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Ruth Fuller
Clark University

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Cover Page Footnote
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Aren't You Scared Of Us? Expression of Healthy Masculinity in Men's Prison

Ruth Fuller

ABSTRACT

After hegemonic masculinity theory became the dominant paradigm for studying masculinities in the social sciences in the 1990s, it was swiftly applied to criminological research. In the decades since, studies of prison masculinities have emphasized the role of prison as an incubator of hypermasculinity. Incarcerated men are subsequently implicated as the unwilling victims of the spatial and social restrictions that characterize prisons as "total institutions" (Goffman 1961). Operating under this premise, research on prison masculinities have documented a culture driven by hypermasculine ideals, particularly the use of violence to obtain status among inmates. While these perspectives have been illuminating, I argue that the overemphasis on hypermasculinity in the prison context has dehumanized incarcerated men by failing to recognize the ways they resist the "prison code" and create positive meaning for themselves as men. In an effort to diversify the literature on incarcerated men, this paper outlines some of the alternate ways that inmates engage in identity-forming practices outside of the conventional masculine scripts. I draws upon three different aspects of prison life—personal health and fitness, educational programming, and wellness programming—to challenge to the one-dimensional view of prison masculinity that has dominated the literature.

When the first student enters the math classroom on Wednesday morning at MCI Shirley, a medium-security prison in central Massachusetts where I volunteer, he greets me with a smile. "Did you have a good Thanksgiving?" I ask, and after a moment of silence, he and I chuckle at the idea of enjoying a holiday in prison, sharing the dark humor I've become comfortable using with the men here. Later in class, a student offers to grab a pencil for me at the front of the room after noticing I've been working without one. When the correctional officer shouts "Movement!" in the hallway at the end of class, AJ, the student I've been working with for the last two hours, looks up at me with his characteristic shyness and thanks me for my help today: "I'll see you next week, Ruth."

Naturally, I cannot help but wonder how the life trajectories of these kind, gentle men have landed them here. But even more so, I try and fail to imagine their humorous, curious, and warm personalities operating in conjunction with the infamous "prison code" I have read so much about. One possibility is that they are exactly the type of men the correctional officer who led my prison orientation described: master manipulators and predators attending class for the sole purpose of acquiring "good time" to reduce their sentences – all their smiling and kind gestures a test of my naivety. This possibility is supported by the vast literature on incarcerated men, which describes structures of inequality that create hardened, hypermasculine, and emotionally stunted individuals. Another possibility, however, is that my instincts are not as naïve as they seem; these men are emotional and complex humans, many of whom did bad things and have had very bad things happen to them. They are men who are grateful to be treated as an equal by me, an unpaid college student who wears a green T-shirt that reads TUTOR across the back.

This paper seeks to complicate assumptions that underlay the work of scholars and activists who study masculinity in the criminal justice system. In doing so, I hope to expand our conception of how masculinity operates, moving beyond its destructive elements to create a fuller picture of how men in prison create positive

meaning for themselves.

Literature Review

In the last three decades, the study of masculinities has transformed tremendously and has had profound impacts on the way prison life is studied. In the 1980s, R.W. Connell's conception of hegemonic masculinity broke ground in the study of gender because it problematized previous understandings of masculinity as an object, instead designating it as a process or practice.[1] Connell defined hegemonic masculinity as the dominant style of masculinity in any particular social order, that which "embodies the 'currently accepted' strategy" of doing masculinity.[2] Another defining feature of hegemonic masculinity is that it functions to uphold the "legitimacy of patriarchal power," that is, the subordination of women.[3] However, very few men embody hegemonic masculinity completely. Rather, it is the "normative" style of masculinity, rewarded by society. Connell's paradigm opened up the possibility of the existence of multiple masculinities (and femininities) within hierarchical relationships. In the decades since Connell first published her theory, a number of critiques have emerged. Still, hegemonic masculinity remains an influential framework in the sociology of gender.

The Prison Code

Research on men in prison tends to emphasize the ways inmates navigate the "prison code." This concept refers to the rules that govern social interactions between inmates. It is not codified by any legally enforceable rules, rather it exists as a set of unspoken cultural norms shared by inmates. Hegemonic masculinity theory is particularly useful in understanding how the prison code is upheld and reinforced. It is theorized that social status is allocated based on how closely an individual resembles the hegemonic ideal.[4] In other words, the gendered social dynamics present in the outside world can also be found in prison, often in exaggerated form. Thus, dominant prison masculinities are simply the most extreme version of those traits rewarded on the "outside." For instance, virtually all expressions of emotion outside of anger are socially off-limits.[5] Status is also given to men who are willing to use violence to get what they want. A willingness to manipulate, deceive, or employ physical violence to obtain resources is particularly important in a setting where such resources are limited.[6]

The prison code complements a rigid inmate hierarchy. Those who navigate it successfully gain standing. These inmates resemble the hegemonic ideal more closely than lower-ranked ones. They tend to possess more resources and enjoy a higher standard of living.[7] Most importantly, they are willing to use violence against other inmates to assert power and extract resources. But not all violence is rewarded equally in prison. Acting out "for violence's sake" is not as highly rewarded as "moralistic violence," or the use of violence to "express grievances, settle disputes, and protect oneself."[8]

At the bottom of the inmate hierarchy are marginalized and stigmatized prisoners. Three distinct categories of these lower-status inmates are "snitches," "bitches," and "punks." Although the terminology can vary geographically, this derogatory language is reflected in much of the literature on inmate hierarchy.[9] "Snitches" are inmates who cooperate with prison authorities, serving as informants against other inmates. Snitching is one of the most dangerous transgressions of the prison code because loyalty is valued highly in prison culture.[10] In the context of prison rape, inmates would often rather be sent to solitary confinement than tell an authority who raped them, because doing so would trigger retaliation from other inmates. Furthermore, Kupers finds that correctional officers use the inmate hierarchy to their advantage by employing it as a tool of social control: they may threaten to inform other inmates about a rape if the victim is not compliant with the officer's demands.[11]

"Bitches" are inmates who are regarded as too feminine, which is often conflated with homosexuality. Bitches may or may not actually identify as gay, but share the inability to "hold their own" in the prison setting.[12] Finally, "punks" are inmates who are exploited (oftentimes sexually) by other inmates. Nandi eloquently summarizes the function of this hierarchy in terms of masculinity: "Through social relations in which dominant prisoners hold extreme amounts of power over and stand in stark contrast to 'weaker' prisoners, many males create alternative definitions that help them conceive of themselves as men."[13]

It is important to note that the characteristics of bottom-level inmates are "defined in terms of the feminine."[14] This reflects an important element of hegemonic masculinity: that it is a mechanism of gender inequality.[15] Holmberg's study of initiation rituals in a men's prison exemplify this dynamic. He observes that upon entry into the prison, inmates promptly classify each other as either "dominant or submissive" and treat each other accordingly.[16] Similarly, Sabo describes the hard/soft dichotomy that pervades prison culture, in which the "hardest" bodies (the largest and most muscular) and most emotionally stoic inmates receive the

highest respect.[17]

The most extreme example of patriarchal violence in correctional institutions is prison rape, which has been extensively studied. The language of prison rape is particularly telling. The rapist assumes the role of "man," "master," or "victor," while the victim is regarded as the "girl," "slave," or "vanquished."[18] The victim of rape is feminized in the eyes of his peers because he is acted upon against his will and thus relinquishes his autonomy. Sabo explains that,[19]

> Men's efforts to weave webs of domination through rape and physical intimidation *in prison* also reflect and reproduce men's domination of women in the social world beyond the walls. In the muscled, violent, and tattooed world of prison rape, woman is symbolically ever present… the prison phrase "make a woman out of you" means that you will be raped. Rape-based relationships between prisoners are often described as relationships between "men" and "girls."

The emphasis on rape in literature on prison masculinities is warranted, considering that 1 in 5 male inmates in the United States have experienced rape.[20] Still, it is worth interrogating why this particular expression of violence is so prevalent in the study of inmate hierarchy.

Prison as a Total Institution

The prison as an oppressive social structure is also important in the study of prison masculinities. Gendered practices are influenced by structural constraints and in prison, "the constraints are stark and identifiable."[21] Erving Goffman's concept of the "total institution" is useful in understanding the emasculating effects of prison life.[22] In a total institution, there is a "governing body" (administrators and correctional officers) who dictate the fate of prisoners on a day-to-day basis. The rules and regulations of the institution are predetermined and strictly enforced. All aspects of the inmate's life are confined to a small, public space wherein all his actions are monitored. In contrast to this confining environment, hegemonic masculinity emphasizes the importance of self-determination, control, and independence. The tension between hegemonic masculinity and the restrictions of prison as a total institution gives rise to the rigid hierarchy among inmates. Riccardelli and Spencer write: "Cultural ideals associated with hegemonic masculinity are intensified in the prison context which 'places a premium on normative presentations of masculinity.'"[23]

Contentions

I contend that the singular focus on hegemonic masculinity in the study of prison masculinities has reified the assumption that all men in prison are either dangerously hyper-masculine or helplessly victimized. Based on this literature, one may conclude that incarcerated men *only* express themselves according to these rigid scripts. Furthermore, analysis of prison as a total institution has been taken to mean that imprisoned men are incapable of any self-determination or resistance to the forces of prison life. Other theorists have had similar contentions. In his broad theoretical critique of hegemonic masculinity theory, Eric Anderson argues that it is possible for multiple masculinity types to exist in harmony without inequality.[24] He notes that multiple masculinities theory, from which hegemonic masculinity emerges, tends to prescribe "perpetual patriarchy" on society, leaving no space for alternative masculinity—which may be healthy, inclusive, and positive— to emerge.[25] While his critique may be more optimistic than is warranted, Anderson draws attention to the fatalistic tendencies of social theory.

Similarly, Liam Kennedy contends that "all too often… masculinity (especially hegemonic masculinity) has been used in the singular and typically defined by listing off a series of purportedly manly traits."[26] The traits that end up being highlighted—at the expense of others—are those which are "socially destructive."[27] By exaggerating destructive masculinity, the literature on men in prison has overlooked "the dynamic, complex, and potentially positive nature of masculine identity and performance in prisons."[28] This more nuanced approach reveals that inmates do, in fact, use what little agency they retain in prison for positive, self-affirming purposes.

This paper is intended to add to the nascent literature on non-destructive masculine identity development and performance in prison. I will examine three arenas in which positive masculine identity emerges in prison. First, I will look at sports and fitness as sites of self-care. Second, I will examine the ways that prison education programs lead incarcerated men toward self-efficacy and positive modes of self-expression. Finally, I will explore innovative, rehabilitation-oriented prison programs as sites of vulnerability, healing, and comradery.

Sports, Fitness, and Health

Sports and fitness are an important part of prison life for incarcerated men. All U.S. male prisons have some form of an indoor gym with exercise equipment as well as a "yard" where men can run and play sports

like basketball.[29] These spaces hold both practical and symbolic meaning. They exist as areas for men to stay healthy as well as to build physical strength, which may be required to protect and assert themselves in prison. Nandi writes that for men, particularly Black men, "bodies frequently act as representations of power and domination."[30] Muscularity in particular has long been regarded as "*the* sign of masculinity."[31] In this context, physical fitness becomes equated with physical violence. Yet this view positions the physically fit male body as a purely negative symbol with destructive connotations. Of course, there are men who use sports and fitness in prison to emulate the "hard" masculine image. But, as Sabo contends, the relationship of prisoners to their bodies is not so "simple or one-sided."[32]

In the prison context, in which inmates have so much of their identity stripped away, the small ways that they do engage in self-expression become especially important. The physical body is the primary "zone of sovereignty" for incarcerated men.[33] Other ways that they might express themselves, such as through fashion, are barred by prison authorities. A regimented fitness routine can offer a small remedy to the overwhelming loss of control and freedom of movement that prison life necessitates. As inmates in a total institution, incarcerated men find their physical movement restricted, their schedules predetermined, and their requests met by the whim of correctional officers. This environment is damaging to the conventionally masculine script, where self-regulation, autonomy, and self-efficacy are highly valued.[34] Thus, the maintenance of one's own physical health offers inmates a haven of control and some semblance of a masculine identity.

Men also engage in fitness regimes for their health benefits. In doing so, they actively resist the conventional script of masculinity. Collecting inmate testimonies of health issues they face in prison, Courtenay and Sabo found that health is antithetical to most aspects of prison life.[35] The unappetizing food supplied to inmates offers few nutritional choices and very few (if any) fresh fruits or vegetables. Food is often prepared incorrectly or is served after it has spoiled. Only the limited number of inmates with financial resources can access dietary supplements through the commissary. The physical environment of prison is unhealthy as well: there is constant noise, cigarette smoke, and extremely cramped living quarters. In this context, "the pursuit of sports and fitness activity is a personal quest to create a healthy body in an unhealthy environment."[36] Inmates who care for their bodies are engaging in conventionally non-masculine practices. Courtenay and Sabo explain that "if men in prison are to adopt preventive health measures, they must embrace social practices that have been in some ways culturally constructed as 'feminine.'"[37] While women tend to learn bodily self-care during adolescence, the socialization of boys puts far less emphasis on these skills. Adult men then often rely on the women in their lives to track their health. The prioritization of fitness and nutrition as a goal is a rejection of these gendered scripts that govern cultural notions of wellness.

Prison Education

Prison education programs have become a major topic of interest in the past decade. Prison education research has emphasized the potential for educational programs to decrease recidivism rates and, in turn, reduce the financial burden of incarceration on state and federal governments.[38] However, prison education serves other purposes. It allows inmates to expand their identities beyond those which are forced upon them as prisoners. In the process, they realize alternative ways to achieve important aspects of manhood -- pride, self-respect, and perseverance -- through productive means.

Committed engagement with academic programs in prison allows inmates to experience success and accomplishment. This is especially important because these men tend to enter prison with negative experiences in formal school settings. For example, Black and Latino men are overrepresented in the American prison population; they are also overrepresented in high-school dropout, suspension, and school expulsion rates. Thus, it is unsurprising that the male prison population has far lower rates of educational attainment than the general U.S. population: about one-third of people in state prisons have never finished high school.[39] Inevitably, inmates with low educational attainment consider themselves unintelligent, unsuccessful, and incapable. In fact, boys who have been failed by the education system often turn to criminal behavior as an alternative source to feel pride in their accomplishments and abilities.[40] Furthermore, the depersonalizing nature of prison forces men to take on the "master status" of "prisoner" and view this as the entirety of their identity which is extremely emasculating.[41]

A successful prison education program is an opportunity for inmates to acquire positive experiences with the learning process and unlearn their negative self-perception. Thus, the classroom is the site of a "re-identification process" where inmates "undertake the work of remaking themselves and their understanding of the world around them."[42] In one survey of inmate attitudes toward education at the Kentucky State Reformatory, 49% of inmates enrolled in academic

programs cited increased self-esteem as their main motivation for attending the program.[43] This finding demonstrates that inmates intentionally seek out education as a means of redefining their own identities.

Daniel Karpowitz highlights the "self-affirming" power of college-in-prison programs. Reflecting on the Bard Prison Initiative, a program that gives inmates access to college-level courses offered by Bard College, Karpowitz notes that to be admitted into such a program often represents "the first time an institution of some prestige, of some significant social capital, and with an exceptionally high self-regard, has said that it sees itself, and its future, in [the inmate]."[44] Furthermore, the juxtaposition of a prestigious institution like Bard College with the punitive prison environment makes incarcerated men feel more able to "transcend the poverty and indignity of their experiences."[45] The classroom itself provides a nurturing haven within the hard prison environment, an "alternative site" for men to negotiate their masculine identities.[46]

There are many ways that the positive impact of education in prison is linked to the inmate's masculine identity. The ability to persevere despite obstacles and have pride in one's accomplishments is a positive and valued ideal of manhood.[47] One incarcerated student in a California state prison exemplifies the relationship between these ideals and his prison education, saying, "I chose as a grown man to sell dope… If I wait for someone to give me [something else] to do, I'm going to be here forever. I have to go within myself and say it's time to *start being a man*. I take it upon myself" (emphasis added).[48] Karpowitz similarly argues that self-discipline and rigor, which are valued masculine traits, can be achieved by wrestling with unfamiliar and difficult material in the classroom.[49] The prison classroom therefore exists as a site for men to expand their identities. Through the process of learning, incarcerated men come to view themselves as more positive, productive, and capable members of society.

Inmate Wellness Programs

The focal point of prison literature has been the various ways inmates use manipulation and physical violence to assert their status. Highlighting these dynamics, the prison has been portrayed as a place devoid of all intimacy, friendship, or mutual respect. After all, if men in prison are preoccupied with their own survival, how could any energy be spent fostering healthy interpersonal relationships? The popular emphasis on past trauma and pathologies of imprisoned men fuels the perception that they are incapable of healthy relationships with each other. The idea of inmates experiencing comradery in prison goes against the tenets of hypermasculinity that theorists have established—individualism, self-preservation, and a disdain for emotional vulnerability. Yet contrary to this popular framing, there exist formal and informal networks through which men have formed intimate bonds of mutual support in prison. I will outline a few established programs which have served the dual purpose of encouraging comradery and providing space for emotional vulnerability.

The Prison Council Project

The Prison Council Project (PCP) was developed by inmates at the Shawangunk Correctional Facility, a maximum-security state prison in New York. From the outset, its founders sought to address the prison as a place where men were spiritually degraded. One of its founders speaks of the prison experience as "an assault upon the soul."[50] The spiritual basis of the PCP's vision is significant because it demonstrates that inmates are capable of introspection, contradicting the popular assumption that imprisoned men are emotionally stunted.

The PCP functions as a bi-monthly two-hour meeting of twelve inmates. Its meetings are discussion-based: men sit in a circle and take turns speaking, listening, and responding to each other. All members must speak at least once before responses begin. The structure of the group is intentionally non-hierarchical and its guidelines regarding speech and participation emphasize group consciousness and inclusion. Members place particular emphasis on establishing the space as safe and supportive. To this end, a "code of honor" is established at the outset of each meeting, committing each participant to "confidentiality and mutual respect."[51] Then, the group members sit in silence for several minutes to "quiet the mind." The meetings end with a similar call for mindfulness. Bonner and Breiman write[52]

> When our sessions come to a close, we stand together in a circle and join hands. We express final thoughts, visions, hopes, and prayers, and we become silent one last time. We imagine the energy among us going out to other inmates in the facility and beyond the walls into the world. As we part, we know that we will carry each other in our hearts until we meet again.

The creation of an all-male space where mutual respect is valued runs contrary to the conventional perception of prison life. The conduct of the men in the PCP breaks the "rules" of hegemonic masculinity — PCP members are sentimental, emotionally vulnerable, group-minded, and generous. The Prison Council Program exemplifies that it is possible to carve out spaces inside prisons

where these conventionally non-masculine qualities are rewarded.

Prison Hospice Programs

Prison hospices are another site of emotional vulnerability and comradery for imprisoned men. Prisons are required by law to provide end of life care to dying inmates and some allow inmates to volunteer their time to care for hospice patients. The close proximity to grief within these programs means that inmate-volunteers experience and cope with complex emotions. The emotionally taxing nature of hospice work also encourages comradery between volunteers.

Many inmates elect to take this position— which requires a hefty amount of training and is one of the lowest-paid — because they themselves have experienced the death of a loved one. Oftentimes, inmates' past experiences with death are traumatic, having occurred in childhood, out of violence, or even at their own hands.[53] Other workers seek out caregiving work as a means of personal redemption. One worker who serves as the hospice barber confesses, "I've done a lot of bad things in the past, and I feel like I can do some good to try and make it right with him. It's the Christian thing to do."[54] The willingness to turn their negative experiences into productive caregiving speaks to imprisoned men's capacity for remorse and redemption.

Contrary to the conventional masculine script that men don't cry, hospice workers often weep over the loss of their patients. Says one worker: "One time, I mean I felt like if you cry too, it's weak. You know, men don't cry. But as I begin in this program, it make no difference who see me cry."[55] Interactions between inmate-workers and inmate-patients are carried out with generosity, gentleness, and physical touch. Some of the common tasks for workers include dressing and bathing the patients, brushing their teeth, massaging their bodies, and reading books aloud to the them.[56] In an environment where homophobia is said to permeate every aspect of life, the inmates who work in the prison hospice complicate this narrative by using touch to communicate their care. In fact, the prison hospice is a site where virtually all of the rigid hyper-masculine norms presumably built into prison life are rendered almost invisible. Jaouad describes scenes of gentle expressions of love: a worker sits down next to a patient and holds him while he cries while another fidgets with the shower temperature to get it just right for his patient. Interactions like this force us to recognize that the prison code, despite its looming presence, does not govern all aspects of prison life, and inmates who choose to embrace the feminized traits of care and compassion are not always brutally punished.

Close relationships between inmates are often facilitated by the intimate nature of hospice work and serve as another challenge to the type of masculinity emphasized in most of the prison literature.[57] Inmate friendships are particularly valuable to those serving long sentences, according to Kennedy, because their loved ones have often died or been estranged over the course of the inmate's sentence. As a result, "fellow prisoners become your family."[58] In the hospice setting, where death is a constant reality, workers often cope with loss by reaching out to fellow inmate-workers.[59] They describe the comfort of always having a "shoulder to lean on" and people to seek out for advice.[60] Again, the language of comradery used when describing the hospice volunteer experience contradicts the prison masculinities literature. Of course, prison hospices represent a very small segment of prison life. Yet to dismiss the emotional vulnerability of hospice volunteers as simply a product of a unique environment is to deny the reality of their experiences and the validity of their actions.

Conclusion

With good intention, liberal reformers and researchers have sought to outline the horrors of prison life in gruesome detail. From accounts of a rigid hierarchy upheld by sexual exploitation to extreme acts of performative hardness, we have situated inmates as the living embodiment of all that is wrong with manhood and masculinity, even as we call for more humane prisons. Inmates become one-dimensional caricatures: broken, bad, and emotionally absent. This perspective, however well-intentioned, tends to put undue blame on inmates for our broken system of incarceration.

This is not to say that the horrors of prison are not real. Prison is undoubtedly a violent place, where inmates must utilize limited resources to survive their sentence. Still, much of the literature has failed to capture the full humanity, agency, and potential of men behind bars. As curious as we are about the mechanics of the prison code, we must be equally curious about the ways that men resist that code and the violence it necessitates. This reframing opens up new areas of study in the sociology of masculinities and prison life. Through this lens, men's care for their health becomes a radical resistance to the prison as a site of degradation. Men engaged in educational programs experience pride and an increased sense of self-respect due to their accomplishments. Spaces of spiritual and emotional vulnerability emerge, which we have neglected to examine. We must explore these places, encourage their growth, and support the men who dare to create them inside the prison walls.

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53. Suleika Jaouad, "The Prisoners Who Care for the Dying Get Another Chance at Life," *The New York Times*, May 16, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/05/16/magazine/health-issue-convicted-prisoners-becoming-caregivers.html; Katherine P. Supiano, Kristin G. Cloyes, and Patricia H. Berry, "The Grief Experience of Prison Inmate Hospice Volunteer Caregivers," *Journal of Social Work in End-of-Life & Palliative Care* 10, (2014): 80–94.

54. Jaouad, "The Prisoners Who Care for the Dying Get Another Chance at Life."

55. Supiano et al., "The Grief Experience of Prison Inmate Hospice Volunteer Caregivers," 89.

56. Jaouad, "The Prisoners Who Care for the Dying Get Another Chance at Life."57. Kennedy "'He Must Learn What Being a Man is All About.'"

58. Ibid.,158.

59. Supiano et al., "The Grief Experience of Prison Inmate Hospice Volunteer Caregivers."

60. Ibid., 90.

Author Biography

Ruth Fuller '20 is a Sociology major with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. She has a broad array of academic interests including criminal justice reform, historical and contemporary feminist movements, and the sociology and politics of gender in everyday life. She believes that humanizing incarcerated individuals is an essential component of ending mass incarceration. Ruth is exploring careers in social work and community organizing. She would also like to be a librarian one day. In her free time Ruth enjoys learning the definitions of new words, listening to NPR, and conversing with strangers.

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