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## Recommended Citation

Baird, Irene C. (2004). "Rattling the Cage: Incarcerated Men, Gender and the Construction of Maleness," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2004/papers/8>

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# Rattling the Cage: Incarcerated Men, Gender and the Construction of Maleness

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... men ... [were] never taught to **be** men ... [were] taught what men **do** ...  
and if you don't **do** enough ... the right way ... you feel worthless ... unvalued  
... you get angry and afraid ... [you] break out into all sorts of harmful actions.

Iyanla Vanzant, *Up From Here*, p. 4

**Abstract:** This excerpt from Vanzant speaks to the purpose of this research with incarcerated males. Succinctly, the issue—Vanzant's "harmful actions"/male criminal activity—is an age-old one with punishment as the antidote. This study, alternatively, chose to look at the issue from a learning perspective: men's learning, outside of the academy, to gain insights into themselves, their **being** as men, and to take ownership for "rerighting" themselves (their words), with literature serving as the medium.

## Introduction

The United States holds the dubious distinction of having the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world. The majority of the inmates are male and they typically commit crimes of violence (Messerschmidt, 1993; Newman, Lewis & Beverstock, 1993). They are housed within an industry that continues to expand, with corrections policy currently from a punitive rather than rehabilitative orientation. The system and the men, themselves, have long been conditioned to a socially-defined and constructed male model: what and how he "does"/acts. Given the magnitude and seriousness of non-conforming activity, theories about the male "criminal type," beginning in 1911 with biological determinism. Others include self interest above the interest of others; crime as opposed to conforming-learned behavior; sex role theories such as men's aggression, control, and power issues. As with recidivism rates, some researchers compile and disseminate statistical profiles focusing on age, race, educational background and criminal history—an essentialist framework often with strong racial overtones. The missing link has been the failure to look beyond the limited and limiting focus, to explore not the *do* of men but rather what author Vanzant (2002) identifies as the *who* of men, their essence.

What it meant to *be* an incarcerated male was significant to this study. Since 1994, this researcher has facilitated Freirian/humanities-oriented programs for women in a county jail. The model (Baird, 1994, 1995, 1997) evolved from a pilot project conducted with homeless women; it drew on that aspect of the humanities that stresses examining, cognitively, personal identity, values and community involvement. Implemented since then in a jail setting, it has engaged women in reading and reflecting on the experiences of successful female authors of similar race, class and experience as a mechanism for understanding and addressing their own traumas. Subsequent narratives by the participants have served to acknowledge and try to resolve their personal dilemmas. Because of the success of this non-threatening, practical process, permission was granted to introduce a similar program for incarcerated males to afford them the opportunity to learn and understand the outcomes of acting out their socially-constructed sense of maleness.

## Theory

Theories based on Freirian praxis, socially-constructed gender roles, prison education, black feminist identity issues and the narrative process provided the framework for this study. Given the prison context, the Freirian lens (1996) was the most appropriate overarching

perspective through which to analyze the outcomes. As a learning issue, it supported the humanities aspect of exercising cognitive skills for exploring the self and one's relationship to the community. Its precise focus, however, was the matter of oppression. Its commitment to provide oppressed peasants with a process for humanization, empowerment and liberation parallels the situation and the learning model for the inmates in this study. Inherent was the acquisition of voice, of a vocabulary of the learners' words to identify and empower themselves.

Messerschmidt's studies (1993) focused on the gendered, social structure of society. From this perspective, he posited that race, class, age and the social situation determined behavioral constructs; that greater authority and control have been accorded men and from that privileged position social life has been arranged to their advantage. Messerschmidt added that emphasis on gendered power was basic to understanding that manly was the only way essential nature could be judged and explored as to why men engage in more crime; that from a race, class perspective it may be the only resource when others may be unavailable for accomplishing masculinity. To illustrate, he explained that white middle class boys have built-in home/school supports that "make some behavioral allowances" but diminish the potential for criminal activity; working class boys whose fathers have trades can look forward to following in their fathers' footsteps. Alternatively, low income and minority youth who lack deterrents and/or resources act out their masculinities through gang-associated criminal activity. It provides a structure because for them there is no other way in the social structure to "do gender." To further emphasize the socially-constructed, privileged male status, Stoltenberg (1980, 16,17)) in his study of male sexual identity, paraphrased some Aristotelian admonitions such as: a rigorous adherence to the set of behaviors, characteristics, and idiosyncracies that are appropriately male; an unquestioning belief in the restlessness of one's will and in the fact that, **being superior by social definition**, one can want whatever one wants and one can expect to get it. Soltenberg further added that "A 'he', being a he, can get away with murder, figuratively and sometimes even literally."

The concept and process for implementing this program was reinforced by the extensive Newman, Lewis and Beverstock (1993) study and its theory of education in prison. Newman, Lewis and Beverstock posited that inmates fail to consider that their thinking, behavior and attitudes contribute to the problems they experience. The researchers proposed, as effective program strands, the inclusion of moral reasoning, cognition and the humanities. They maintained that the inmates must expend their own efforts to identify and correct their criminal-thinking errors.

The process for effecting this kind of ownership was strongly supported by black feminist theory, especially the research of Hill Collins (1997, 253) who echoed the Freirian necessity for taking responsibility for identity formation and socialization for liberation. She asserts that the primary responsibility for defining one's reality lies with the people who live that reality, who actually have those experiences. hooks (1989, 43) parallels the Freirian theoretical lens: "Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects by shaping their identity, naming their history, telling 'their' story." The inclusion of narrative theory was also essential because stories tell us not only who we are but where we have been and where we can be (Rappaport, 1995). The "who we are" was significant for the inmates to distinguish the **being** from the **doing**.

### **Methodology**

Based on word-of-mouth recommendation from incarcerated women and from male counselors at a county jail, groups of men volunteered to participate in a program comparable to one for women facilitated there since 1994. The four annual ten-week segments were designed to use poetry and prose selections of authors of similar race, class and experience who succeeded in

overcoming their real-life crises. From a Freirian/humanities perspective, the intent was to engage the learners in reading, reflecting and discussing the experiences as a mechanism for acknowledging, understanding and addressing their own dilemmas. Subsequent narratives on themes relevant to each individual reinforced the process. The participants selected their writing for inclusion in a booklet of their naming; this accorded them a voice, a medium for sharing their realities that served as identity formation, esteem and empowerment building. **They "owned" the process and it was their truth that was being addressed.**

The men who volunteered for these 90 minute weekly sessions were between the ages of 21 and early 40s; two were 17. The majority were African-American; the remainder, Anglo-American and Latino. Because of lockdowns, shakedowns or personal issues, attendance varied: for the most part 8 to 20 men attended each session. From their other programs, they were accustomed to a psychological counseling and religious orientation. They faced two initial surprises: the Freirian orientation, with a cognitive emphasis for reading, reflecting on and addressing their realities, using their own words and perspectives; and a white, female adult educator who brought resources and facilitated the sessions but who directed the men to the reading and their discussions for resolution of questions. As Newman, Lewis and Beverstock (1993) recommended in their theories on prison education, the men were responsible for expending their own efforts to identify and correct their problems, or "rerighting" themselves.

At the beginning of each new session, the groups were introduced to author Iyanla Vanzant (1998) by way of an excerpt from a "tough-love" letter to her son in which she explained that we are all doing some kind of time; that each of us had to find the key for unlocking the cell that imprisons. Her book, *Up From Here*, was a successful complement to the program's model. It uses seven case studies of men struggling with all too familiar responsibility-required realities: denial resulting from unexpected/unwanted fatherhood; boredom and "escape" from marriage; destructive attitude/behavior at the workplace; uncontrollable anger, feelings of guilt and low self-esteem. According to Vanzant (2002), men are often terrorized by thoughts of failure because of their sense of maleness; as a result, they brutalize themselves and others. Supplemental materials were essays by Michael Eric Dyson (1999) on "Behind the Mask." His reading was accompanied by each man drawing a mask of himself, describing to the group how he saw himself and what he was hiding.

Interspersed between these activities were anonymously written exchanges between the men's and women's groups. They shared personal views on trust, commitment, responsibility to children, especially when different women were mothers and part of a man's "family." The men's writing, small group interviews, formative and summative evaluations were coded and analyzed for thematic constructs. Results were returned to the men for their clarification and correction. At the conclusion of each ten week session, the men received copies of the booklet containing their own writing and certificates of accomplishment, bearing the university's logo.

### **Findings**

The incarcerated men defined themselves from "behind the mask," through their life stories and written communication with incarcerated women. Consistently, at the beginning of each ten week segment, they displayed a strong male orientation as defined by society: in charge, fearless, risk-taker. When they defined a real man, they said, "head of house; someone who knows what a man is; someone who can father many children, satisfy many partners." When the focus was on a specific individual and his mask, the very young ones described themselves as: "I am intelligent and good looking; I am pretty cool as a man; a strong black man, short hair and nice and brown; I am a winner; first and foremost, headed towards success and nothing else; I'm

funny, easy to get along with and faithful out of this world." Their descriptions seemed unreflective, what Dyson (1999) referred to as fronting, profiling, posturing. Still another: "I am a Leo, got 6 kids, a down-to-earth person. I want what I want when I want it. Sometimes I can be hardheaded" . . . still doing his gender role.

Doing gender was also reflected in the life stories that often talked about early years and being taught what to do. For example, "My father introduced me to things that a father should stray his son from . . . I am 22 years old . . . I am not a thug or an angel but I live the way of thuggery as a result." Another wrote of needing another role model when his father died. A relative filled in by introducing him to alcohol and teaching him city survival skills. "He roughed me up to make me a man . . . to make a cub into a lion or bear . . . at age 13."

As part of his story, a black male wrote of being advised, at age 8, by a "regular" at his grandmother's speakeasy: 'young man . . . you gotta be your own man' . . . "confusion and a sense of not belonging were my childhood mentors." These masculinities, as defined by Messerschmidt (1993), especially in terms of race and class, were starting to be acted out at an early age. Part of the confusion was attributed to interaction in both the black and white communities, involving "talking black" or "talking white" as the occasion seemed to require. This led to a weakened sense of identity with which some were still wrestling.

When discussing crime, the male **do** definitely prevailed, what Messerschmidt (1993) attributed to "doing gender" when other resources were unavailable. This was affirmed by comments such as, "men commit crimes because they are taught to or are instructed that crime is their only option for success; men commit crimes so they won't be perceived as weak . . . to prove you are a man." These comments also confirmed Vanzant's contention that the acting out resulted from never being taught to **be** men.

Poet Jimmy Santiago Baca's autobiography dramatically illustrates the **being/doing** tension. He was deserted as a child, impoverished, illiterate and depending on his masculinity to survive . . . in and out of prison repeatedly. Transformation began by teaching himself to read, then to write poetry in the penitentiary. The defining moment between **doing** and **being** was the scene in which he was standing over an inmate he physically overcame and could have killed, thereby reinforcing his **do**-ability. Instead, reflecting on the **being** aspect, the human aspect of the opponent and of himself as a poet, he refrained. The men were visibly moved by this reading, reflecting that there is such a difficult line between exhibiting machismo for survival, that "always looking over your shoulder," and affirming the humaneness of the self and the other. These men talked and wrote different stories: the talk full of male, macho ego; the writing full of anger, fear, despair, vulnerability, loneliness . . . soft issues especially in exchanges with the women's groups. The critical revelation was that inmates believed in and accepted a deeply entrenched, societally-imposed gender role that inhibited, "diminished" those who would acknowledge their humaneness. As they said, "for a man it is hard to be or show how to be soft because it might be understood that man is not strong," confirming Messerschmidt that, with this acceptance, doing crime was their only resource when others are unavailable for accomplishing masculinity.

### Implications

For adult education, the implications are tremendous, the first being to rattle the cage of criminal [in] justice, the system "a national madness to which we are all connected," according to Baca (Evans, 2001, xi), "that absurdly expects prisoners to change for the better as we deep-freeze them in inhumane environments."

Given the entrenched gendered social structure that inmates assumed as permission "to act out as men," there is no predicting how long it will take for them to "reright" themselves. The escalation of violence and terror world-wide, the "need" to flex muscle, further exacerbates the gender role issue; therefore, we must rattle that cage also. This study did so, confirming Baca's contention (Evans, 2001, ix) that ". . . writing [becomes] a creative way for . . . prisoners to reenter society. Because society won't let them in, they [invite] society into their world . . . to have others acknowledge [their] existence and witness [their] life as a human being." Though the men in this study had difficulty with the **doing/being** concept, they requested more programs that humanize and empower; unprepared for community reentry, they fear, "Will I be able to face the world on its terms and not my own." They rattled their own cages, using writing to try to learn to become "meaningful human beings in a society that branded them as nothing more than worthless criminals (Evans, 2001, xii).

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The incarcerated males at Dauphin County Prison, Harrisburg, PA, USA, who volunteered and generously contributed stories of their lived experiences for this study.