

Cultural Construction of Manhood in Prison

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A social constructionist approach portrays masculinity as being perpetual performance. Manhood is never secure, but always in the making. This article shows that the construction of manhood in prison is an adaptation to an environment of extreme danger and deprivation. The cultural material for the recouping of an impaired manhood is built through action and deed in the cell blocks, prison chow hall, yard, and weight rooms. These encounters and contests among and between inmates are cast into stories and myths and woven into the fabric of prison manhood. Cultural prescriptions and proscriptions instruct men in strategies for building honor and reputation and avoiding shame. This model of prison manhood is not derived from individual psychopathology or an aberrant offshoot of a wider framework for manhood. Rather, the reconstruction of manhood in prison represents an adaptation to an environment of extreme social control and limited resources.

The Prison Context

In prison, manhood can be observed in its most elemental form, stripped and leveled and then refashioned within the institutional walls. Without 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. Social and cultural behaviors shift to accommodate this sparse, controlled environment. The rapid cessation of roles and identities in the wider society intensifies the development of new gendered constructions. Cultural rules among male prison inmates are potent and clear, and the consequences of neglecting or breaking the rules are ever present.

Prison is a particularly interesting environment in which to observe the cultural structure of manhood. The rapid cutoff from the outside world is followed by a total indoctrination into a separate society behind the walls. A prison social system exerts a powerful shaping effect on the lives of inmates, thereby intensifying the enactment of masculinity. A collective acting out of manhood-enhancing behaviors enforces newly gendered transactions. The harsher the environment, the more accentuated the behavior. The more depleted the resources for augmenting manhood, the higher the stakes for the accrual of honor. Ironically, men are sent to prison for the commission of those very behaviors that become essential to their survival behind prison walls.

Overview of the Literature

In the growing literature on men, masculinity is increasingly described as a fluid and emergent construction rather than as a static or biological entity. Gilmore (1990, p. 10) concludes from his cross-cultural search for a "deep structure" of manhood that there is instead a nearly universal bundle of manhood attributes. The extent to which these attributes are expressed and emphasized in a particular cultural system depends on the degree of "stressed manhood," or the difficulty in performing the male role.

Brooks and Silverstein (1995, p. 281) build on Gilmore's model of "stressed manhood." They argue that "dark side" behaviors, including "acts of commission" such as violence, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, substance abuse, and self-destructive behavior, as well as "acts of omission" such as relationship inadequacies, absent fathering, and social-emotional withdrawal, are caused by the "rigid role prescriptions implicit in the traditional male role." The normative nature of the rigid and constricted male role, then, is imbued with the threat of the consequences of not conforming to cultural expectations of manhood. In the process of socialization into the male role, cultural blueprints for manhood in some societies and contexts may pressure men toward heightened conformity and the overcompensation of their manhood.

Messerschmidt (1993, p. 103) approaches masculinity as public performance. Among lower working-class, racial minority boys, the youth group or gang is the central arena within which masculinity is enacted. The street, rather than school or workplace, provides gang members with the resources to display manhood. Crime becomes a means of "transcending class

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and race domination and an important resource for accomplishing gender." In this setting, the gang is the public repository for a collective staging of manhood.

Herzfeld (1985, p. 127) discusses the performance of manhood among Cretan mountain villagers who engage in ritualized sheep stealing. "Men must show themselves capable of possession, whether the object be animals, women, or weapons, the very instrument of possession." They continually assess one another for the adequacy of their performances in the arena of public life. "In each social encounter between men, the structure of their relationships emerges again and again as a format of mutual, if often amiable, opposition." The "kala 'ndras," or "well self-assertive man," is one who is always on guard to reestablish and reconstitute his manhood standing in the eyes of his compatriots (p. 47). He never takes his reputation for granted, but always has an eye toward aggressively and competitively staking his claims of the strength of his masculinity.

The review of the literature provides an overview of which models of manhood contain underlying commonalities. The specific characteristics in any particular model derive from the degree to which manhood is "stressed." Prison, because of the high degree of difficulty in the performance of masculinity in this context, fosters a deeper understanding of manhood.

Method and Place

This research was conducted in a large state prison for men located north of Boston. The prison contains all levels of security: minimum, medium, and maximum. Over the course of 1 year, inmates in the medium-security facility were observed in five separate psychoeducational groups of 12 weeks' duration. The focus was on teaching skills in self-awareness, emotional self-management, and training in relaxation and meditation. The groups were observed for the emergence of cohesion or verbal as well as nonverbal expressions of commonalities. Inmates, by virtue of being in prison, have similarities in daily experiences, losses, and stressors. However, they are not typically drawn together in the discussion of these common themes. There is, instead, a tendency toward distancing and distrust. Cohesion in the groups was observed and measured by the extent to which inmates were able to, both verbally and nonverbally, connect with one another around common themes and issues.

To really understand the tapestry of men's lives in prison and the cultural system in which they live, it would be ideal to become a participant observer. In-

mates could be observed in the various locales, the common living areas and public spaces as well as the private areas in the prison cells. However, access to these places is extremely limited and guarded. Easy entry into prison is reserved exclusively for prison staff, who come and go, and inmates, who come and may not go. Visitors to prison must go through an extensive, formal entry process that involves the removal of shoes, socks, belt, and other articles of clothing; the checking of various parts of the body for contraband; and the application of a purple fluorescent stamp of approval on the hand to allow one to pass through the physical barriers of multiple locked doors and gates. The total spatial distance for this passage is a matter of feet and yards, but the cultural distance is great. The journey inside leaves one with an impression of having penetrated an alien land with its own distinct and, at times, shocking cultural rules and practices.

In lieu of participant observation of the daily lives of men in prison, the extended observation of men in groups was an ideal alternative. Over the course of the 12 weeks of each group, the men gradually became comfortable with my presence, realizing that I was truly a neutral observer and in no way connected to "the police." This distinction, of course, was critical to the conducting of the interviews. From these groups, a sample of 20 men was selected for extended taped interviews. The men interviewed were representative of a range in age, race, and ethnicity. They were also chosen because of their abilities and willingness to express their knowledge, experiences, and views in lengthy, private conversations.

The interview participants were promised confidentiality and anonymity. Both the cultural model of manhood and the individual stories in this article closely adhere to the daily realities and lifestyles of these men.

Core Strategies for the Recouping of Manhood

Prison is that dreaded and feared place where manhood is cut down. When crossing the boundary into the prison world, it is necessary to leave one's manhood at the door. The entry process creates an immediate and total deconstruction of the outside or "free world" identity. There is a stripping of all symbols and insignia of status and social being. The prisoner is separated from all resources for enacting manhood: women, money, clothing and weapons and access to goods and services. One is ground down into the lowly and homogenized status of inmate. The newly initiated prison inmate is refashioned in state-issued clothing and relegated to a small living space

shared by individuals of unknown history and status. Goffman (1961, p. 14) refers to this process of forced dispossession and deconstruction as “mortification of the self.” The inmate is “shaped and coded into an object to be fed into the institutional machinery.”

Life on the inside revolves around the seeking of minor privileges and small objects of status and the avoidance of punishment. Privileges emerge as powerful symbols of the reassertion of autonomy and status. Modes of social organization are built around these limited goods and services. Honor and status are sought in battle over small items such as a can of soup or a package of coffee. The weekly canteen, for those who have some money in their prison account, takes on central significance as an avenue of resource accrual and a symbol of status and potential power. A prison cottage industry has developed around the brokering of common items as well as contraband and forbidden goods and services such as drugs and sex.

Entry into prison is representative of a radical removal process from the outside world. Although the boundary between the prison world and the outside world is porous and allows for the passage back and forth of personnel and certain goods and services and information, a near total blockade exists against the passage of inmates out of the prison. Inmates are contained within and secluded from the outside world. Their position is one of marginality and inferiority, and they must submit as a body to an identity of low status and obedience.

Once inside, inmates become part of a prison-based cultural system built around rules for recouping their threatened manhood. There is an immediate rush to repair and rebuild using the available resources. This article describes and defines the core cultural strategies for accruing resources to reconstruct manhood in the particular context of a medium-security prison for men. These strategies include (a) the social mapping of relationships, (b) becoming a “stand-up man,” (c) the avoidance of social isolation and the formation of associations, (d) the management of reputation through the manipulation and display of crime status or the concealment of crime status, and (e) the display of a readiness to fight.

The Social Mapping of Relationships

In a social world of strangers, externally controlled relationships, and a near total lack of privacy, inmates initially assess one another for their potential for threat or danger. Through a combination of behavioral cues and the very active flow of gossip, an unknown inmate is sized up as a man. When living in

close and crowded quarters, especially when avoidance is not possible, a sense of urgency prevails among inmates to assess and locate on a cognitive map of types of men in prison exactly where to place everyone. Safety depends on assessing exactly what kind of a man one is living or associating with. There are extreme consequences deriving from associating with the wrong kind of man. Men in prison size up one another through an array of external stylistic and behavioral criteria. Gossip, and the strongly held collective assessments of one’s manhood, exert powerful social sanctions and impel inmates toward public shaming, ostracism, and, at times, violence. In the crowded, enclosed, and locked public spaces inside a prison, avoidance of social stigma and the building of a reputation as a strong man are essential to survival.

Don is a 39-year-old White man with a long history of drug addiction and criminal activity that has supported his drug habit. Soon after entering prison, he began to lift weights with another White man whom he describes as “one of the strongest guys in the camp.” He immediately began to sense disapproval from those around him. Then he was approached by three other men in his cell block and told he was “lifting weights with a baby killer.” Don assessed the situation and decided that, because there “had been no sex in the crime,” he would continue to work out with this man. “Then the guys who approached me got real mad. I told them to mind their own business and let me do my own time in prison. So they stayed away from me. But then I noticed a lot of guys weren’t talking to me, and I felt real stress. So I said to the guy, look I know you are a good lifting partner, but I can’t lift with you anymore because I’m getting harassed.”

There is a pervasive element of uncertainty and risk within the inmate society, a perceived need to continually produce evidence of honor and valor, and the avoidance of stigma that could detract from one’s social standing. It is essential to the recouping of manhood to go out of one’s way to avoid or repel charges of being a “rat” (an informant), a “skinner” (a sex criminal), or a “geek” (someone who is perceived as having a diminished manhood) and to even avoid associating with someone with a reputation that is contaminated by these labels. Men in prison perform endless, ongoing assessments of the strength and durability of one another’s manhood. Who are the real men and who are the impersonators? The standards by which manhood is measured applaud physical strength, stoicism, loyalty to one’s associates, and dominance over the weak and the marginalized.

In prison, relationships are often fleeting. Inmates are moved from one physical locale to another at any

time and without warning. They are often moved to another prison or the outside world as they are processed through the various levels of classification. Relationships among inmates may be fleeting or long term. But, whatever the nature of a relationship, its duration and degree of closeness or distance are largely governed by external forces. The cultural model for establishing relationships among men in prison is characterized by an overlay of compliance, powerlessness, and suspicion. The accepted strategy is "trust no one" and "watch your back."

Becoming a Stand-Up Man

The "stand-up man" is a cultural category of manhood that incorporates the idealized qualities of the strong, impregnable male self. A stand-up man is one who dares to take action against anyone who tries to "take something away" from him. According to Curt, a young African-American with a history of drug dealing, gang warfare, and violent crime, "A stand-up man is someone who will not fold under pressure. First there is a warning—'Don't let it happen again'—and then a stand-up man is gonna take it to another level. He'll say, 'Yo, I already gave you a warning and there ain't no more warnings.'" If a man doesn't take action and stand up, his manhood is weakened. And he must take action without any display of emotion. Curt explains that a stand-up man knows that "at a certain point, he can just shut off his emotions." This emotional stoicism, and the flair and style with which it is displayed, is key to the building of a reputation as a stand-up man.

The ultimate threat of having "something taken away" is the loss of one's manhood, something that inmates are constantly on guard against. Anal sex between inmates can be viewed as a resource for enhancing manhood and for demonstrating physical prowess and control over others. But, in prison, a clear distinction is made between the role of the penetrator and that of the recipient in anal sex. For some, the penetrator, the dominant sexual role, is displaying an enhanced manhood. However, the recipient role is universally seen as one of submission and diminished manhood. According to Curt, a man who is forced or even consents to a passive sexual role loses his manhood. "They took your manhood away. They looked at you like you wasn't a man. Because he went up in you, he just converted you from manhood to ladyhood." The consequence for this perceived gender loss is to be viewed by others as being less than a man and to repeatedly fall prey to anal rape and a host of other threats and losses in the future. The looming fear of the total and inexorable loss of man-

hood, with the resultant social ostracism and threat of sexual violence, enforces an environment of self-protection and extreme wariness.

On a less extreme level, in a world of limited objects of status and power, a stand-up man is careful that nothing material is taken away from him. There are a multitude of stories about having one's canteen taken. Small items like a can of soup, a bag of coffee, or a pair of sneakers become symbols of the spoils of war, and their acquisition symbolizes male prowess and valor. According to Andrew, an African American man in his 40s with a history of drug-related crimes and gang warfare, "In here, because we have less, things mean more. Out on the street, we fight over women. A lot of guys in here will fight over a 30-cent can of soup. It's a gladiator thing. In the gladiator days, they had women in the audience. But you take the women away, and those guys would still do battle."

Don has struggled to erect an image of himself as a stand-up guy. "The sensitive guys in here get taken advantage of, get walked on. People in prison pick up on weakness in someone like a dog picks up on a cat being in the house. People can tell if you are a sucker, if they can get things from you. If you show weakness and let one guy take something from you, the next thing they want is your ass. There's an old saying in here: 'Don't ever take something that is left in your cell.' If you walk in your cell and there are a couple of candy bars on you bed, don't eat them." Don denies having been approached sexually, but claims that "people are constantly trying to play me in here, to see if they can get things off me." The bottom line of the maxim in prison for protecting one's manhood seems to be to never let anything be taken away, whether it is sneakers and soup or dignity and manhood.

The Avoidance of Social Isolation and the Formation of Associations

In prison, inmates size up one another for the potential construction of relationships in their dangerous and chaotic social world. Associations are often transitory by nature. However, the construction of social relationships is a key survival strategy in prison. Social isolation and ostracism leave one vulnerable. The building of associations, particularly throughout the various locales in the prison, represents a valuable resource for the construction of a reputation as a stand-up man. Associates, particularly close associates, are a potential pool for mobilization in time of conflict. Physical locale, in and of itself, is

not a secure base for honor and status and the recouping of manhood. Locales frequently and unpredictably shift. However, widespread associations throughout the prison can ensure safety and strength and are a potential resource for the recouping of a diminished manhood. When one moves to a new locale, the presence of an associate in residence can ensure safety and offset the danger of loss of status.

By mapping the social universe in prison, inmates first determine who their enemies and potential associates are. The word "associate" is used to refer to those with whom a social connection is possible. "Friendship" is rejected as being too close for a prison relationship. A friend is someone who has been there through time and multiple social contexts. In prison, there is typically no time depth to relationships because they are disrupted by inmates' multiple changes in location. Unlike in relationships outside prison, men in prison generally do not know one another's families, friends, or neighborhoods. Because of the difficulty of really knowing someone in a broader and deeper context, and due to the lack of control of the course of a relationship, inmates typically maintain that true friendships cannot take place in prison. Instead, associations are built, which implies a connection with varying degrees of commitment and shared activity. But, there is always an assumption of the limits and fallibilities of the connection. There is a resignation that the connection can be severed at a moment's notice. In Don's words, "I wouldn't call any of these people in here friends. They're associates because I don't really trust anyone in here. Right now, I hang with three guys. I go lift weights with them, I sit down and play cards with them, and I go to chow with them." When asked the distinction between a friend and an associate, Don says that his brother is a friend. "I can share anything with him. He'll always be there." By contrast, his current three associates have only been in his social world for a month. Don was suddenly moved into a residential drug treatment cell block after being on its waiting list, having no knowledge of or say in how long the wait would be. He has now chosen his current three associates from the new social world he has entered. But these three associates may suddenly be shifted elsewhere. As Don says, "You know—you hang with them and then they could be gone. Then you're looking for someone else to hang with." When asked what had happened to his previous associates in the cell block that had been his home for 5 months before being moved to the drug unit, Don said, "They are still my associates, but I don't hang with them. That is why I call them associates. They are people you hang with while they are there." Don goes on to

explain the impact of multiple, externally controlled moves on the shape of his social universe. "From living in C2, then being in the hole (single-cell isolation unit), then being in A1, then D2, and now I'm in D1, in all these places you meet people, but they are not friends. They are not people you talk serious with. You are playing cards together, playing sports, walking in the yard, but I would not say they are friends."

In the search for commonalities and connections, the social mapping process extends throughout the prison world and even into the outside world. Through the porous social system of a prison, linkages are avidly sought with other inmates having shared kinship or neighborhood affiliations. No matter what the exact nature of an outside or prior connection, a shared affiliation with the outside world represents a potentially strong association in the prison. A "homeboy," or a fellow inmate who comes from the same street, neighborhood, or town, is a potential valuable resource for establishing a deeper association in prison. A homeboy can be recruited in time of need and can be a resource for recouping or defending manhood. A relationship with a homeboy may be multistranded, incorporating shared territory, shared history, and the most valued of all, shared kinship ties.

Jeremiah, an African American "older guy" in his late 30s, describes his close association with Brian, a younger African American in his early 20s, as "Brian's okay in my book. I never paid him much attention in the street but we started getting kinda tight in here when he brought up the fact that he hung with my son. Back then, I was either too drunk or high to remember, but when we started talking about it, it refreshed my memory. If somebody was a friend of my son, I treat him as I would my own son in jail." When Chuck, also a young African American, became Jeremiah's "cellie," or cell mate, Jeremiah discovered through a social mapping conversation that Chuck's father had been an associate in the streets. These common affiliations that stretch into the outside world allow associations to become close and augment the potential for the construction of a reputation as a stand-up man.

David is a 36-year-old White man sentenced to 6 years in prison. He has a long history of addiction to drugs and alcohol. David, like many inmates, strongly values his reputation of being "standoffish." This protects his image of being stoic and self-sufficient. He likes to walk around the prison yard and use a radio with headphones, staying aloof and by himself. The extreme version of this image is the "cave dweller," the inmate who never speaks to oth-

ers and rarely comes out of his cell. Cave dwellers are commonly avoided because they are perceived as dangerous. Virtually no one can accurately locate the cave dweller in the social universe of the prison. Though “standoffish,” David has established a reputation as a stand-up man through his body language and limited associations with several other inmates. He is extremely cautious about his choice of associates. When he first arrived in prison, he searched for a homeboy, for a primary linkage to his town of origin. At best, he hoped to find a homeboy with whom he had a prior association. He hoped he could find at least someone from his home area, someone with whom he could establish a prior sense of connection, who knew his friends, family, streets, or neighborhood. This kind of linkage could have provided David with the sense of a strong, preestablished manhood and could have enabled him to display some of the resources needed to build a reputation as a stand-up man. He began to create associations with other young White men as a strategy to recoup his manhood. “There are only a certain few in here that I deal with. I mean, I came in here alone and I am going to leave alone. The people I involve myself with in here are the guys I work out with. Or I might speak to someone when I am walking around outside.”

David emphasizes that it is important to not spend too much time with any individual or group. This behavior, he feels, could signal neediness or dependence on others and detract from his image as “cool” and self-sufficient. “I’ve got a group of eight to ten that I lift with and talk to, but I’m never with them all the time. The guys that are with each other all the time—I’m not into that stuff.” David’s associations, like those of many men in prison, are based on the simultaneous performance of physical activities. “It’s the guys that work out and play sports that I am chummy with. If they don’t work out, I’m not chummy with them.” David did manage to locate a man who had known an old friend of his from the past, and he immediately “chummed around with him.” But this association abruptly ended when the man was suddenly transferred to another prison.

Seth, a White man in his late 40s, has also struggled to build a social world that will provide him with a sense of security about his manhood. As an “older guy,” or “OG,” he is more secure about his manhood status. But, like David, he is on constant guard to defend himself against any assault on his reputation. He has gone to great lengths to only associate with other stand-up guys. He describes himself as “a drug addict who did crime to support my

drug habit.” He chooses to hang with other drug addicts, therefore reducing the possibility of choosing an associate who could weaken his reputation as being stand-up. “It doesn’t really matter what drug you used or what crime you did to get the drug. All the drug addicts I hang with are real, they’re not gonna bull shit you about their crime.” Seth, like David, has built his network of associates among other White men to limit any controversy about his reputation. “By me not lifting weights with a Black man, I lower my chances of someone coming up to me and saying ‘Hey, what are you lifting with that guy for?’ ” As an added form of damage control to his reputation, Seth avoids “cling-ons.” Within his small group of White drug addicts, one of his associates began to try to spend too much time with him. “He’d wait for me when the cell doors opened, he’d want to walk to chow with me, he’d want to lift with me. He wasn’t giving me any time to breathe, no time to myself.” Seth feared that the cling-on, out of jealousy, could prevent him from being released from prison when his sentence ended. “You don’t let people know what’s going on if you’re going to be leaving. It stirs up jealousy. You have guys in here doing 15 years and if all of a sudden you’re leaving it could bring up a lot of things they don’t want to hear. When it comes my time to go, I just want to say, ‘Bye, I’m leaving.’ There’s no real relationships in here, so no one’s gonna cry that you left. Even the guys you hang with will be doing their same routine one day after you left.”

Associations, then, constitute a valuable resource for building a reputation and for recouping manhood. But manhood is only augmented through connections with the right kind of associates. Highest on the list of valuable associates is the homeboy, lending depth and commitment to the relationship. A homeboy can be counted on to “stand behind” his associate, even fight for him at a moment’s notice and against great odds. But any associate’s value is only as good as his reputation. Associations with those of lower status can constitute a detraction from one’s manhood and are better avoided. Also, although associations are coveted in prison, an associate can be a liability if he becomes too clingy or demanding. In prison, there is a belief that associates can betray or sabotage one’s standing if there is a shift in alliances. An associate can become a snitch or a rat or become associated with an enemy. The ideal model for constructing masculinity is to have a cadre of associates of similar background and status, but, when necessary, to evoke qualities of independence and self-containment—the capacity to perform masculinity alone.

Managing Reputation Through Crime Status

It is clear that constructing a reputation as a stand-up man, as well as building a network of affiliations with other stand-up men throughout the prison, are essential strategies for recouping manhood. Prison culture applauds the inmate who demonstrates resilience, self-sufficiency, and a readiness to “stand-up” to challenges and threats. Another resource for recouping manhood is the nature of the crime. Certain crimes create a sense of commonality, shared experience, and status, whereas other crimes symbolize a powerful stigma, compelling others to avoid and marginalize. In the social mapping process through which men categorize one another as enemy or possible associate, the type of crime can be a valuable resource for building honor and enhancing manhood or can cause a diminishment of manhood, which can lead to systematic and collective ostracism and even violence.

At the very bottom of the hierarchy of crimes is the “rat” or “snake.” This despised category includes those inmates who have informed on other inmates. Even forming associations or becoming friendly with prison staff, who are often collectively referred to as the “police,” can endanger one with being labeled a “rat.” The essence of the reputation of stand-up man implies someone who doesn’t “kick it with,” or socialize with, the “police.” Those with a secure reputation as stand-up are less vulnerable to being referred to as a “rat.” However, an inmate with fewer resources for building a reputation of stand-up may need to go out of his way to avoid being seen in proximity of the “police.” When dealing with the “police,” there is a powerful binding rule that holds all inmates, as a collectivity, responsible for upholding secrecy and refusing information about one another. According to Don, “A stand-up guy is never a rat. He’s gonna do the right thing. If I see something happen in the yard, I see somebody get hit, and the police lug me to ‘the hole’ with three other guys, I deny everything even if I know what happened. I say I saw nothing. I’m being a stand-up guy. I’m not telling what I know. I’m keeping the code of silence. In prison, you keep your mouth shut. Period. If you rat or snitch, the police have to put you in protective custody and transfer you out. You will never be safe again in the general population.”

Another despised category, just slightly above the level of rat, snake, or snitch, is the sex criminal: the pedophile or the adult rapist. Sex crimes, as a whole, represent the lowest form of crime among inmates. Some state that the pedophile is more lowly than the adult rapist. Others lump all sex criminals into a

single category. But all “sexual predators” are held in universal disdain in prison culture. They are relegated to the rank of untouchables, and inmates either avoid them or go out of their way to demonstrate their disdain. By creating social distance and expressing disapproval, inmates are elevating their own status as men. They are upholding the cultural rule that states that men with a secure sense of manhood only violate the strong. They never prey on the weak, including women, children, and older people. One inmate even extends this rule to include animals. Carlos is a 32-year-old Cape Verdean with an extensive history of violence, both inside and outside prison. Being ready to fight is essential to his status as a stand-up man. But Carlos makes the distinction between those who are in “the game,” or are participating in crime, and those who are not. “If you are in the game, you are fair game. If you are a drug dealer, a bookie, a loan shark, a thug, a hit man, or a car thief, you are fair game. I have no remorse if I have to go in there and do what I have to do. But the laws of the street say to never pick on the weak. I would never hurt an old person or a woman or a child. I guess it’s a way of having morals for my line of work, for criminal activity.”

Jeremiah describes the marginalized status of Sam, an African American incarcerated for raping a child, as “real low on the prison totem pole. There’s certain places Sam can’t go in this camp, and there’s certain people he can’t be around. And he knows it. People would beat the crap right out of him, right on the spot. I guess you could say people are ‘rape-ophobic’ in here. When Sam goes out in the yard, he stands way over by the fence and watches his back while everyone gives him the evil eye.”

Because of the power of crime categories to elevate or detract from one’s reputation, it is critical to find out one another’s criminal history when constructing associations in prison. An acute fear of contamination of one’s manhood spawns a variety of strategies for finding out about crime status. When someone moves into a cell with a new cell mate or allows a newcomer to become an associate and to hang with his group of associates, the criminal records of this newcomer must be determined. The manhood status of this person, if low, will automatically contaminate the manhood of his new associates. Don describes the acute sense of embarrassment he feels if he mistakenly associates with an inmate with “bad charges.” “I hang with guys that are stand-up guys, guys that are in for good charges. There is a code of decent charges and lousy charges. If you are a rapist or a child molester, people want nothing to do with you.”

According to Don, it is not correct practice to “just come out and ask somebody their crime.” There are indirect ways to find out. If an inmate has been around for a length of time, and he seems to have stand-up guys as associates, then it is probably safe to assume that he does not have lousy charges. But if he is new or somehow on his own without a cadre of associates, it is necessary to locate him on the continuum of types of charges. If an inmate says that he sent his criminal papers home, or if he has blacked out the charges on his papers, then he is hiding something. Immediate action needs to be taken to distance or separate oneself from the stigma of the guy with the lousy charges. Don explains, “If I’m lifting weights with you, giving a little disclosure to you about myself, getting closer to you, and the whole time you raped a kid and you’re not telling me, that would definitely embarrass me. It’s about what other people think about me.” Don goes on to explain, “Everybody is constantly talking in here—this one is in for this and this one is in for that. You can tell who the rapists are because nobody will say ‘hi’ to them, nobody will give them the time of day. With the stand-up guys, you don’t have to ask to see their charges. It would be an insult to ask them.”

Jeremiah recalls the time when he was moved into a cell with a total stranger named Joey. He describes the conversational strategies he used to find out who Joey was and what his charges were. “I didn’t know him, I didn’t know anyone else who knew him, and I didn’t know anything about him. So I brought out my paperwork and said, ‘Hey, Joey, read this. I’m in for robbing a bank with a note. I was coked out of my mind. If you don’t mind me asking, what are you in for?’ You can always tell if someone is bullshitting you by looking at their paperwork.” In this manner, Jeremiah was able to determine that Joey was a stand-up man and could safely become an associate without any deleterious effects on Jeremiah’s reputation. In another incident, Jeremiah asked an inmate with whom he had a new association if he could see his charges. The writing had been crossed out on this man’s criminal papers with a marker, but a coded number remained on the paper. Jeremiah went to the law library and found that the number represented a rape conviction. He then said to the man, “Hey, I can’t hang with you anymore. You can’t speak to me anymore. I’m not going to hurt you, but don’t mess with me again.”

The sex criminal, then, is held in universal disdain among inmates. The rejection of sex criminals, blatantly expressed and collectively enforced, functions as a potent resource for enhancing the manhood of all others. As a result, it is likely that those inmates not

formally charged with or perceived as sex criminals who have committed sex crimes go to great lengths to conceal this information.

In contrast to the harmful effects on manhood status caused by sex crimes, other crimes can strengthen manhood status. Those crimes that show strength, risk taking, and courage constitute the acme of good charges. Crimes of violence among men lend one an air of invincibility. A reputation as a stand-up man in prison may be built in part on a crime of valor and daring. It is said by some inmates that the most stand-up of all crimes is the “cop killer.” A “cop killer” may be serving a life sentence in prison, but he will be able to live in safety because of the manhood-enhancing value of this crime. Just as the “snitch,” because he sold out to the police, is the lowest on the hierarchy of crimes, the “cop killer,” because he “stood up” to the “police,” is at the pinnacle.

Displaying a Readiness to Fight: Going Into Battle

A willingness to fight is a sure way to enhance manhood. In the streets outside prison, men may fight over women, money, territory, or many other symbols of male status. In prison, the range of spoils is sharply diminished and, as a result, may contain even more meaning. The symbol may be a feminized object such as a homosexual punk (a submissive partner in a sexual relationship between two men, typically portraying a female through dress and body language), a scarce good like a pair of sneakers or a bag of coffee, or a perceived threat or insult. But going into battle is a potent resource for reconstructing manhood in prison.

The battle imperative, the need to respond to displays of disrespect, to reciprocate violence or threats of violence, cannot be ignored in prison. A battle is not just fought against an opponent. Instead, a battle involves the public construction of reputation as a man. A prison gladiator is on display for the collective manhood of the inmate community. The battle, its style, flair, spirit of daring, and the degree of nonchalance with which it is waged, is staged for the scrutiny of all. And after the battle is over, it enters the annals of prison myth and lore. It is generally assumed that any failure to “stand up” will spoil one’s reputation and encourage other men to further weaken one’s manhood. For example, David, a man with a very small group of associates and no home-boys, is quick to anticipate and respond to the call to battle. His reputation is constructed on a perpetual readiness to fight. In a card game, David relates that

"someone called on my manhood and I stood up." As David describes it, an onlooker tried to tell him what move to make. "I stood up and pushed him in the chest a little bit. That usually fires somebody off, but it didn't faze him. Then I went down to my cell and waited for him to come and fight. But he didn't. Then I went down to his cell and invited him to fight but he closed the door in my face. I was glad nothing came of it but I felt I had to stand up to him."

As David reflects on this incident, he realizes that the presence of others watching him, assessing his behavior, made him feel the need to "stand up." "I wanted to fight because people were listening and watching, and I needed to save face. I wouldn't have cared if I'd been out on the street. But in here, you have to get respect or you'll be eaten up." Again, the fear of a soiled or contaminated reputation, one that cannot be resuscitated, drives men like David to fight. "You have to settle things in here. If you don't settle right then and there, you are gonna hafta deal with somebody coming up behind you later on." The object of battle is to determine "who has the upper hand." According to David, if no one has the upper hand, "a line has been drawn and you don't deal with that person again." If someone has the upper hand, the victor gains honor and reputation. But the obligation to ascertain the winner or to declare a stalemate and then implement the rules of avoidance is paramount among men in prison.

The obligation to go into battle can be foisted on one by the rally cry, "Put your sneakers on." Almost everyone, no matter what the distinctions in age and manhood status, understands the irresistibility of this challenge to "stand behind" a close associate, particularly a homeboy. Close associates are often described in battle terms, such as "He is someone I would go to the hole for" or "He is someone I would go to battle for." Don describes Sean as "probably the one guy in this place that I would go to the hole for. If he had to fight, I would fight with him." When asked what it is about Sean that bestows this honorable distinction on him, Don describes the relationship as having more depth in time and in various prison locations than the typical fleeting prison relationship. "I've known him the longest of anybody in here. I went through a 4-month drug program with him in Dedham, then a prerelease in Dedham, and then we were together for 6 months at M.C.I. Concord. We have had a lot of experiences together."

Remarkably, Don and Sean's first interaction with each other was through battle. Don remembers, "We had words over a card game." Although he has long since forgotten the content of the conflict, he remem-

bers that the fight created a bond between them. "After that fight, we became associates. I said, 'Hey, it's over with.' We shook hands and it was like it didn't even happen." Soon after, Sean cashed in on this association by asking Don to "put his sneakers on." Without hesitation, Don followed Sean into a bathroom fight with Jeremiah. Although Don had no idea what the battle was about, he was compelled to "stand by" Sean. This battle bond was a test of their association, and Don could not refuse. In another prison several years later, Don and Jeremiah became associates and reminisced about their introduction to each other in a battle in a bathroom over something connected to Sean's need to recoup his manhood.

Andrew is secure in his status as an "older guy." Men at this age are less likely to fight "at the drop of a dime." To an extent they can cash in on their status as a senior man with considerable life experience. Also, a young man is not going to gain the same honor by attacking an older guy. And if a young man loses a battle with an older guy, this may detract from his manhood. He may be ridiculed for fighting an older guy. Andrew explains that when a man enters prison, he is "naked." Although the reputation constructed by the stigma of bad crimes will inexorably follow a man into prison, placing him in an irredeemable position of low status, all initiates to prison go through an immediate leveling process that demands they stand up and defend their honor. "Just like any man, you want respect. But when you come through these doors, you are nobody but a number. Regardless what you did on the street, how many people you hurt, how many drugs you sold, when you come through this door, you are nobody." For the newly initiated young inmate, fighting may be the most available avenue to recoup manhood. In Andrew's words, "A lot of them build reputations by getting into fights. Then people say, 'No, you don't want to mess with him, because if you mess with him, he'll fight you.' This is how they establish credibility around here. They jump on an officer, and you may not see them for the next five years, but when you do see them, he's not to be messed with because he will do whatever. That is how a lot of 'em gain respect."

Carlos, with a long history of violent crime and multiple incarcerations, is now moving toward the status of senior male, the "older guy." Over his many years of battle, both inside and outside prison, he has developed a reputation as a stand-up man who fights with flair, style, and recklessness. He prides himself on taking risks and readily rising to challenges. But he now sees himself as taking on a new status with less obligation to go into battle. "As an older guy, you can hurt people, but you don't. Older guys are

dangerous if you put them in the wrong position. They've had years of being wild, stick-up kids. But they are semiretired." Carlos has achieved the status that allows him to be "level headed" instead of "crazy." But if he does go into battle, he adds, "I completely follow through."

Carlos describes an incident at M.C.I. Concord when he was compelled to go into battle following a perceived threat to his manhood. He rose to the challenge with enthusiasm. Carlos had traded cigarettes for what he hoped would be some sleeping pills. "They hit me with an old switcharoo move and gave me some bullcrap. They disrespected me, played me like a flipperhead, and just plain beat me. In a state prison, when you get played like that, you might as well give up. You are going to continually get your stuff taken. In prison, a coward dies a thousand deaths, a soldier dies but one." So Carlos, drawn in and, as he tells it, exhilarated by the opportunity to dramatically recoup his manhood, planned his next moves against the man who had challenged him. Again, there is language of nonchalance and daring. He calls the state of readiness to fight his "Rambo mode." "I didn't have access to a weapon, but I'm good with my hands and feet. When I saw him walking back from chow, I gave him about six shots, a couple kicks, bing bing bang, and he went down. When I fight, you would have to incapacitate me to get the better of me. If I have one limb left, I'm still coming."

Not all men in prison welcome the opportunity to defend their honor with the same enthusiasm as Carlos has. Some, like Carl, have to be pressed into service to defend their manhood. Carl is a White "older guy," and had just arrived at the prison when his manhood was challenged on the softball field. He had not yet constructed a reputation as a stand-up man. Because of his unproven manhood status, he felt he had to demonstrate his stand-up prowess. "I felt I was very disrespected and I felt embarrassed. There were people watching the whole thing, and I felt if I didn't do anything, they would think I was a coward. It was all about saving face. I lost everything after that fight. I lost my canteen and all my privileges, got sent to the hole for two months, and I even lost the fight. But after that, people said, 'Oh, that's Carl. He's a stand-up man. He's got no problem fighting.' So, even if I lost a lot by that fight, I gained more than I lost by showing people I'm stand-up."

It is clear that fighting, going into battle, is an elaborately ritualized and often mandatory means to recoup manhood in prison. The performance of the battle is essential to the reconstruction of reputation.

A stand-up man has to be observed standing up. There must be action, not words. Talk is compromising and only detracts from action. The public event and its collective assessment provide the resources for recouping manhood. The battle imperative is usually preceded by an insult or injury. For the young gladiator, this may simply be a sense that one's honor was somehow punctured or diminished. An "older guy," particularly an "older guy" with a solid reputation as stand-up, may, with a confident dismissal or perhaps a warning, state that this insult is of no great significance to him. He may say, "Hey man, don't talk to me like that" or "Don't let that happen again." This public acknowledgment of the insult represents a form of damage control to one's manhood. Many battles are left unfought by this gesture of honor recoupment. Both young gladiators and "older guys" espouse this tactic of letting things go one time with a warning. According to Carlos, "I'll give you once to apologize. Then, if you don't, I'll get right down to business." This rule of caution and holding back and then, if necessary, "getting the job done," is held in high esteem as an honorable manhood stance. But there seems to be universal agreement that, if "somebody puts their hands on you," you have to fight. When an opponent touches you, there is no turning back. Up to that point, there are a variety of honorable options. But once hostile physical contact is made, a stand-up man must fight or lose his manhood. As Andrew explained it, "As an older dude, there's nothing nobody can do outside of putting their hands on me that would make me want to fight them. You can't say nothing out of your mouth that could upset me enough to fight. But if you get physical with me, then I'm going to battle."

Conclusion

Men in prison live in an environment characterized by danger, deprivation, and subordination. They are stripped of all the external, worldly trappings of status and power. In a sense, there is nothing left to lose but their very manhood. The constricted male role and the ever-present sense of danger contribute toward an augmentation of the display of manhood. In the intense and unrelenting battle over manhood, there are small but significant spoils. A can of soup, borrowed and not replaced, can lead opposing groups of homeboys and close associates into battle. They may not know exactly what they are fighting for, but it is understood that the fight is about honor and the preservation of manhood. The construction of manhood in prison demands the public performance of deeds of bravery and physical prowess. The cultural

rules for recouping manhood arise out of an environment of stress, loss, and deprivation. Gossip, story telling, and myth making enforce a masculinity of showy, dramatic behaviors and flashy deeds. Myths of manhood become the foundation for a charter for action and enhance the need to show, through gesture and body language, a manhood of style and strength. Those who do not stand up are collectively condemned. Labels of social satire and ostracism circulate through gossip and relegate all "rats, punks, and wimps" to the lowest level of the manhood hierarchy. Gossip and collective condemnation of the weak and despised are powerful avenues for affirming the values in prison of the stand-up man. Men in prison, like all men, must defend their manhood or it can be taken away. In more gentrified and civilized environments, the struggle over manhood is not so stark and obvious. In prison, the rough and raw underbelly of the battle is exposed as a subordinated and marginalized population fights over limited spoils.

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