures, it is important to see how men at the low end of the spectrum of masculinity are able to create positive senses of self and lead productive lives. The task of re-imagining Black masculine identity was taken on here as I use this dissertation as a vessel for these men to provide alternate ways of seeing formerly incarcerated persons, Black men in particular.



## APPENDIX A: THE MEN OF MY STUDY

FIBM						
	Age	Education	Occupation	Current Relationship	Children	Length of Incarceration
Fred	25	Dropped out	Grocery Store	Married	Yes	3
Steven	29	HS	Unemployed	Single	No	2
Jarred	33	HS	Unemployed	Girlfriend	No	12
Shane	37	Dropped Out	Store	Single	No	20
Edward	38	BS	Plant Worker	Single	No	5
Christophe	41	HS	Warehouse Manager	Girlfriend	Yes	2
David	47	HS	Store	Girlfriend	2	12
Randall	48	Dropped out	Grocery Store	Married	Yes	16
Andre	48	HS	Store	Single	Yes	10
Jacob	51	HS	Warehouse	Married	Yes	8
Justin	59	HS	Unemployed	Single	Yes	15
Anthony	60	Some College	Organizer	Married	Yes	27
Carlito	66	Some college	Manager	Single	N/A	20
Nicolas	66	HS	Unemployed	Married	Yes	7
Marcus	68	HS	N/A	Widowed	No	5
Lorenzo	69	HS	N/A	Widowed	Yes	10
Michael	77	Masters	N/A	Single	N/A	3

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your background?
  - a. Age?
  - b. Where are you from?
  - c. What would you describe your ethnicity as? (Check all that apply)
    - i. ☐ White Non-Hispanic
    - ii. ☐ African-American
    - iii. ☐ Latino --If Latino, Please Check Below:
      1. ☐ Cuban
      2. ☐ Puerto Rican
      3. ☐ Mexican
      4. ☐ Colombian
      5. ☐ Argentine
      6. ☐ Venezuelan
      7. ☐ Other (please specify)
    - iv. ☐ Asian --If Asian Please Check Below
      1. ☐ Chinese
      2. ☐ Japanese
      3. ☐ Korean
      4. ☐ Vietnamese
      5. ☐ Thai
      6. ☐ Other
      7. ☐ American Indian
      8. ☐ Other (please specify)
  - d. How many years of formal education have you completed?
    - i. ☐ Did not complete high school
    - ii. ☐ Completed high school
    - iii. ☐ Some college
    - iv. ☐ College degree
    - v. ☐ Masters' degree or equivalent
    - vi. ☐ Ph.D., M.D., or J.D.
  - e. Family
    - i. Do you have any children?
    - ii. What is your current relationship status?
      1. Married
      2. Separated
      3. Divorced
      4. Single, Never Married
      5. Intimate Partnered Relationship
      6. Widowed
  - f. Sexual orientation (if they are willing to provide it)
  - g. Occupation/job prior to incarceration

## THE BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER INCARCERATION EXPERIENCE

2. Think back on your life, prior to ever being incarcerated. How was it?
  - a. What was your occupation?
  - b. Where you married? Any children?
  - c. How were you as a person/man? [i.e. what was your behavior like? How masculine did you see yourself at that time?]
3. I want to talk a little about your current incarceration status.
  - a. Was this your first incarceration experience? If not, how many times have you been incarcerated?
  - b. When was the first time you were ever incarcerated, if more than once? [Year only]
  - c. Overall, how much time do you estimate you spent incarcerated?
4. Thinking back how was the transition into prison?
  - a. During your time incarcerated, to what extent did you ever feel like you had to change your behavior, from who you were before you went in, in order to survive the experience?
    - i. Why do you feel that you did/not have to do anything differently?
  - b. Reflecting on the experience, is there anything that you would do differently?
    - i. Why or why not?
5. Thinking about your life prior to incarceration and, now, after incarceration, to what extent do you think that experience has had an impact on who you are and your behavior/masculinity now?
  - a. In what ways have you found that you have changed your behavior/masculinity since being released, if in any way?
    - i. To what extent did you face difficulties when transitioning your behavior after your release, if any?
  - b. Are there aspects of your behavior/masculinity that have or have not changed, that you would have preferred to change or not change?
6. If you wouldn't mind, would you tell me a little about your life currently, after incarceration, and how you see your future?
7. So, I want to understand what the concept of "Masculinity" means to you. How would you define it?
  - a. Has that always been the way that you defined it? If not, how did you define it at other times?
  - b. To what extent do you see yourself as fitting into that definition currently?
  - c. What does it mean to be masculine during incarceration?
    - i. To what extent is it similar/different, as you see it, to masculinity outside of prison?
  - d. What parts of the incarceration experience, made it easier/more difficult to maintain/enhance your masculinity?

## EXPERIENCE WITH SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION AND PROTECTIVE MEASURES: THE PREA

The next few questions may be somewhat sensitive areas to you, so please don't feel pressured by any means to answer them, but it would greatly help me in understanding how people deal with such matters.

8. I would like to discuss the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003 with you?
  - a. How much do you know about the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003?
  - b. Have you had any experience with the PREA that you know of?
  - c. What does it mean to you?
  - d. [If they don't know much about it, I will give them a brief summary of it and what it encompasses.]
9. So, humor me for a minute and let's think about the ways the PREA, that's what we'll call it for short, let's think about how you see it affecting your life if you were currently an inmate.
  - a. Let's say you were classified by the PREA, which category do you think you would be placed in? [i.e. potential sexual predator or potential victim]
    - i. Why?
    - ii. Do you believe it is based on your physical traits?
    - iii. Do you believe it would be based on your past behavioral characteristics?
    - iv. Do you believe it would be based on the crime(s) you were charged with?
  - b. How do you think this classification would affect your incarceration experience, if at all?
    - i. [If potential victim] – Do you think it would affect your risk of victimization?
      1. How so?
      2. Why is that?
    - ii. [If potential predator] – Do you think this would have an effect on your risk of offending?
      1. How so?
      2. Why is that?
    - iii. Would you change your behavior in anyway because of your classification?
      1. [If so] – What would you do differently?
      2. Why or why not [if no change at all]?
  - c. Okay, let's say you were placed in the other category, what would change about your incarceration experience, if anything at all?
    - i. Do you think this would affect your risk of victimization?
      1. How so?
      2. Why is that?
    - ii. Do you think it would affect your risk of offending?
      1. How so?
      2. Why is that?
    - iii. Would you change your behavior in anyway because of this classification?
      1. [If so] – What would you do differently?
      2. Why or why not [if no change at all]?

- d. Do you feel the need to reject either label or one more than the other?
    - i. Why or why not?
    - ii. Which one?
  - e. Let's think about people incarcerated right now, based on your experience what types of people, do you believe would be classified as at risk of victimization? What typed would be classified as potential sexual predators to other inmates?
10. There is not a lot of research in this area and what I am doing is very exploratory. I am hoping I am asking the right questions, but since I have not been incarcerated, you should know better than I know. So I want to ask you, what other kinds of things should I be asking?
- a. Many researchers that conduct research that requires interaction with other people understand that we sometimes have an effect on the people that we interview; sometimes putting them at ease, other times making them uncomfortable. Doing so, sometimes may hinder the revelation of rich data and take away from the experience. So, we sometimes ask the people we talk with if there were things that we could do better to improve the interview experience. With that being said, I wanted to ask if you would share how comfortable in general did you feel discussing these issues with me?
  - b. Would you feel more comfortable talking to another interviewer (age, race, and gender)? Why?

## **APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT**

You are invited to participate in a study on incarceration experiences. The study is being conducted by me, Le'Brian Patrick, a graduate student, in the Department of Sociology, at Louisiana State University. The purpose of this research is to explore the process of changing behavior while incarcerated and after released and things that may affect this process.

If you decide to participate in the study, I would like to talk with you about your feelings about your experience and the things that may have had any influence on your choices.

The interview is planned to last for approximately between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded. You are free to stop the interview, refuse to answer particular questions, and/or cease participation in the study at any time.

This study is completely anonymous. The following steps will be taken to protect all participants and ensure anonymity: a) Names in the transcripts of the audiotapes will be replaced by pseudonyms and questionnaires will include pseudonyms as identifiers, b) all audio recordings will be erased immediately following transcription of the interview and after the transcription have been checked for errors.

This study involves answering questions dealing with your thoughts and feelings your life prior to, during, and after incarceration. Because of the sensitivity of similar subject matter of some subject matter (i.e., the act of and/or victimization from sexual assault), the researcher will not pressure participants to answer any question that he is uncomfortable with answering. However, participants are encouraged to provide as much detail as possible to ensure that the researcher understands their viewpoint, so the researcher has prepared himself for personal revelations, if they arise. Participants are unlikely to experience any major direct benefit or harm. It is important that you understand that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to answer any question that you do not wish to answer.

By stating that you do understand indicates that you have decided to participate in this study and will act as the informed consent. Your decision as to whether or not to participate will not prejudice your relations with the researcher, or the Department of Sociology, Louisiana State University. If you decide to participate, you are completely free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without any penalty.

Do you understand the prior statements?

Do you have any questions before we proceed?

If you have any additional questions, please contact Le'Brian Patrick, Department of Sociology, 126 Stubbs Hall, 225/578-1792 or at [lpatri2@tigers.lsu.edu](mailto:lpatri2@tigers.lsu.edu). Questions and concerns about the research participants' rights can be directed to the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board office 131 David Boyd Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803.

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