

Cristopher Buckham
Wyoming Medium Correctional Facility
7076 Road 55F
Torrington, Wyoming 82240

Super-masculinity

The antisocial behaviors most feared by society in released prisoners include an inability to admit responsibility or concede defeat, a lack of remorse, selfishness, coldness, insensitivity, impulsivity, uncontrollable temper, an absence of negotiation skills, and, obviously, criminal thinking that leads to criminal behavior. The sad fact is that most prisoners learn and adopt these behaviors while incarcerated. And, these behaviors are often coupled with revengeful thinking due to intense anger directed at society and the criminal justice system for past incarceration and other perceived wrongs. The paradox is, however, that for the majority of prisoners such behavioral traits are absolutely essential to existence in the environment of prison. Put another way; without adopting these antisocial and destructive behavioral traits most prisoners would not survive prison.

The relation of masculinity and the prison environment begins with respect. Every person needs to feel respected, or at least have the impression that others are not out to actively disrespect them. For prisoners, the lack of respect begins even prior to prison. It begins when they are charged with a crime, when the state by accusing him of criminal behavior says "This man has committed a crime against our community and he is not one of us until proven innocent." It continues after conviction at sentencing when the judge declares that he is no longer a part of the community and he needs to be separated for a time. When he arrives at prison, he will be subjected to all manners of disrespect and degradation from prison officials. His opinions and feelings will mean nothing – less than nothing, in fact, because if he voices those sentiments he will be told that he doesn't matter. The process of accusation, trial, conviction, sentencing, and incarceration are extraordinarily dishonoring, disrespectful, and degrading experiences. And they are intended to be so.

Prisoners are powerless as the few decisions they are able to make are trivial because outcomes are highly choreographed by prison authorities. The state of being powerless goes hand in hand with the feeling of worthlessness. When prisoners are humiliated, degraded, and disrespected they are told, both explicitly and implicitly, that they are the scum of the earth, that they are not wanted and they are not worthy of remaining in civilized society. These feelings

often create an intense internal pressure within each prisoner to be respected, to be valued, and – most importantly – to put a stop to the degradation they are being subjected to.

When a prisoner first gets to prison and begins to get settled in he looks everywhere for some form of respect, some way to re-build his self-esteem, his pride, and his confidence. He won't get that needed affirmation from prison officials – ever – and it is very likely he won't get it from friends or family or anyone else in his community. The one place where he can get it, though, is from other prisoners. The need to be respected is not, in general, an unhealthy feeling. It becomes unhealthy when the need for respect must be gained by force, coercion, or pretense – or as psychologists and sociologists call it “aggressive masculinity.”

There are various ways that aggressive masculinity has been described in the prison context and similar areas. For example:

- D.L. Mosher describes it as hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity with characteristics such as aggression, the need for control and authority, the capacity for violence, and the need to dominate women. Interestingly, Mosher's studies found that people with little means and resources display higher levels of hypermasculinity to compensate for the lack of capital. This finding is especially true among prisoners who are deprived of all meaningful possessions, privacy, and autonomy.
- UCLA professor Sharon Dolovich calls it hypermasculinity.
- R.W. Connell calls it hegemonic masculinity consisting of domination of women and a hierarchy of inter-male dominance.
- Yevone Jewkes writes that “[a]lthough various types of masculinity are adopted to counter some aspects of marginalization (scholar, skilled tradesman, and expert in legal matters and prisoners' rights are common examples), an extreme construction of masculinity as an identity position is the most universal response to the imperative to conform to the lower working-class that dominate prison culture . . .” (61).
- J.T. Gibbs and J.R. Merighi found that hypermasculinity is employed in order to minimize or counter impressions of marginality among minority males.
- David Karp argues that in “American culture, hegemonic masculinity is characterized by authority, control, independence, heterosexuality, aggressiveness, and a capacity for violence” (65).

One of the best descriptions of this phenomenon comes from renowned psychologist Terry A. Kupers. He writes that the

[u]nfortunate male proclivities associated with toxic masculinity include extreme competition and greed, insensitivity to or lack of consideration of the experiences and feelings of others, a strong need to dominate and control others, an incapacity to nurture, a dread of dependency, a readiness to resort to violence, and the stigmatization and subjugation of women, gays, and men who exhibit feminine characteristics.” (“Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison” 717)

I term this phenomenon super-masculinity and its adoption by prisoners is essential to their survival.

Super-masculinity is represented in what has been widely termed the “prison code.” It is the unwritten code of how prisoners should conduct themselves in prison in order to be considered a man and comrade. Scholars have described the prison code as:

Suffer in silence. Never admit you are afraid. Do not snitch ... do not do anything that will make other prisoners think you are gay, effeminate, or a sissy. Act hard. Do not help the authorities in any way. Always be ready to fight, especially when your manhood is challenged. One way to avoid a fight is to look as though you are willing to fight. As a result, prisoners lift weights compulsively, adopt the meanest stare they can muster, and keep their fears and their pain carefully hidden beneath a well-rehearsed tough-guy posture. (Sabo 61)

The prison code *is* super-masculinity. Having these characteristics enables both strong and weak minded prisoners to survive their prison terms. In a typical male jail or prison, there exists an ever present prospect of violence that permeates every aspect of a prisoner’s daily existence. Prison rewards manliness and antisocial behaviors because displaying opposite behaviors is to be perceived as the opposite, weak and delicate; or prey. A prisoner must always carry himself as a man, he must “be hard and tough, and don’t show weakness” (Kupers, “Rape and the Prison Code” 106). A prisoner who fails to outwardly display super-masculine behaviors will be subject to all manner of indecency and he will be immediately labeled as a punk, soft, feminine, and most of all he will be labeled a target.

Nearly every violent incident in prison can be attributed to respect where a prisoner believes he is entitled to respect and did not receive it. Respect rules all in prison. M. Gerzon maintains that the need for respect is illustrated through masculine features such as outbursts of irrational anger, maintaining a tough-guy posture, and impulsively violent behavior. Without respect, a prisoner becomes a punk, or bitch, or some other degrading term with the accompanying characteristics. Entering prison, people are stripped of everything they have – liberty, property, communal esteem, privacy, and family ties – to the point where the only thing they have left to possess is their honor and pride. And, in prison, honor and pride are conclusively tied to respect. Without respect, a prisoner is nothing, a non-person in the minds of other prisoners and prison staff. The method most often used by prisoners to gain and maintain respect is to portray super-masculine characteristics. Kupers found that toxic masculinity tends to proliferate wildly in prison because the prison code is an extreme exaggeration of the unspoken male code on the outside. According to the code, a “real man” or a “stand-up con” does not display weakness of any kind, does not display emotions other than anger, does not depend on anyone, is never vulnerable, does not snitch, does not cooperate with the authorities, and suffers pain in silence (Kupers, “Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison” 718). This theme cannot be emphasized enough.

Being a punk in prison is quite likely a miserable existence. A punk will be verbally harassed, mocked, scorned, and treated less than human. He will have no friends – even prisoners form loose communities to create solidarity against other groups of prisoners and, collectively, against prison staff – which means he will be open to terror by any group as there will be no one to watch his back or turn to for support. He will likely have his personal property stolen. Nothing he has will be spared from thievery; not his food, hygiene necessities, nor even his blankets or mattress. The guards and prison administration will likely offer him no protection. I recall one prisoner who pushed the “panic” button in his cell and told the guard that he needed to be moved to a protective custody housing unit because his life was in danger. The guard told him “Not on my shift!” and he had to wait several days to be moved, all the while living in absolute terror. The punk prisoner may be able to receive a transfer to a different housing unit, maybe even protective custody, but for a punk there will always be someone to threaten him. And, it is quite likely he will be subjected to sexual assault.

The alternative to being a punk in prison is to carry oneself with super-masculine features, ready to fight at any time for any reason. In truth, it is generally irrelevant how well a prisoner can fight but instead it is the willingness to fight anyplace, anytime that gains the respect required from other prisoners and prison staff to avoid the punk label. This is not to say that all punks lack the ability to fight successfully; many a prisoner has had the humiliating experience of being beaten in hand-to-hand combat by a prisoner labeled as a punk. The point is that a prisoner who carries himself as one capable of violence, is remorseless, selfish, and has a reputation for refusing to back down will survive prison.

Super-masculinity also entails never showing fear. “Stand Tall, Do Right, Fear Nothing”¹ is the essence of hyper-masculinity. Always looking fear in the eye and never blinking. Being ready to do anything necessary at any time to protect one’s reputation, in addition to body and property, is the code of successful prisoners. Admitting fear does not happen among this crowd as to do so would put one at risk of receiving the punk label. Violence will be a fact of life as former prisoner Jack Henry Abbott wrote:

You accept violence, committing it to survive *morally* as well as biologically. You’re not a “psycho,” a killer. That doesn’t mean you won’t kill, you won’t do mind-boggling acts of violence. It is hard to bring yourself to these acts, but you take a deep breath, look intelligently at what you must do, and you do it even though you are scared stiff and sick to your stomach. (68) (emphasis in original)

What are the consequences of living day after day, year after year in a heightened state of super-masculinity? What toll does this take on the prisoner’s psyche? What toll do such characteristics play in reentry success or failure? How can society expect prisoners to return to their communities as caring, considerate, peaceable citizens when in order to survive prison, they must act insensitive, selfish, and disorderly? Abbott was correct; living this way will make you sick to your stomach.

The penalty for living in a state of super-masculinity day after day, year after year is psychological deterioration where the harmful effects only compounds. Derrick Corley reports that prisoners who have lived under these conditions over time experience serious difficulties

¹ I created the phrase “Stand Tall, Do Right, Fear Nothing” and once taught it as slogan for successful living to adherents of my former faith. I taught that by standing toe to toe with adversaries, by doing the right thing in all situations, and by fearing absolutely nothing that a man could thrive (as opposed to survive) in prison and elsewhere with his pride and honor intact.

maintaining meaningful interpersonal relationships after prison because without “trust or letting someone know at least some of your weaknesses, no strong bonds can develop” (64). Over time, maintaining super-masculine characteristics will impair a person’s ability to build and maintain healthy relationships with any person. Loneliness, solitude, and emotional isolation will take a toll on even the most hardened prisoner – but healthy and stable relationships are absolutely essential to living successfully and productively outside of prison. Corley poses the paradoxical question: “If it is true that healthy people have healthy relationships, and, if these relationships are systematically denied prisoners, then how can [prisoners] be expected to eventually live in society as normal, law-abiding productive people?” (107). The answer is that, given the current demands of prison living, they can’t.

Some prisoners need to display more masculine characteristics than others in order to survive. Prison hierarchy dictates which prisoners are given greater deference at the front gate. For example, prisoners who have committed crimes that are inherently considered “manly” such as murder – especially murder of law enforcement personnel – are widely considered to intrinsically possess super-masculine characteristics. In contrast, prisoners who have committed sexual crimes – especially sexual crimes against children – are widely considered to be at the very bottom of the prison hierarchal system and therefore need to show the highest amounts of super-masculine features. While most prisoners do, not all prisoners need to display such characteristics to avoid being labeled a punk. A few have served decades in prison without ever having to prove themselves and without being labeled a punk. Such an existence does not, however, diminish the threat of violence or the need to avoid being perceived as soft.

Another worrying consequence of maintaining super-masculine characteristics over time is that such behavior will become instinctual to the point of being irreversible. The reality of this possibility is exactly what opponents of prisoner rehabilitation point to when campaigning that the inbuilt atmosphere of prison prevents anyone from being rehabilitated. The sad truth is that such assertions are based in fact. While no scientific studies exist that link recidivism with specific super-masculine attributes learned and perfected in prison, it should be obvious that a person who lives constantly ready to engage in violence over every perceived or actual insult can only be integrated into American society with extreme difficulty, if at all. This is not to say that prisoners who have existed in prison displaying constant super-masculinity can never successfully reintegrate. Many ex-prisoners have been able to shed those debilitating features

and live normal, psychologically healthy lives outside of prison. But the fact remains that over 75% of all released prisoners will be re-incarcerated within five years (Durose, Cooper and Snyder).

No prisoner can avoid the threat of constant violence or emotional isolation. The psychological stress these two conditions inflict on prisoners is real and can be life-long. Incarceration in its current design does not promote successful rehabilitation. Prison conditions actually have the opposite effect which prohibits ex-prisoners from successful reintegration because the traits inherent with super-masculinity are wholly inconsistent with rehabilitation and reintegration. How can a society that claims to have a corrections ideal premised on reintegration after punishment knowingly allow such inhumane and psychologically damaging conditions to exist in its prisons knowing that such conditions will doom successful reentry for nearly all prisoners? The answer is that reintegration is not America's corrections policy but, rather, it is permanent exclusion.

The characteristics of super-masculinity are not unique to the prison environment as most any male-dominated atmosphere will likely have super-masculinity characteristics. A notable example includes the military. During basic training, drill instructors often characterize weakness as feminine with the insinuation being that people who are non-masculine – such as females and homosexuals – are weak physically, emotionally, and psychologically and therefore have no place in the military. Megan N. Schmid notes that “drill instructors at boot camp put down male recruits by feminizing them, calling them ‘pussies,’ ‘sissies,’ or ‘girls,’ to teach them that ‘to be degraded is to be female’” (492). Other institutions where super-masculinity is present include fraternities where the domination and degradation of women and people with feminine characteristics is expected (Bleeker and Murnen). Wall Street has also been found to be a masculine dominated environment where machismo is displayed and expected among financiers (Moghadam). This may seem a strange characteristic of the traditional stuffy, banker type but much of Wall Street involves taking extreme risks, making reckless speculations, and manifesting a scheming persona – traits also possessed by prisoners and criminals. And, an obvious arena where super-masculinity is present is in the locker room of nearly every male athletic team – regardless of the level of professionalism.

In addition to the extreme dimensions super-masculine characteristics are taken to by prisoners, there is a very key difference in the presence of super-masculine characteristics in

prisons and other social institutions. In prison, people display these characteristics in order to survive both physically and psychologically. The daily threat of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse for prisoners who fail to display super-masculine characteristics is very real. Super-masculinity is not just a way to get ahead or a way to fit in or prosper in an unknown world. It is an invaluable tool utilized to literally stay alive. In other social areas, there is no threat to one's physical or psychological safety for failing to play the game and be masculine.

Prison is a highly uniform environment. Prisoners wear identical clothing, eat the same food, possess the same property, and generally have the same privileges and restrictions. On the surface, there are no methods for prisoners to identify as a male or even display human characteristics. Everything about prison uniformity is intended to strip prisoners of their identity. Thus, as J. Phillips correctly points out "[w]ithout the resources normally available for the enactment of manhood, men in prison are forced to reconstitute their identity and status using the limited available resources" (13). This "reconstitution" of their identity involves recovering as much of their manhood as possible with the resources available. Because there are no material resources available to make this identification such as cars, clothes, employment, or women to compete over, prisoners have invented tools to create the appearance of masculinity. Some of these tools were learned prior to incarceration by prisoners (and copied by other prisoners) because the goals in some cultures outside of prison – respect, intimidation, and material possessions – are also the goals inside of prison.

Whatever prestige or power prisoners had while free is stripped from them at the prison gate which places them at the bottom of the social hierarchy ladder. In addition, a significant percentage of prisoners were already on the fringes of society before being sent to prison. Prisons house a disproportionate number of America's drug addicts, alcoholics, uneducated, mentally ill, illiterate, poor, homeless, retarded, and people of color and other minorities along with a disproportionate number of people who have been physically and emotionally abused prior to incarceration. These types of people have existed in turbulent, often violent, environments where displays of personal flaws are seen as signs of weakness that can be exploited by others. Prominent psychologist and prison researcher, Craig Haney, wrote how super-masculine characteristics correlate from the streets to prison:

In the freeworld outside of jail and prison, many of these men have long been structurally marginalized and emasculated and will be again when they return to

it, even though the fearsomeness with which they display their masculinity in prison is designed to mask this fact. They have been diminished by a society that first creates and then devalues its un- and under-educated, that too readily discards worthy but nonetheless needy people who lack the requisite social or economic capital to make effective claims for services and opportunities, and largely ignores the plight of persons whose years of prior abuse, neglect, trauma and maltreatment – sometimes inflicted or exacerbated by an uncaring and brutalizing juvenile justice system that they encountered along the way – has damaged and hopelessly compromised their life chances. To be more precise, on this latter point, our society typically remains oblivious to their plight until their behavior becomes so obviously troubled and troublesome that the criminal justice system begins to take an all too active interest in them. The harshness, abuse, and neglect they encounter in jail and prison are sadly very familiar to many of them – a concentrated dose of the kind of damaging experiences they have already undergone. (133)

By the time these marginalized people arrive at prison, they have some of the basic tools – the basic characteristics of super-masculinity – necessary to live relatively peacefully in prison. These characteristics will mature and be perfected throughout their incarceration to the point where they will define the person both in appearance and within.

In order to speak about prison gangs one cannot help but discuss race as prison gangs are synonymous with race. Gangs are termed by prison authorities as ‘Security Threat Groups’² and are nearly always formed along racial lines. Black gangs include the Black Guerilla Family and the Gangster Disciples.³ Hispanic gangs are generally run by the Mexican Mafia and include Northsiders (prisoners from north of Fresno, California), Southsiders (from south of Fresno), Bulldogs (prisoners from the city of Fresno), and Paisas⁴ (a Mexican immigrant who has not assimilated to American culture). And, white gangs include the Aryan Brotherhood, the Nazi Low Riders, and other localized gangs. Other races (Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern,

² Being recognized as a member of a gang is not, per se, against prison rules. What is against prison rules is actively engaging in gang activities.

³ This gang, mainly found on the east coast, is peculiar as it allows prisoners of other races to join and because its members wear necklaces with the Jewish Star of David for identification.

⁴ Paisa translates to ‘fellow countryman.’

etc.) are typically grouped with black gangs unless there is a numerical advantage such as the case with Pacific Islanders in the Hawaii prison system.

Not every prison has a gang problem but every prison has gangs or gang members. Prison gangs flourish in environments where there is need for a sense of mutual support and common security and safety. Prison gangs operate under very clear, self-imposed rules where the authority structure, communication with other races, and behavioral expectations are well established and are often mandatory. In prisons where gangs thrive, there are few actual gang members but in such environments all prisoners are expected (by the gangs) to affiliate themselves with a gang appropriate to their race. For example, black prisoners are expected to always side with black gangs regardless of whether or not they are a gang member. This same principle holds for white and Hispanic prisoners. It does not matter if the prisoner is a validated member of his race's prison gang; what matters is his race. In addition, while black street gangs such as Bloods and Crips are bitter enemies, the animosity in the free world is generally set aside while members are in prison as race trumps street gang affiliation.

For new prisoners, gangs can offer protection. When a prisoner first enters a prison housing unit, he will be approached by members of his own race and be asked about his crime, time, and any gang affiliations.⁵ The new prisoner will likely welcome the attention as he will be provided some friendship and direction by the members of his own race. In exchange (and this is not a take-it-or-leave-it option), he will be required to abide by his races' disciplinary code and to participate in major group altercations. If a gang decides to fight another gang, all of the gangs members from each gang will be required to participate and the prisoners from the races of each gang will also (usually, but not always) be required to join the in the fight in some manner. For prisoners who are expected to participate but fail to do so, punishment from the gang members will involve economic penalties and/or physical abuse. The point to be understood here is that that the typical prisoner cannot help but avoid the problems associated with gangs and gang activities because of racial inclusion.

In terms of super-masculinity, gangs epitomize its characteristics and the pressures to display the characteristics are intensified in prisons where gang activity persists. This is also true in prisons where gangs are not as prevalent but where prisoners still divide themselves along

⁵ The practice of "paper checking" (one prisoner reviewing court and pre-sentence investigation papers of another prisoner in order to learn about past crimes) is forbidden by institution's rules.

racial lines, as many prisoners do. Similar to other male dominated environments (the military, fraternities, etc.) gang members and gang affiliates (non-gang member but included because of race) perceive themselves to be in competition with other prisoners both within and among gangs to be the "manliest" man. This leads to increasing intensities of super-masculine characteristics. As one researcher noted, this competition has four consequences for the person: he is overly concerned with how other men rate his masculinity; he is "chronically insecure" that he is not manly enough; the competition leads to constantly increasing displays of masculinity; and, he is forced to detest non-masculine characteristics such as those displayed by many women and homosexuals (Cooper 687).

Even with the increased levels of super-masculine characteristics and the accompanying violence and psychological degradation, prison gangs in the present American prison system work to the advantage of both prisoners and prison administrators. The advantage to the prisoner is security and belonging. For prison administrators, the discipline that prison gangs demand of gang members and affiliates is welcome. For example, gang members are highly discouraged from engaging in altercations with other gangs' members and prison staff to the point where if altercations do occur without permission from gang leadership, the gang member can be disciplined by other members of his gang to include severe beatings. Obviously, these types of scenarios are welcomed by prison staff because of the increase in security and the decrease in altercations. On the other hand, when prison gangs decide to fight, riots are usually the result.

What needs to be understood about prison gangs, racial separation, and super-masculinity is this: if prison gangs and racial segregation were not dominant features of prisons, super-masculinity and all of its evils would not be required of prisoners to survive their incarceration. Equally, if super-masculinity were not present in prison, gangs and racial segregation would not prevail.

There is little debate that the adoption of super-masculinity characteristics among prisoners is the easiest and most widely utilized method to survive prison. However, as nearly all prisoners will eventually be released from prison, the consequences of these characteristics pose a serious impediment to success as a free person. Sharon Dolovich, who has written extensively on the super-masculinity phenomenon, reasons that "in American prisons and jails, prisoners' hypermasculine posturing and ensuing pathologies arise not from an inherent preference for violence, but from a not-unreasonable belief that nothing else will secure their

physical safety” (Dolovich, “Two Models of the Prison: Accidental Humanity and Hypermasculinity in the L.A. County Jail” 972). At the heart of the adoption of super-masculinity is the exchange of immediate security for long-term mental health disabilities. The alternative is immediate physical danger coupled with long-term physical and mental health disabilities.

Psychologically speaking, super-masculine characteristics if displayed over time (or even a short time depending on the mental resolve of the individual) will cause serious mental health problems. A 1999 study published in the *International Journal of Self Help and Self Care* found that super-masculinity “contradict[s] basic human needs and desires for intimacy and emotional expression, creating stress and conflict between men’s core selves and social expectations” (Mankowski and Silvergleid 283). The paradox for prisoners is that the very qualities that enable them to survive in prison are the same qualities that will cause them to experience long-term mental health problems which will substantially prejudice the likelihood of successful reentry. Craig Haney described this fact in eloquent detail:

Of course, embracing these [super-masculine] values too fully can create enormous barriers to meaningful interpersonal contact in the free world, preclude seeking appropriate help for one’s problems, and a generalized unwillingness to trust others out of fear of exploitation. It can also lead to what appears to be impulsive overreaction, striking out at people in response to minimal provocation that occurs particularly with persons who have not been socialized into the norms of inmate culture in which the maintenance of interpersonal respect and personal space are so inviolate. Yet these things are often as much a part of the process of prisonization as adapting to the formal rules that are imposed in the institution, and they are as difficult to relinquish upon release. (“The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment” 7)

For the unfortunate prisoners who spend many years and decades behind bars, constantly displaying super-masculine qualities will gradually have to cease as he ages. No one takes a tough-guy senior citizen prisoner seriously – especially in prison. The influential psychologist Hans Toch pointed out that “[s]ooner or later, hypermasculine men must age and face their decreased capacity and propensity for violence” (“Hypermasculinity and Prison Violence” 168). When long-term prisoners age to the point where they recognize that their previous methods for

adapting to prison can no longer be employed to survive the demands of prison, they become depressed and suicidal. This is why older prisoners tend to withdraw from social life and deliberately isolate themselves. It is another form of adaptation. But, it doesn't always work and many older prisoners become the victims of younger prisoners.

Another serious problem with super-masculinity is that it leaves prisoners with only two options for dealing with problems – fight or flight. The fight or flight option is not limited to simply fighting or running. It also includes engaging in behavior that will garner approval or condemnation from other prisoners. A common example is the choice of whether or not to do drugs. Most prisoners view other prisoners who do not do drugs with extreme suspicion. Regardless of whether this is a side-effect of the drugs they are consuming, just another paranoid response typical of chronic drug users, or the suspicion of an experienced prisoner, prisoners who don't do drugs or who don't have a very good reason for abstaining will be viewed as an outsider. And, being seen as an outsider among prisoners is not a healthy situation. The choice to engage in behaviors that are deemed to be manly is the fight option and choosing to avoid those behaviors is perceived as the flight option. There is no gray area in this nauseating scenario. For example, when two prisoners have a verbal dispute over which station a community television should be tuned to there will be very little give-and-take as whoever backs down will be viewed as the weaker. Hence, there is no negotiating a peaceful outcome and no positive communication when living in a super-masculinity atmosphere.

By not practicing communication and problem-solving skills while incarcerated but instead reducing all problems and situations to fight or flight responses, released prisoners will surely be ill-prepared to deal with even the small struggles of living in society. The fight or flight response to problems can create confusion, stress, and inappropriate activity among prisoners who are not accustomed to dealing with problems through violence which (in my opinion) is nearly every new prisoner. Both staff and prisoners alike respect prisoners who fight and despise prisoners who run or avoid violence in some other way. But, on the other hand, fighting (if caught and acknowledged by staff) will result in disciplinary sanctions which will certainly affect one's chance of early parole. This is a confusing problem for prisoners – “Do I fight and live in prison in relative peace and comfort or do I run and exist as a target with the hope of getting out early?” Obviously, and unfortunately, most prisoners choose the fight option which has the effect of lengthening their stay in prison.

The characteristics of super-masculinity – refusal to admit weakness or show vulnerability, irrational independence, refusal to show emotion, lack of empathy, aggression, antagonism, homophobia, the devaluation of women and homosexuals, and the threat of immediate violence – are in fact the characteristics common to psychopaths. “Wearing a mask’ is arguably the most common strategy for coping with the rigors of imprisonment, and all prison researchers will be familiar with the sentiment that inmates feel it necessary to adopt a facade while inside” (Jewkes 53). The fortuitous truth is that there are very, very few true psychopaths in this world and prisoners who display these psychopathic characteristics are doing so for the sole purpose of surviving prison. In reality, most prisoners conceal their true identity. They use super-masculinity as a mask, a form of armor, to camouflage and protect themselves against the emotional and physical cruelties of prison.

The problem with the mask comes when the real self (the person who the prisoner actually is as opposed to the staged person he wants others to perceive him as) changes into the staged self. To a certain degree, I’ve experienced this firsthand. When I first came to prison I didn’t think of myself as a criminal or a social outcast or any of the negative stereotypes associated with people who break the law. I certainly didn’t see myself as a violent person who preys on others for senseless reasons.⁶ I thought of myself as a compassionate person, a caring person capable of acting morally, a person of good will. I knew that what I had done to get sent to prison had the great potential to seriously hurt people but the intention of my actions had nothing to do with the purposeful, malicious infliction of pain. In any event, I had this self-portrait until I got to prison where I soon realized that kind, compassionate people – the kind of person that I truly was – are the victims of other prisoners. I didn’t want to become a victim so I began, in the same manner every other prisoner begins, adopting super-masculinity characteristics in order to fit in and cope with the emotional and psychologically stressful demands of prison living.

I have lived with super-masculinity character traits throughout my incarceration. If the choice is between being a target and a victim or putting on a mask and acting like a school-yard bully, I will choose the bully rule every time – just as nearly every other prisoner does. The truth is that I hate this lifestyle with a passion. It is a depressing, miserable existence that could only be conceived in the bowels of Hell. It is heartbreaking to every day watch these young kids get

⁶ “Senseless reasons” is how I recall my prosecutor describing my behavior at my sentencing hearing.

moved into my housing unit fresh from the streets – many of whom have no business being in prison – scared senseless their first day turn into tough-guy bullies within a month. This is not what prison is supposed to be. It is not supposed to be a bully factory where impressionable kids are left to their own devices to survive their punishment.

I am fortunate that I was able to recognize what had I changed into in order to survive. Few can claim this. I still act the bully when I need to but it is just a mask. It is not me or who I want to be perceived as. The tough-guy, bully reputation that I created for myself years ago has ensured my place in prison as one who is to be let alone. It is not a reputation that I like but it works for me and it works for every other prisoner who comes in a normal, feeling person but is soon forced to don the super-masculine camouflage just to make it through the day.

In addition to the reputation gained among prisoners that displaying super-masculine characteristics entails, a reputation is also gained from prison authorities. Prison authorities often make formal or informal recommendations for parole suitability to paroling authorities that can have a substantial impact on whether or not to grant release. When prison authorities perceive a prisoner as possessing the negative characteristics associated with super-masculinity, adverse parole recommendations are certain to result. While I have not seen any research on this phenomenon, I believe that a significant number of prisoners have been given negative parole recommendations from prison authorities because of their having to wear the prison mask in order to survive.

My real self is not a person I show to anyone in prison and many other prisoners also wear this mask. Although they likely sense the real me, I am not able to show this person to my family other than through letters as my phone calls and visits are seen by other prisoners and prison staff. It is fortuitous for me that my prison self has not changed the real, compassionate, caring me. Sadly, I know that this is not true for everyone. I have seen all too many prisoners shed the mask and adopt the super-masculinity role both outwardly and inwardly. They adopt it fully because it gives them a sense of pride, a sense of self, and a sense of community belonging that they have likely never had before. The adoption is especially true, and especially troubling, for younger prisoners who have not had time to develop an identity or a sense of self. The full mind and body adoption, however, will ensure their forever being a prisoner with all of its implications and labels because such a personality is wholly incompatible with life among free persons. How true it is that “[t]here are inmates who claim that they first entered prison as

trusting and gentile youths and left prison as irritable, ungovernable men” (Toch, *Living in Prison: The Ecology of Survival* 234).

If those reading this paper learn anything from my ramblings, it should be this: people who make mistakes are not all bad people forever deserving of being marginalized and excluded. They are men who have stumbled in their journey and need a helping hand. The current environment of our prisons do not lend this helping hand but, instead, push people further into deviant thinking and criminal behavior to the point where many of them may be forever incorrigible.

Lest there be no confusion, prison will turn people into aggressive, violent bullies and few possess the internal resilience and desire to shed that debilitating coat when they reenter the community. The methods they adopted in order to survive the evils of prison will carry with them when released and will ensure their failure to live free. To put it simply, prison does not rehabilitate but instead turns people into the very monsters that society is most afraid of.

This insanity must stop.

Works Cited

- Abbott, Jack Henry. *In the Belly of the Beast*. Random House, 1981.
- Bleeker, Timothy E. and Sarah K. Murnen. "Fraternity Membership, the Display of Degrading Sexual Images of Women, and Rape Myth Acceptances." *Sex Roles* 53 (2005): 487, 492.
- Connell, R.W. *Gender & Power*. Stanford: Standord University Press, 1987.
- Cooper, Frank Rudy. "Who's the Man? Masculinities Studies, Terry Stops, and Police Training." *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 18 (2009): 671, 687-688.
- Corley, Derrick. "Prison Friendships." *Prison Masculinities*. Ed. D.F. Dabo, T. A. Kupers and W. London. Philadelphia: Temple Universtiy Press, 2001. 64.
- Dolovich, Sharon. "Creating the Permanent Prisoner." *Life Without Parole: America's New Death Penalty*. Ed. Charles Ogletree and Austin Sarat. UCLA Public Law & Legal Theory Series, 2012.
- . "Two Models of the Prison: Accidental Humanity and Hypermasculinity in the L.A. County Jail." *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 102 (2013): 965, 972.
- Durose, Matthew R., Alexia D. Cooper and Howard N. Snyder. *Recidivism of Released Prisoners in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2014.
- Gerzon, M. *A Choice of Heroes: the Changing Face of American Manhood*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982.
- Gibbs, J.T. and J.R. Merighi. "Young Black Males: Marginality, Masculinity, and Criminality." *Just Boys Doing Business? Men, Masculinities, and Crime*. Ed. T. Newburn and Stanko, E. Routledge, 1994. 80.
- Haney, Craig. "The Perversions of Prison: On the Origin of Hypermasculinity and Sexual Violence in Confinement." *American Criminal Law Review* 48 (2011): 121, 133.
- . "The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (December 1, 2001).
- Karp, David. "Unlocking Me, Unmasking Masculinities." *Men's Studies* 18 (2010): 63, 65.
- Kupers, Terry A. "Rape and the Prison Code." *Prison Masculinities*. Ed. D.F. Sabo, T. A. Kupers and W. London. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 106.
- . "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison." *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61 (2005): 713, 717.
- Mankowski, E.S and C.S. Silvergleid. "A Review of Self-Help and Mutual Support Groups for Men." *International Journal of Self Help and Self Care* 1 (1999-2000): 283.
- Moghadam, Valentine M. "Women, Gender, and Economic Crisis Revisited." *Perspective on Global Development and Technology* 10 (2011): 30, 37.
- Mosher, D.L. "Macho Men, Machismo, and Sexuality." *Annual Review of Sex Research* 2 (1991): 199-247.
- Phillips, J. "Cultural Construction of Manhood in Prison." *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 2 (2001): 13.
- Sabo, D.F. "Doing Time, Doing Masculinity: Sports in Prison." *Prison Masculinities*. Ed. D.F. Dabo, T. A. Kupers and W. London. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 61-66.
- Schmid, Megan N. "Combating a Different Enemy: Proposals to Change the Culture of Sexual Assault." *Villanova Law Review* 55 (2010): 475, 492.
- Toch, Hans. "Hypermasculinity and Prison Violence." *Masculinities and Violence*. Ed. L.H Bowker. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998. 168-178.

—. *Living in Prison: The Ecology of Survival*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1992.

Yevone, Jewkes. "Men Behind Bars: "Doing Masculinity" as an Adaption to Imprisonment." *Men and Masculinities* 8 (2005): 44.