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## UNLOCKING MEN, UNMASKING MASCULINITIES: DOING MEN'S WORK IN PRISON

*While several studies have examined the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and criminality, prior research has not explored correctional interventions that respond to the pernicious effects of hypermasculinity in prison. This article reports the findings of an exploratory, qualitative study of two related men's programs at prisons in Massachusetts and California. The study included participant observation and interviews with program volunteers. The article describes how the programs seek to deconstruct hypermasculinity in the prison setting and help inmates redefine masculinity to produce prosocial outcomes. The programs are offshoots of a large, voluntary organization called the ManKind Project. Drawing on the philosophy of the "mythopoetic men's movement" as well as popular personal growth and therapeutic techniques, the program seeks to offer inmates the opportunity to explore their conceptions of masculinity and redefine them in ways that will serve them both in prison and upon reintegration into society.*

**Keywords:** hegemonic masculinity, hypermasculinity, criminality, prison setting, mythopoetic men's movement, men's program in prison

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Prison is an ultramasculine world where nobody talks about masculinity. (Sabo, Kupers, & London, 2001, p. 3)

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the relationship between gender and crime, more specifically concluding that cultural constructions of masculinity are correlated with crime and that male prison culture reifies hypermasculinity. Little has been written, however, about correctional interventions that respond to this reification. This article describes the intervention theory of a program specifically designed to address hypermasculinity in the prison setting. Findings are based on an exploratory, qualitative study of two related men's programs at prisons in Massachusetts and California. The study included participant observation and interviews with program volunteers. The article describes how the programs seek to deconstruct hypermasculinity in the prison setting and help inmates redefine masculinity to produce prosocial outcomes.

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<sup>a</sup> Interim Associate Dean of Student Affairs and Associate Professor of Sociology, Skidmore College. Correspondence for this article should be sent to David R. Karp, Interim Associate Dean of Student Affairs, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866. Electronic mail: [dkarp@skidmore.edu](mailto:dkarp@skidmore.edu)



Members of a large voluntary men's organization called the ManKind Project volunteer in prisons and offer an innovative program model. One program was developed in 1999 at Folsom Prison in California. In 2002, a second program followed in Massachusetts. Although the two programs provide descriptive information on websites (Inside Circle Foundation, 2009; Jericho Circle Project, 2009), there has been no previous scholarship about these programs.

### Gender and Crime

Crime, particularly violent crime, is clearly gendered. Drawing upon data from Maguire and Pastore (2009a,b,c,d), Table 1 illustrates, in the United States in 2006, males accounted for the vast majority of violent crime arrests. The only crimes, violent and nonviolent, in which women and girls take the lead are prostitution and running away from home (Maguire & Pastore, 2009a). Even these latter exceptions do not account for the prostitutes' clientele and who it may be that the girls are running away from. The table also reveals that males dominate the prison landscape by overwhelming margins. Although some scholars have worried about a recent increase in female arrests for violence, Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Zhong, & Ackerman (2005) found this increase to be an artifact of a net-widening criminal justice system and not due to any increase in actual female violent behavior. When it comes to serious crime, females are simply not the problem.

It is striking that criminological theories so rarely consider the relationship between gender and crime. Deterrence and rational choice theories calibrate the incentive structure of criminal behavior, but do not examine why males conduct a different cost/benefit analysis than females (Clarke & Felson, 1993; Nagin & Pogarsky, 2003). Social learning theories tell us that criminal learning takes place among deviant peers

Table 1  
*Criminal Justice Comparisons between Males and Females in 2006*

	Male		Female	
	Total	%	Total	%
<i>Arrests</i>				
Homicide	7,145	89	923	11
Rape	15,155	99	202	1
Robbery	64,426	89	8,275	11
Assault	225,512	79	58,230	21
<i>Incarceration</i>				
Inmates	1,399,075	93	103,104	7
Death Row	3,312	98	54	2

and is behaviorally reinforced, but do not say why this takes place more often among male peer groups (Akers, 1998). Control and life course theories argue that poor parenting and weak social ties to various social institutions lead to delinquency and crime, but fail to explain why the daughters of rotten parents do not behave like the sons (Hirschi & Gottfriedson, 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Social disorganization theories contend that concentrated poverty and weak community controls lead to crime-prone neighborhoods, but are silent about the greater percentage of law-abiding female residents of these troubled locations (Sampson & Wilson, 1998). Strain theories suggest that the materialistic pursuit of the American Dream leads to greed in both street and white collar crime, but do not ponder why it is men who are thieving, robbing, and embezzling (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2001). Labeling and shame theories highlight stigmatization and outcasting, particularly among the poor and minorities, but overlook the fact that it is poor, minority males who are the primary recipients of deviant labels (Braithwaite, 1989; Wellford & Triplett, 1993).

Among sociological theories of gender and crime, one explanation is Messerschmidt's (1993) structured action theory. He argues that the social construction of gender can explain much of the discrepancy between male and female crime rates. Following Connell (1987, 1995), who does not retain a criminological focus, Messerschmidt argues that the dominant or hegemonic construction of masculinity predisposes males to criminality and violence. For Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), masculinity is not a unitary concept, and cultures will manifest multiple conceptions of masculinity. The gender scholars argue that a dominant, "hegemonic" masculinity is contrasted not only with femininity, but also with alternative "subordinated" and "oppositional" constructions of masculinity. Hence, jocks may represent the hegemonic ideal more readily than geeks or hippies. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the culturally-prescribed ideal, and therefore, accorded the highest status. Individual males vary in the resources they can bring to bare to achieve this status.

In American culture, hegemonic masculinity is characterized by authority, control, independence, heterosexuality, aggressiveness, and a capacity for violence. Mosher (1991) characterizes hegemonic masculinity as "hypermasculinity," referring to its primary dimensions of dangerousness, acceptance of violence, and dominance, particularly over women. An individual with few resources in one arena may compensate in another, such as when a poor, jobless youth displays his masculinity with sexist banter, wearing gang-style clothing, or carrying a gun. Each of these interactional displays asserts masculinity and enhances status.

### *Hypermasculinity in Prison*

According to Goffman (1961), prison is a "total institution" because all aspects of inmate life are conducted in the same place and under the same authority; much of the activity is conducted in groups and in tightly scheduled, prescribed, and similar ways; and organized with deference to the aims of the institution rather than varied by the particular needs of individual members. Constructions of masculinity in prison develop within a homosocial total institution. While multiple masculinities are present in prison,

the dominant construction intensifies several elements of hegemonic masculinity. “Although 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 dominated prison culture” (Jewkes, 2005, p. 61). Hypermasculinity is reflected in the norms of inmates, often called the “prison code” (Sabo, Kupers, & London, 2001):

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. Do not trust anyone. 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. (pp. 10-11)

Inside prison, masculinity resources are severely limited. Inmates have the lowest status in the wider society, are without work, have little or no money, are unable to express heterosexuality, have no distinctive clothing, little autonomy, no freedom, and are likely to be poorly educated and from a racial or ethnic minority. Thus male inmates seeking interactional confirmation of their masculine status are much less able to exploit the standard cultural markers of hegemonic masculinity: socio-economic status, a reputable profession, fashionable clothing, independence, whiteness, and heterosexuality.

In conditions of scarcity, fierce competition for status intensifies the construction and reconstruction of male identity. “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” (Phillips, 2001, p. 13). Ethnographic accounts have identified the following common strategies to obtain status, some that generalize across settings in the United States (Phillips, 2001), England (Jewkes, 2005), and India (Bandyopadhyay, 2006). Each of these strategies intensifies the hegemonic expression of gender into a form of hypermasculinity, so much so that it approaches a “caricature of masculinity” (Toch, 1998, p. 172).

### *Wearing a Mask*

Inmates believe it is necessary to present a hypermasculine public façade that may conflict with a more nuanced private self-identity. “The public persona that individuals present when interacting with others inside prison may be a familiar guise, constructed and refined through a long process of socialization into male-dominated subcultures as a child, adolescent, and adult” (Jewkes, 2005, p. 54). Various metaphors are used, such as mask or armor, to emphasize a distinction between a public and private identity. The armor protects the inmate from revealing vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and other qualities that might undermine a hypermasculine identity.

*Capacity for Violence*

Inmates can establish their manhood by taking action, usually physical aggression, against another who they believe has wronged them. Development of the physical body and fighting skills help establish the public edifice as invulnerable and threatening (Sabo, 2001). As one inmate observed,

There are certain actions and moods one has to project... Men threaten one another daily. A man disrespects you, and in return you threaten him. Someone cuts in line in front of you, so you must threaten him.... To save face, and thus your future existence in prison, you have to fight. Kindness is weakness, gentleness is weakness. Care is weakness, sadness is weakness, and love is weakness. (Carceral, 2004, pp. 28, 35, 36)

*Associations*

Although the prison code suggests that inmates should “do their own time,” meaning that they should keep their problems to themselves (Scarce, 2002), forming relationships with other inmates who can be trusted can minimize the vulnerability of living in isolation. Phillips (2001) distinguishes associations from friendships, however.

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. (p. 17)

Friendship is based on mutual care and affection and grows with shared expressions of hopes and fears. Inmate substitution of association for friendship is a masculine resource because it is an expression of self-reliance and circumscribed trust.

*Inmate Stratification*

Race is tightly bound with social stratification and segregation in American society (Massey & Denton, 1993), and racial tension persists in the prison setting where low-income, minority males are disproportionately represented. Among minority males, expressions of hypermasculinity may be used “as a defensive strategy to counter their feelings of marginality” (Gibbs & Merighi, 1994, p. 80). Inmates are often stratified by race, but also by the kinds of crimes they committed. Some crimes are masculinity resources, while others are liabilities. Crimes that imply toughness or rebelliousness, such as being a “cop killer,” are a masculine resource that can enhance status. Although all crimes are exploitive, the weaker or more vulnerable the victim, the less status it accords. Raping or killing a woman or a child is afforded the lowest status. “It was as if the weakness of the victim inhabited the perpetrator and made him weak ... killing a

weaker person was perceived by the prisoners as an emasculation of the masculine self” (Bandyopadhyay, 2006, p. 190). Inmate hierarchies are established using the masculine resources available, primarily by hiding vulnerability and expressing physical dominance over other men, and reinforced by criminal history.

### Redefining Prison Masculinity

In a literature review of men’s self help groups by Mankowski and Silvergleid (1999-2000, p. 283), hegemonic masculinity in American culture has been found to “contradict basic human needs and desires for intimacy and emotional expression, creating stress and conflict between men’s core selves and social expectations.” This contradiction is intensified in prison as the gender strategies enacted for survival in prison are also criminogenic risk factors that limit inmates’ likelihood of successful societal reintegration. Indeed, successful reentry is rare. Sixty-seven percent of former inmates are rearrested within three years of release, and 52 percent are reincarcerated (Petersilia, 2003, p. 140).

Toch (1998) argues that hypermasculinity may serve short-term goals in prison, but is unsustainable and ultimately counter-productive. “Sooner or later, hypermasculine men must age and must face their decreased capacity and propensity for violence” (p. 174). As their hypermasculine resources diminish, inmates face depression, hopelessness, and may resort to violent and suicidal escapist fantasies—a “pseudo-reparative script”—in which an inmate “believes that he can save the meaning of his life by heroically losing it” (p. 175). Given the long duration of many inmates’ sentences, Toch proposes programming to address hypermasculinity and especially include men who are experiencing diminishing masculine resources because they would be the most receptive to and in need of an alternative conception of masculine identity.

Surprisingly, given the rise of men’s studies and masculinities research in criminology, almost no attention is given to interventions that help inmates redefine masculinity in a way that will help them succeed upon reentry. If limited, distorted adaptation to manhood is a major source of crime, if prison culture exacerbates this problem, then how would researchers and practitioners design interventions to specifically isolate “hypermasculine” risk factors and alter them? What would such interventions look like programmatically? Is it possible to redefine masculinity in the prison environment without putting inmates at risk of exploitation by others? These questions guided the author’s inquiry into gender-centered prison programming. This article explores the approach of one prison intervention model specifically designed to address hypermasculinity in prison. The model originated within the paradigm of the “mythopoetic men’s movement,” which provides the context for the prison programs studied here.

### *Mythopoetic Redefinitions of Masculinity*

Shepard Bliss, who coined the term “mythopoetic,” writes that the word “refers to re-mythologizing. It means re-making, so the mythopoetic approach means revisioning masculinity for our time” (Bliss, 1995, pp. 292-293). Couched in symbolic language,

mythopoetic writers explore current understandings of masculinity and redefine it as part of an identity politics. According to Barton (2000, p. 3):

Mythopoetic men's work uses myths and poetry as vehicles for accessing inner emotions, inner realities, and feelings.... By using the tools of myth, poetry, and experiential processes, men can access these feelings and emotions to re-vision a form of masculinity that is healthy for himself, his family or household, his relationships, his community, and his planet.

National bestsellers like Robert Bly's (1990) *Iron John*, Sam Keen's (1991) *Fire in the Belly*, and Michael Meade's (1993) *Men and the Water of Life*, helped spark a mythopoetic men's movement in the 1990s. Personal growth workshops emerged and both the popular literature and the men's gatherings have been a focus of scholarly work in men's studies (Barton, 2000; Kimmel, 1995; Messner, 1997; Schwalbe, 1996).

A sociological study of the mythopoetic movement by Schwalbe (1996) uncovers the working philosophy of the movement participants and finds that it offers a critique of hegemonic masculinity and prescribes a redefinition. Much of the philosophy in the mythopoetic movement originates with Carl Jung. The central Jungian concept is the archetype, which refers to Jung's belief that the human psyche includes a complex, universal, symbolic system that guides and patterns behavior. Whether archetypes are inborn or culturally learned matters less than the notion that they are powerful forces and subconscious. In Jung's system, there are masculine and feminine archetypes, which roughly conform to hegemonic expectations: masculinity is defined by order, defending territory, being a provider, and heterosexual attraction to women. Femininity is expressed by intimacy, nurturance, child-bearing, and heterosexual attraction to men.

While masculine archetypes are dominant for men, feminine archetypes are also present. The Jungian project of personal growth is to first understand how these archetypes guide behavior, making their operation conscious, and then integrating the polarities.

This Jungian notion of "deep masculinity" is not an exaggerated form of traditional masculinity. Rather, it is the secure, generative masculinity that develops after a man has accepted his feminine side. In Jungian terms, this is the development of the masculine personality into a fuller form, after union with its opposite.... [Men who] are thus immature in the Jungian sense, may be unable to channel their masculine energies into anything but violent, domineering, or destructive behavior. (Schwalbe, 1996, p. 51)

The belief held by the mythopoetic men is that mature masculinity retains dimensions of masculinity, but also integrates feminine qualities. This may be similar to the androgyny hypothesis in personality psychology and the empirical findings that integration supports mental health (Lefkowitz & Zeldow, 2006).

Mythopoetic men's work tends to focus on four masculine archetypes: the lover, warrior, magician, and king (Moore & Gillette, 1990). The lover symbolizes passion, nurturing, empathy, and sensuality. The warrior reflects commitment to a cause, loyalty, determination, and decisiveness. The magician is the source of creativity, insight, self knowledge, and personal transformation. The king provides order, wisdom, counsel, and blessing. Schwalbe (1996, p. 39) writes,

The greatest insight can be achieved by entering into dialogue with these imaginal characters to find out what they have to tell us about who and what we are, about our troubles, and about what to do.... Because all archetypes have positive and negative sides, there is in us, for example, not just a king archetype, but also a good king that leads us to act wisely and generously, and a bad king that leads us to act like tyrants.

The mythopoetic perspective, like recent gender theories, identifies multiple masculinities (though uses a different conceptual framework than the gender scholars in social science) and is critical of the destructive effects of hypermasculinity. Following Jung, redefining hegemonic masculinity includes a personal exploration of the four masculine archetypes and how they are expressed in behavior that is either destructive or generative. In so doing, the approach rejects the pernicious effects of hypermasculinity while seeking to offer a prosocial masculine alternative. Though a grassroots movement, the mythopoetic men have created programming that appears responsive to the concerns of the gender scholars about hypermasculinity and offers practical steps toward redefinition.

#### Implementing Mythopoetic Ideas: The ManKind Project

The ManKind Project (MKP) is the largest voluntary organization within the mythopoetic men's movement. The prison program volunteers are almost entirely drawn from members of the ManKind Project. MKP is a men's organization that sponsors the New Warrior Training Adventure (NWTa), which, according to its website, is a "modern male initiation and self-examination. We believe that this is crucial to the development of a healthy and mature male self, no matter how old a man is. It is the 'hero's journey' of classical literature and myth that has nearly disappeared in modern culture. We ask men to stop living vicariously through movies, television, addictions and distractions and step up into their own adventure—in real time and surrounded by other men." (ManKind Project, 2009). MKP advertises that more than 36,000 men have attended the NWTa, and about 3,000 participate each year.

In addition to the New Warrior Training Adventure, MKP encourages men to "integrate" their experience at the NWTa by joining an Integration Group. These are self-directed support groups of 5-15 men, which tend to meet on a weekly basis. The participants gather to discuss personal challenges and pursue opportunities for growth and community service. Positive research findings about participation in the ManKind Project have been reported by Mankowski, Maton, Burke, Hoover, and Anderson



(2000), demonstrating reductions in gender role conflict and depression symptoms, and enhanced life goals, self-esteem, and life satisfaction.

MKP is an international organization, with centers in most states in the U.S., in several European countries, Australia, and South Africa. Given the scale of MKP, many off-shoot projects have emerged, including the two prison projects which are the focus on this article: the Inside Circle and the Jericho Circle. This study examines these prison intervention programs, exploring their attempt to help inmates by challenging their hypermasculine identities and assisting them in redefining masculinity in a way that will reduce their criminality.

The central research questions of this study are: What would a gender-focused correctional intervention look like? How would a program assist male inmates in redefining masculinity to make it less criminogenic? In what ways do the Inside Circle and Jericho Circle programs address hypermasculinity and seek to replace it?

### Method

The data from this study come from individual interviews with program directors and volunteers with the Jericho Circle and Inside Circle programs. Thirteen interviews were conducted between June and September, 2006. In addition, the author was a participant/observer for one Jericho Circle intensive program in June, 2006. The ten Jericho project subjects were selected based on their participation in the JCP intensive that the author observed. The three Inside Circle subjects were identified because of their leadership and extensive involvement in that program and based on the recommendation of the program founder/director.

The interviews were semi-structured, each relying on a common set of open-ended questions. Interviews lasted from one to two hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Nine interviews were conducted by telephone and four were in person. As part of a longer set of open-ended questions asked in each interview, the following were particularly relevant to this study:

- How much experience and training have you had in facilitation of men's groups in general and with the prison circle program in particular?
- Describe the prison circle program, especially the weekly circles and intensive week-end trainings.
- What specific short-term and long-term outcomes do you believe come from weekly circles and intensives?
- What do inmates need that they do not get outside of this program?
- Is it safe for men to open up emotionally when they are incarcerated?
- How is this work uniquely "men's work"? What aspects of the program are designed specifically for inmates, what is applicable to men in general, and what is applicable to both men and women?

In addition to these questions, program founders and administrators were asked about the history of the programs, the current organization of programs, the programs' relationships to prison authorities and to the ManKind Project, as well as program objec-

tives and practices. Because the interviews were semi-structured, subjects were encouraged to elaborate in areas where they had specific knowledge, experience, or interest. Websites of the prison circle programs were also reviewed.

Data were coded and analyzed using a qualitative software program, Atlas.ti. Themes relevant to the central research questions were identified. The results section reports themes relevant to the core research questions and are based on similar responses given by at least a majority of the interview subjects. Differences of opinion, though rare, are noted as relevant. Quotations are illustrative of these themes.

Because of the small sample, these data are not reported with statistical tables and are not meant to be generalizable to program volunteers in general, nor as a test of any theoretical hypotheses regarding prison masculinities, nor as an evaluation of the effectiveness of program implementation. Instead, the purpose of the analysis is to elucidate the conceptual model of the program, how it is implemented, and its relationship to the critique of hypermasculinity by gender scholars.

All of the subjects were white males, from mid-40's to mid-60's in age. Each of the volunteers brought significant group facilitation experience to their participation in prison work. Of the thirteen interviewees, one was the founder of the Inside Circle Foundation, another of the Jericho Circle Project. Most had little or no prior experience volunteering in prisons, but two had worked extensively as prison staff in counseling and administrative positions and one had spent considerable time as an inmate.

All of the men had a background with MKP. Inside this organization, experience is generally defined by the number of times a man has staffed a New Warrior Training Adventure. While all men have been participants of the NWTA, many go on to staff additional weekends. Nine of the thirteen interviewees had significant backgrounds with MKP, with at least fifteen NWTA staffings and as many as fifty. In addition, men active with MKP, like these volunteers, typically belong to an Integration Group. The men therefore drew upon their facilitation skills and personal experiences of their own men's groups in addition to the experiences with the NWTA. Most of the volunteers also drew upon facilitation skills learned outside of MKP, some of whom were professional therapists or coaches, others having participated in programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and various spiritual disciplines.

## Results

### *The Inside Circle Foundation and the Jericho Circle Project*

The Inside Circle and the Jericho Circle Project prison programs have two basic components: weekly support circles and three or four day intensive trainings, partly modeled on the MKP New Warrior Training Adventure. Both are facilitated primarily by volunteers active with MKP. The weekly circles, modeled on MKP Integration Groups, provide an opportunity for a small group of inmates (approximately 8-10) to meet and discuss matters of concern to them and offer mutual support in a confidential forum. Sometimes facilitators will provide specific topics or lead them through predetermined exercises. Other times, the agenda will follow the participants' requests to

work on issues most important to them at the time. Some groups are ongoing, while others may form and disband after a pre-specified number of meetings.

Prison intensives are three or four days in length, and generally include 12-15 inmates who have been active in the weekly circles. They are staffed by 15-20 volunteers, who spend long days (8:00am-8:00pm) with the inmates. This high volunteer to inmate ratio is one of the unique features of the program and distinguishes it from other approaches that rely on a single facilitator to support a group. At the beginning of the intensive, each inmate selects a volunteer to be his mentor for the duration of the week-end. The activities of the intensives are highly coordinated and meant to be emotionally challenging in a supportive environment.

The intensives invoke the concept of initiation—a gathering of men to challenge initiates to take responsibility for their lives and their communities. According to the Jericho Circle website (Jericho Circle Project, 2009):

It is our belief that many young men in our society turn to crime and substance abuse because they have not experienced an effective initiation into manhood. Young men are hungry for guidance, mentoring and challenge from responsible men in their community. In the absence of this experience, men who are passing through and beyond adolescence frequently create their own “pseudo-initiations” (gang rituals, body marking, trials by violence to themselves and others, etc.). While these rites of passage are intended to prove the manhood of young men, they often end up doing the opposite—trapping these men in behaviors and environments that keep them in a state of dependency and take them further away from what it really means to be a man.

Using mythopoetic references, the volunteers describe the work as a rite of passage, one that has been gender-segregated in many cultures, but has been lost in the modern world. In the absence of a culturally-prescribed ritual that is guided by male adults who role model a mature masculinity, boys age into manhood by looking to peer groups and popular media for instruction. The hegemonic cultural markers may explain why the inmates in these prison circle programs became criminal offenders.

### *Program Dimensions*

Volunteers describe their programs as having two fundamental features that make them unique. The first is creating a “safe container” that allows men to develop enough trust with each other to speak openly about personal issues. The second feature they call “doing work” and refers to a set of techniques that enables the participants to explore personal problems and identify root causes, develop ways to solve these problems, and to identify and pursue individual goals that give their lives a sense of direction, meaning, and purpose.

*The Safe Container.* The program volunteers seek to create enough trust inside the circle that the men can speak honestly and experiment with new, prosocial identities

without fear of judgment and ridicule. The achievement of this is a primary goal and crafting it requires several interrelated activities and conditions. The term “container” is widely in the mythopoetic men’s groups and refers to group norms, agreements, and dramaturgical space that “brings a sense of inclusiveness, belonging, coherence and purpose ... a vessel which allows the participants to identify and elaborate the mythological themes in their lives” (Liebman, 1991, p. 10). A “safe” container is not achieved immediately, but develops slowly over many months. At first, men are carefully selected to participate and each member is approved by the staff and by the inmate participants. Volunteers place a great emphasis on providing the opportunity for men in the circle to share issues of concern to them. The value of creating a safe container is in allowing men to feel comfortable enough to talk about whatever is most important to them, without fear of criticism.

One belief among the volunteers is that when men enter the circle for a meeting, they can experience a *psychological or spiritual shift*, one that enables them to become more mindful of themselves and the others in the room. A facilitator, for example, might greet each circle member individually as they enter the room. He might ask them a thought-provoking question for the man to ponder in a meditative silence until the circle is fully gathered. The ManKind Project and the prison circle programs are non-denominational. Most volunteers describe the importance of creating a sacred atmosphere, but one that is inclusive of any participants’ particular religious or secular beliefs. This sets the programs apart from prison ministry projects, which may have conversion as part of their agenda.

Volunteers argue that a safe container is created when participants actively endorse a belief in the *equality* of each man in the circle and that each man should be fully accepted by the circle. The volunteers reject essentialist distinctions fostered in prison culture among inmates and between the inmates and others. This includes a rejection of a series of structural hierarchies. Inmates self-stratify by crime and race, and the men’s circles actively encourage integrated groups, although this is sometimes difficult to achieve given that prison systems often segregate inmates to reduce racial conflict. One of the Inside Circle program founders noted,

It was so dangerous in the beginning that the chaplain would go to the blocks at night after it was locked down, after dinner, and get individual inmates and take them to the chapel because Nolan [inmate founder of ICF] was very clear that he wanted this to cross racial lines. So you’d get Blacks and Mexicans and Whites and one by one bring them to the chapel and they’d have their meeting. And when they were done they’d go back home, and all the rest of the guys in the blocks only knew that the chaplain had pulled someone out.

In the racially-charged prison setting, creating an integrated circle required secrecy and careful implementation.

A second layer of hierarchy is between the volunteers and inmates. One Jericho Circle volunteer argued that the container is strengthened because of the value of equality emphasized in the circle.

Treatment in prisons is never egalitarian. It's the treaters and the treated, them and us.... The inmates can only go so far with [a treatment provider] and he can only go so far with them. [A treatment provider] is expected to control his self-disclosure. [Equality] is the real truth, so all the other models are based on power differentials.... It is the only way that the deepest work can happen—I don't think that can happen in unequal relationships.

The volunteers identify with the inmates as equals. They form a circle of men with the inmates and will do their own work as participants in the circle, thus bridging the divide between the “treaters and the treated.” This kind of equality enables volunteers to role model emotional openness and trust, as well as provides inmates an opportunity to enact social support.

A third feature of the safe container is *accountability* that is produced by shared agreements and the assurance that if these agreements are violated, the transgression will be addressed. Although some of the terms are non-negotiable, such as confidentiality, all are discussed and the men will customarily provide a gesture of assent, such as a “thumbs up.” Building a safe container is, in part, a democratic process of creating shared understandings of what is and what is not permissible behavior among circle members. Once agreements are reached, the circle holds each member accountable to them by challenging men who violate agreements to recognize the impact of that behavior on themselves, the circle, and others. The volunteers believe that holding men accountable strengthens the container by providing clear boundaries. This fosters trust that other men will not betray their confidence and also that, within the container, it is acceptable to “let go,” even “push against” the container in order to test its relative safety.

In sum, the volunteers are quite intentional about the need to create a safe container, a space that is distinctive from mundane or routine group environments. To do so, they try to cultivate a distinctive atmosphere through ritual practices. They try to reduce distinctions between volunteers and inmates by opening the circle to any man's concerns and treating all members equally, including and especially volunteer facilitators, who help model personal sharing and social support. And they co-create normative agreements and hold participants accountable to those commitments, which help inmates to develop a sense of personal responsibility. The safe container can be seen as a location to develop new masculine resources that do not require hypermasculine expressions. It is a respite from the prison environment that relentlessly provokes masculinity challenges and responses that are consonant with the prison code.

*Doing work.* The men's circle volunteers see themselves conducting an intensive personal growth program, one that volunteers believe “goes deeper” than traditional

group counseling, but that also falls outside the traditional domains of psychological counseling and religious ministries. Building a safe container is the first step. The second is “doing work,” which refers to a process where the group’s attention is placed on one man’s personal issue, one or more men act as facilitators, and the rest serve in support roles. Primarily, the circle programs emphasize emotion work—verbally identifying feelings and expressing them in healthy ways.

In describing emotion work, volunteers use techniques that are widely used in the ManKind Project. The first, “bioenergetic work,” refers to group processes that elicit or intensify emotional expression and is influenced by the work of Alexander Lowen (1976). In part, bioenergetic work refers to the facilitator’s attentiveness to physical expression of emotion (body language). Facilitators will also use physical techniques to increase expressiveness. As a simple illustration, if a man who is “doing work” says that he feels “burdened” by his problem, the facilitator might have some circle members place their hands on the man’s shoulders and bear down on him while the man continues to tell his story, thus physically intensifying the experience of being burdened. Volunteers also use “psychodrama” as part of doing work, following the tradition of J.L. Moreno (1953). This would include role plays that reenact past situations, from troubling to traumatic, or role plays that rehearse future scenarios, such as practicing a healthy response to an impending confrontation.

Doing work involves bioenergetics, psychodrama, and a third element drawn from the mythopoetic men’s movement. The volunteers believe that insight about personal struggles can be found in myths and legends, like the story of Iron John (Bly, 1990), that describe dramatic struggles of noble figures. A Jericho Circle volunteer suggested,

What we can offer them is more of a challenge and maybe a harder edge to the work. That translates into a focus on accountability, the dimension of the hero’s journey which is really an ordeal that we ask men to undergo in order to discover something about who they are. The weekend [intensive] is based on a hero’s journey model. Even the work that is done on a weekly basis is a microcosm of the hero’s journey.

Solace and hope and fortitude can be found by envisioning one’s own drama as a “hero’s journey.” The mythological narratives help inmates re-examine their own lives as a struggle—full of challenges and failures, but one that is not yet over. By identifying with a heroic figure, they can muster the resolve to change their behavior and lead successful lives.

Doing work inside the container begins with the identification of a feeling, often referred to as a “charge.” The man explores an emotional charge and any resulting dysfunctional behavior. Facilitators may seek to elicit a much greater emotional expression by having the person doing work visualize and describe the emotion, often also employing psychodramatic techniques (role playing). The volunteers, using mythopoetic terminology, reference this work as an exploration of the “lover” archetype. The dialogue then shifts to a second stage, exploring the idea that the dysfunctional behavior has its roots in a childhood wound in which the transgressor was once the victim. The

volunteers, again using mythopoetic terminology, refer to the “magician” archetype, typifying the idea that long standing dysfunctional behaviors can be transformed by recognizing their origins.

In this stage of work, a developmental model is constructed. The child experiences a wound and develops a defensive coping strategy and a negative self-concept. This carries into adulthood, generating dysfunctional behavior in response to situations that trigger the early emotional wound. Volunteers draw on Jung and describe this reactivity as operating from one’s “shadow.” A third stage emphasizes the distinction between behavior and self-concepts guided by early wounds, and those guided by mature and conscious intentions. Taking action that overcomes old patterns is viewed as “heroic.” Therefore, the volunteers often draw upon the “warrior” archetype. With this focus, the facilitator may challenge the man to take responsibility for the harmful effects of his behavior.

The volunteers see the “warrior” focus as a particularly masculine approach to personal growth work because they see it as supportive, but directly challenging—the “harder edge.” The men are very willing to call each other on their “bullshit” or excuses. They also call them on their integrity, challenging each other to live up to commitments they made while participating in the group.

Once a man does his “work,” the final stage is to “honor” the man for his willingness to share his vulnerability and take charge of his behavior. This is a shift in focus to the “king” archetype. By couching a man’s personal work in mythological terms, the program volunteers provide an alternative belief system regarding the nature of masculinity and what it means to be a man. Specifically, they are suggesting that manhood involves a self-awareness that explores the four archetypes, which become metaphorical touchstones in a journey toward personal growth and responsibility.

### Transforming Prison Masculinities

An important element of the prison code is called “doing your own time.” Inmates are supposed to keep to themselves and never develop close, trusting relationships. They should not show any vulnerability or talk about personal issues because exhibiting any sign of weakness provides an opening for exploitation or domination. The volunteers describe this as wearing a mask or armor. Of course, this poses a challenge for prison programs that emphasize emotional expression within a circle of support. The intention is to have men, as they are ready, to remove their masks in the circle. An Inside Circle volunteer described how,

There is a look about men who have spent a long time in prison. I just call it the “look.”... It’s dead, the face gives off no hint. You may be thinking homicidal thoughts or you may be in ecstasy, but your face doesn’t give anything away because in prison it’s dangerous. That whole culture says, “Don’t show what’s going on inside, be a mask.”

The metaphors of armor, mask, or look, are vivid, but vague. What the volunteers describe appears to have two elements: not sharing personal information and not showing emotions that might make inmates look weak, such as sadness, fear, or shame. Each element provides its own potential vulnerability.

A major concern of the volunteers is that men's participation in the program will subject them to ridicule or ostracism, and they have seen evidence of this. Participants are instructed that they must be cautious about their personal and emotional expressiveness. The inmates are expected to make their own, conscious decisions about revealing feelings and trusting others inside the circle and out in the yard. They should make their own assessments of the risk. Removing the mask, at least in circle, is necessary for personal growth and increased self-awareness. So the volunteers encourage the men to be conscious of their actions and know that their mask is removed, but not relinquished. One Jericho volunteer, who also worked professionally as a counselor in a prison outside of Massachusetts, argued the following:

I believe you can take off your armor and still survive inside the prison system. In some situations, you have to have the armor to protect yourself. I think there are ways of learning that you can protect yourself without using the prison code and being defensive all the time.... And know how to let down that shield, and to transform that shield, so that it doesn't have to be based on fear all the time. And it doesn't have to be based on becoming so vulnerable that they can be taken advantage of. We all have shields and know how to use those shields in a positive, healthy way.

The capacity to remove and replace the mask or armor consciously is a goal of the circle work and seeks to overcome the conflict between emotional maturity and self-protection. As Toch (1998) argued, this may be essential to mental health for inmates.

The program challenges men to trust one another within the circle. This is a direct challenge to the prison code, which discourages friendship and intimacy, limiting relationships to short term, highly conditional associations (Phillips, 2001). These associations are further constrained by status; it is generally unacceptable to form trusting relationships that cross racial lines and with men who have committed particular crimes, such as sex offenders. Inside the circle, the emotion work calls upon the men to begin sharing their vulnerabilities and to offer and receive support without experiencing manipulation or abuse. They reconstruct masculinity by suggesting that removing the mask is the courageous act and not a sign of weakness.

Eventually, trust can build between men of different backgrounds, and they are able to participate in intense emotion work. Often this will include psychodramatic techniques that involve several men role-playing characters in re-enactments of traumatic scenes. Or they will involve bio-energetic techniques such as pushing up against a mattress, using physicality to help a man recollect the emotional intensity of the prior experience. As the man pushes against the mattress, others hold it back, challenging him to push it past them in order to symbolically represent the task of overcoming a personal



problem. One Inside Circle volunteer describes how this work illustrates the trust that forms inside the circle.

I was with a guy who was having a hard time not so long ago, and I said, "Somebody go get a mattress." And one of these great, big Black guys said, "We don't need no fucking mattress," and he just put his body up against this man. The great, big, wide black body just crushing somebody in the corner, saying, "Okay, mother, come out of there." He just took all those blows, and it was almost like it was therapeutic for him, too. And it was a Black on White, and in the yard that would be a race riot, but inside there, they trust each other.

At Folsom prison, where the inmate population is often segregated by race, such instances of intense interracial emotional and physical contact and support are particularly illustrative of the trust that has been formed in Inside Circle groups.

The emotion work in the circle is designed to re-enact personal challenges, even violent experiences. The volunteers believe that using a circle of men for this is crucial because violence is a prominent expression of hegemonic masculinity, but one that a circle of men can also redefine as inappropriate and counter-productive to manhood. The psychodramas elicit emotional intensity and, in that charged environment, the facilitators lead the participants toward an understanding of how their emotions can trigger violent behavior, and also how they can be expressed in other more healthy ways. A Jericho volunteer described how the program works with emotion:

Many men, for lots of reasons, have been told they cannot feel their feelings, it's not okay. You can't be afraid, you can't be angry, you have to control it. And a lot of traditional therapy and treatment in prisons teaches men how to contain it, as opposed to expressing those emotions in the body and letting that energy flow through the body. What I've learned is that when men learn how to feel their feelings in the body, it takes about a minute or minute and a half for the intense feelings, and then the energy just wanes... If you know how your feelings are going to flow through your body and you are not afraid of that, you can choose your reaction. We were taught to be angry by yelling and screaming and wanting to kill somebody.... Well if that's the only option for behavior for feeling that feeling, you're somewhat limited.... Once you are comfortable going through the wave of your emotion, you can choose your behavior and choose behavior that is appropriate to the situation.

In response to a troubling emotion, the approach taken by this program can be distinguished from other models that emphasize emotional control/repression or cathartic emotional release. The focus is primarily on emotional recognition. By becoming aware of the emotion by focusing attention on it, naming it and describing it, a man can choose a behavioral response to it rather than act reflexively.

Ultimately, the volunteers' concern about removing the mask in prison is emblematic of their model for personal growth. Their theory is that repressed emotions are inevitably triggered by external stressors, and behavioral responses are likely to be defensive and dysfunctional. Emotional self-awareness involves recognition of individual triggers and conditioned behavioral responses. The circle works with men to improve their ability to identify their emotional states, the immediate causes of their emotional experience, the historical association of similar triggers and emotional reactions, and how those triggers and emotions have led to their antisocial behaviors. Through this chain of recognition, the volunteers believe the inmates can break the chain of unhealthy reactions and choose healthier, prosocial alternatives.

#### Conclusion: Doing Men's Work in Prison

Sentenced criminal offenders are incorporated into a homosocial prison culture that values emotional stoicism (wearing a mask), distrust (associations, not friendship), dominance (especially through violence or the threat of it), and stratification (especially by race and type of crime). Toch (1998) and others (see Sabo et al., 2001; Jewkes, 2005) find a debilitating tension between the cultural demands of prison hypermasculinity and the personal needs of individual inmates for emotional self-expression and affiliation.

The purpose of this study is to report the findings of interviews with circle program founders and volunteers in order to examine how their program works with prison hypermasculinity. While the model draws on commonly used personal growth and therapeutic techniques, the men's circle programs do not build upon or refer to popular correctional treatment models that are typically the subject of rehabilitation research (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000). Therefore, they lack empirical validation and remain largely unknown in the correctional treatment landscape and future research should certainly include program evaluation.

The circle programs create conditions in which men of diverse backgrounds can learn to trust one another and recognize similar patterns of trauma, need, and dysfunction. Although tension remains between men of different backgrounds in the prison system, and the men are cautious with one another, the volunteers discover that these interactions facilitate the personal work of the inmates. The central premise of the volunteers is that the prison mask can be transformed and used consciously, rather than reactively or defensively. This requires a safe container and building enough trust to share personal issues in a group setting. According to this program's theory, for men generally, and especially for men in prison, clarity comes after doing emotion work—identifying and expressing feelings intensely, but safely. The program helps redefine the core expression of masculinity as bravely identifying and expressing a full range of emotion rather than as stoic denial of feelings or explosive behavioral reactions to them. The program seeks to help inmates dismantle conditioned links between emotion and antisocial behaviors, and consciously choose mature responses to emotional triggers.

The program as described by the volunteers is embedded within a mythopoetic belief system, one that includes a definition of masculinity that challenges both hegemonic and prison hypermasculinities. However, the intervention draws upon group therapeutic and personal growth movement techniques such as bioenergetics and psychodrama that were not designed specifically as gendered interventions. The volunteers recognize that much of the work itself is not gender-specific. And they expressed varied perspectives on the relationship between the program model and masculinity-specific interventions. For some, doing men's work simply means that the program focuses on a particular population—males—not that the work is particularly specialized for that group. Most, however, identify features of the program they believe are uniquely suited to men and the problem of hypermasculinity.

Using the language of ritual and mythology and working in groups that seek to build a strong community, the programs provide an opportunity for inmates to explore their conceptions of manhood and how well conformity to the hypermasculine prison code serves them. The Inside Circle Foundation and the Jericho Circle Project are innovative correctional programs that provide weekly support circles and intensive experiential weekend experiences for inmates. They are unusual in their explicit focus on challenging hypermasculinity in prison. According to program volunteers, the model offers a unique and influential opportunity for inmates to experience personal growth and transformation by developing emotional intelligence and personal integrity.

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