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# Never Put Your Head Down Unless You Pray: The Stories of African American Men in the Wisconsin Prison System

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**NEVER PUT YOUR HEAD DOWN UNLESS YOU PRAY:  
THE STORIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN IN THE WISCONSIN PRISON SYSTEM**

by  
Julia Kirchner

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

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in Anthropology

at  
The University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee  
December 2012

ABSTRACT

NEVER PUT YOUR HEAD DOWN UNLESS YOU PRAY:  
THE STORIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN IN THE WISCONSIN PRISON  
SYSTEM

By

Julia Kirchner

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, December 2012

Under the Supervision of Professor J. Patrick Gray

Prior research on offender narratives has not examined culture as a factor in how prisoners explain their crimes. This qualitative ethnographic research project explores the self-constructions of African American male prisoners using both participant observation with active gang members on the street and discourse analysis of over 300 letters written by incarcerated men. Focusing primarily on six prisoner consultants, this study investigates the claims that offenders make about themselves in reference to their identity. These convicted felons justify their crimes as rational under the circumstances prevalent in segregated inner cities. In reference to economic crimes such as drug dealing and armed robbery, they claim that acquired illegal money makes them feel like independent adults who can take care of themselves, as well as support their friends and family members. The money increases their respect from other men and their popularity with women. In addition, the men claim that they are following the principles of their unique subcultural moral codes which focus on masculine constructions of respect and honor. As well as their public presentations of powerful masculine selves, the

offenders also claim to acquire significant aspects of their identity through (attempted) close relationships with female partners, although these bonds are frequently fragile and confusing. The men also struggle to maintain cherished bonds with their natal families and their own young children during their incarcerations. On the street and while imprisoned, the men suffer from substantial emotional losses which include both the breakdown of trust and alienation in relationships with women, as well as frequent elimination of close relationships with male friends and family members due to their violent deaths. African American male offenders exhibit complex multiple selves which are inconsistent and context-dependent, but which are also significantly interdependent with those around them.

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For my children, Samuel and Charlotte,  
and my sister, Darlene

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Part One – BACKGROUND

#### Chapter 1

##### **LITERATURE REVIEW: CULTURE, CRIME, and the SELF**

Self and Story.....	<i>page 4</i>
Deviance, Villains, and Offenders.....	<i>page 6</i>
Independent or Interdependent Selves?.....	<i>page 13</i>
What is a Self?.....	<i>page 18</i>
The Offender and His Communities.....	<i>page 27</i>
“Western Culture” versus Street Culture.....	<i>page 32</i>

#### Chapter 2

##### **RESEARCH and METHODS**

Research Questions and Methodology.....	<i>page 53</i>
My Social Location.....	<i>page 68</i>
Introduction to the Consultants.....	<i>page 71</i>

### Part Two – PRISONERS’ STORIES

#### Chapter 3

##### **MONEY and the CRIMINAL SELF**

Introduction.....	<i>Page 77</i>
Offenders Claim to be Rational.....	<i>Page 82</i>
Offenders Claim to be Intelligent and Competent.....	<i>page 92</i>
Offenders Claim to be Mature and Independent.....	<i>page 101</i>
Offenders Claim to be Popular.....	<i>page 105</i>
Offenders Claim to be Responsible.....	<i>Page 110</i>

#### Chapter 4

##### **HONOR and the REPUTABLE SELF**

Introduction.....	<i>Page 115</i>
Offenders Claim to be Proud.....	<i>page 115</i>
Offenders Claim to be Honest and Trustworthy.....	<i>page 121</i>
Offenders Claim to be Principled.....	<i>page 133</i>
Offenders Claim to be Respectful and Worthy of Respect..	<i>page 138</i>

## Chapter 5

### **ATTACHMENT and the VULNERABLE SELF**

Introduction: Offenders and Their Communities.....	<i>page 162</i>
Offenders Claim to be Devoted to Family.....	<i>Page 173</i>
Offenders Claim to be Confused by Mating Games with No Rules	<i>page 185</i>
Offenders Claim to be (or want to become) Conscientious Fathers	<i>page 226</i>
Offenders Claim to be Lonely and Abandoned.....	<i>page 238</i>
Offenders Claim to be Bereaved and Desensitized to Death...	<i>page 251</i>

## Chapter 6

### **CONCLUSIONS**

How Offenders View Their Own Stories.....	<i>page 257</i>
Suggestions for Further Research.....	<i>page 259</i>
Multiple Concluding Perspectives.....	<i>page 261</i>
Offender Narrative through the Lens of Unrealized Models.....	<i>page 263</i>
Offender Narrative through the Lens of Agency.....	<i>page 267</i>
Offender Narrative through the Lens of Morality.....	<i>page 276</i>
Street and Fieldwork Ethics .....	<i>page 283</i>
Offenders and the Culture of Honor .....	<i>page 289</i>
Offender Narrative and the American Dream.....	<i>page 297</i>

<b>References.....</b>	<i>page 305</i>
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<b>Appendix – IRB Approval Letter.....</b>	<i>page 314</i>
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<b>Curriculum Vitae.....</b>	<i>page 316</i>
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An attractive young mother, holding the hand of her eight-year-old daughter, walks from the crowded gallery seating to the prosecutor's table. She sits beside the prosecutor and her child climbs on her lap. The lawyer tells the judge that he has been asked to read the child's victim-impact statement. The little girl had been asked how it made her feel that her daddy got shot. "Bad." She had been asked to draw a picture to show how she felt before her father's death. The prosecutor says, "This looks like a rainbow." How did she feel after he got shot? "This looks like a volcano."

Just a few feet away, the defendant is sitting shackled in a wheelchair behind the defense table. He has plead "no contest" to First Degree Reckless Homicide for shooting another African American drug dealer while trying to rob him. Both the prosecution and the defense have concurred that the death was probably not intentional, but an impetuous act of folly committed under the influence of alcohol and drugs; an unplanned shot intended to frighten or wound, but not to kill. The defendant is Capo, a man I have known for more than five years. His back is rounded forward and he is hanging his head so that his forehead is about 8 inches above the wooden table. He has chosen to speak to the court during this sentencing hearing. He begins by saying, "Where I come from, this is what we have to do to survive." He says that he is sorry and that he knows that the victim's family and his own family are suffering because of what happened. Then he says, "But I ain't no killer. I ain't no murderer or whatever. I'm not like that." Capo knows that he pulled the trigger the night the other man was killed. But he does not believe that the person who took the life of another human being was his *real* self.

# BACKGROUND

## Chapter One

# Literature Review: Culture, Crime, and the Self

## Self and Story

...we know that narrative in all its forms is a dialectic between what was expected and what came to pass. For there to be a story, something unforeseen must happen. Story is enormously sensitive to whatever challenges our conception of the canonical. It is an instrument not so much of solving problems as for finding them. The plot depicted marks the story's type as much as the resolution. We more often tell stories to forewarn than to instruct. And because of this, stories are culture's coin and currency. For culture is, figuratively, the maker and enforcer of what is expected, but it also paradoxically, compiles, even slyly treasures, transgression (Bruner 2002: 15).

Telling stories and constructing narrative is a human universal. These descriptions of human behavior can take many forms and cover many subjects, but one of the most pervasive is the personal narrative in which the speaker or writer discusses the self. Flanagan writes that "Evidence strongly suggests that humans in all cultures come to cast their own identity in some sort of narrative form. We are inveterate storytellers" (1992: 198). Yet, it has been suggested that people do not just *discuss* the self in narrative, but actually *create* the self through narrative. "It is in and through language that man constitutes himself, as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality" (Benveniste, in Harre and van Lagenhove 1999: 16). Bruner has used the work of Neisser to propose that the self is assembled or organized using the same basic twelve elements that people use when telling a fiction story, including character construction, which is then embedded in a sequence of events or plot (2002: 70-73). When a person tells a story about the self, he or she is bringing the self into being as a character in a drama that is his or her own life<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Not everyone agrees with this view (see Boyd 2009: 159-160; Strawson, 2004).

Fiction stories and personal narratives are alike in the sense that they pivot around the sharing with others of mental images of things which are not present to the physical senses. They also have many similarities in theme and structure, as well as being driven by the circumstances and choices of their characters or heroic protagonists. Gergen and Gergen assert that “change and struggle” are universal themes of life stories (Presser 2008: 51), and Gottschall asserts that all stories follow the formula: Story = Character + Predicament + Attempted Extrication (2012: 52). According to the Life Story Center at the University of Southern Maine, “Our stories contain the same enduring elements, motifs and archetypes that express the common twists and turns of the path of life. As we learn early, all good stories are made up not only of a beginning, middle, and end, but a beginning, muddle, and resolution. This is the pattern, or archetype, that describes the process of transformation common to all lives.”

If the self is constructed through language (as Benveniste and Bruner suppose), one of the important contemporary academic discussions of connection between narrative and experience should also be considered: Does narrative *represent* reality or is it *constitutive* of reality? Polkinghorne summarizes Ricoeur’s breakdown of this dichotomy into three possibilities: If life, as lived, is independent of narrative description, then narrative can give an accurate description of reality or it can present a distorted picture of the real world. “The third position ... is that aspects of the experience itself are presented originally as they appear in the narration and that narrative form is not simply imposed on preexistent real experiences but helps to give them form (67-68)” (1988 cited in Presser 2008: 157). In other words, “we cognitively

structure events in our lives according to some narrated plot even as we experience them; we do not (merely) structure them later“(Presser 2008: 10-11). So humans are *creating* both the self (as a character) and their reality (as a plot) in the process of telling our stories, and then living according to the stories we tell or which we believe to be true. Bruner quotes Slobin as suggesting that, “ ‘in the process of speaking or writing, experiences are filtered through language into *verbalized events*.’ Selfhood can surely be thought of as one of those ‘verbalized events’, a kind of meta-event that gives coherence and continuity to the scramble of experience” (2002: 73).

### **Deviance, Villains, & Offenders**

In academia, in popular media, and even going back to ancient myths and folk tales, there is a great deal of interest in stories with a contrast between virtuous characters and in character deviance, using the term “character” both in the sense of a person in a play or drama and “character” in the sense of a pattern of behavior. Countless stories rely on the comparison between good and evil as an essential element of their plot structure. One of the fundamental binary oppositions in narrative is the contrast between the hero and the villain. In modern American society, the legal system relies on a similar narrative system to function efficiently. Some act of deviance, usually harmful to other person(s), is alleged to have occurred and the court is, by its very nature, designed to adjudicate guilt or innocence. There are two sides in a courtroom, a prosecution and a defense, with competing narratives, but only one final verdict can be issued. The first order of business in a courtroom is to determine whether an illegal act



actually occurred, and then if it did, whether this particular defendant was the person who committed the offence. Complex though these proceedings may be, both questions must be concluded sequentially and with a simple “yes” or “no” answer to each, (albeit an occasionally incorrect one). Implicit in the proceedings, however, are two other questions that will not have such minimal and clear-cut answers: why was this deviant act performed? (motive); and what should be done about it? (sentencing). The judge must declare a sentence to finalize the formal measures, but the question of motive, in its deepest sense, can remain open and contested, even after the courtroom proceedings have closed. Relying on interpretations of motive, courtroom verdicts of guilt identify (or label)<sup>2</sup> a deviant - or villain - who has gone against a conventional social norm which is represented by the law that has been broken.

A conviction of a serious offense in an American criminal court officially creates a person who is categorized as a felon. According to labeling theory, (going back to early social interactionists such as Mead 1934) a person’s identity is socially constructed through the interactions he or she has with the community. Once persons have acquired a social label of deviant (as opposed to conventional), the label affects both their self-concepts and the ways that other people treat them. According to Schur “Human behavior is deviant to the extent that it comes to be viewed as involving a personally discreditable departure from a group’s normative expectation, and it elicits

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<sup>3</sup> While this may be true in certain situations, the process of criminal conviction, followed by a sentence to prison, is in actuality a *forced* movement out of the social mainstream and a *forced* association with other prisoners. Furthermore, the label of “felon” has material, as well as social, consequences after a person is released from prison.

interpersonal and collective reactions that serve to 'isolate,' 'treat,' 'correct,' or 'punish' individuals engaged in such behavior" (in Adler, Mueller, and Laufer, 2007: 192).

According to labeling theory, the social process of labeling is what actually creates the deviance and persons so-labeled are outcast from society and then begin to associate with other persons labeled in the same way. This process is exactly followed (albeit involuntarily on the offender's part) when someone is convicted of a crime and sentenced to prison.

The accused had a story to tell in the courtroom regarding the behavior involved in the alleged lawbreaking but, after the courtroom proceedings have ended with a "guilty" verdict, the convict still has a significant story to tell about his life. In contemporary criminology these stories are referred to as *offender narratives*. According to Presser (2010: 436), "One reason that such participants are likely to tell stories about their offending is that stories are excellent vehicles for explaining oneself (Stone 1982), and we are especially inclined to explain ourselves when we have been sanctioned (Scott and Lyman 1968). Authorities have labeled the participant as 'bad' and 'wrong' and s/he has an interest in refuting those attributions, even to a stranger." De Gregorio suggests that offender narrative is usually employed by the perpetrator to "justify, deny or excuse wrong behavior" and is used to "attempt to repair or mitigate the offensive or discrediting dimension of the event" (2009: 102).

According to Agnew (2006) there is a difference between the way that most criminologists explain crime and the way that offenders explain their own behavior<sup>3</sup>. Criminologists usually focus on background and situational factors which have been part of the offender's life for long periods of time (temporal patterning), but criminals themselves typically do not discuss background factors, but instead "tell a story about why they engaged in crime" (120). The common storylines followed by offenders usually focus on the immediate events that precipitated the offending behavior, and their perception or interpretation of those events account for why the crime was committed.<sup>4</sup> Agnew identifies the same three-part structure of events in offender narratives as in other stories: beginning, middle, and end. First, something happens that is out of the ordinary from the routine aspects of the criminal's life. (This is what Bruner identified as Aristotle's peripeteia, a reversal in circumstances or turning point) (2002: 5). This event increases the individual's propensity to commit a crime. After committing the crime, the storyline ends when the something about the circumstances has changed back to prior level. The five storylines identified by Agnew include: a desperate need for money; a brief, tempting opportunity for crime; an unresolved dispute; a brief, but close involvement with criminal others; and a temporary break with conventional others and/or institutions. Notably, the latter three storylines in this list focus on the

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<sup>3</sup> Agnew suggested that further research should be done in several areas, including to determine "whether storylines can explain group differences in crime" (143).

<sup>4</sup> Agnew also notes that these same storylines could just as easily "be terminated in a noncriminal manner." For example, one of the common storylines is "a desperate need for money" which, of course, could end in any number of ways of acquiring funds such as selling a possession or borrowing money from family or getting a job.

offender's relationships with other people which demonstrate that offenders frequently make choices in a community context.

Despite the fact that the offender does not exist without being influenced by others, stories of an offence or deviant act must begin with the individual offender and work their way outward into a wider view of world. One way to do this is to look for archetypal patterns in the way that people talk about their crimes. Joseph Campbell (1949) has suggested that the heroic tale is the universal story form,<sup>5</sup> and according to Presser (2008: 106-107), one major theme in offender narrative is heroic struggle:

Popular culture routinely depicts the good, usually male protagonist battling hostile forces, which all but overpower him until a momentous gesture of agency by the protagonist prevents such a fate. Accessing that cultural model is therefore another way of identifying oneself as a moral agent. The narrator as hero redeems his past to himself and others. In this light, a tale of heroic struggle is a way of co-opting the label of outsider and subsequently integrating oneself into the social mainstream (Braithwaite 1989).

Presser identifies a second major theme specific to offender narrative as "moral decency." Offenders discuss the journey of their moral selves, either through asserting that they were following subcultural moral codes; or have been mostly a decent person, except for this one mistake (and everybody makes mistakes); or that they started out as good in their youth, then lost their way, and have now found their way back to the good person they were before. She calls these either stability narratives or reform narratives.

Stein (2010) similarly has identified the moral decency theme in offender narrative, although she describes it differently:

Almost every offender I have ever spoken with regards the violent or criminal part of himself as 'not-me.' This is most often understood by the courts as denial of responsibility. However, my

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<sup>5</sup> Yet, there is some disagreement about whether heroic tales or "universal" plots are true only in Western societies or only for males (Harre & van Langenhove 75; Presser 107, 147-148).

own work suggests that many offenders have so split off the damaged parts of their identities that they perceive them almost as external entities. (Ted Bundy, the prolific serial killer, even called his murdering self 'The Entity.')

The 'not-me', malevolent self remains ego-dystonic in order to protect a fragile core identity from the knowledge of its own rage and despair (331).

Stein, like many criminologists, acknowledges the childhood trauma and abuse often suffered by offenders, and then explains their perception of separate good and bad selves as a form of dissociation "of traumas both endured and executed" (332). Kolk et al (1996: 306) describe dissociation as a "compartmentalization of experience." In dissociation, parts of one's self are split apart or experienced separately instead of being integrated together in the manner considered to be "normal" selfhood.

Yet, one does not have to be an offender to express a divided self in narrative. While, on the one hand, storytelling seems to unify and make meaning of events that may be somewhat incoherent before being cast into narrative, it also performs a critical division when the subject of the storytelling is one's self. When people articulate personal narrative they become divided, in essence, into the narrator (who is telling the story and making moral judgments) and the protagonist (about whom the story is being told and judgments are being made). This narrative distance creates a situation in which the self itself is regarded as the Other. "Self-representation is unique because what is being represented – the self – is concurrently doing the representing" (Presser 2008: 11).

Another aspect of considering a divided self is the way that the complex circumstances of the real world seem to generate multifaceted psychological responses that cannot be fully explained as rational. Cohen reviews the phenomenon of how people can believe or know about something, yet deny their belief or knowledge, not just to others, but to *themselves*. He writes,

One common thread runs through the many different stories of denial: people, organizations, governments or whole societies are presented with information that is too disturbing, threatening or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged. This information is therefore somehow repressed, disavowed, pushed aside or reinterpreted. Or else the information 'registers' well enough, but its implications – cognitive, emotional or moral – are evaded, neutralized or rationalized away (2001:1).

Cohen reviews the literature containing possible explanations for how and why denial not only appears to be so pervasive, but how it also seems to work on a psychological level. The most applicable ideas to offender narrative are his discussion of self-deception. Like other forms of denial, there is a paradox involved: in order to hide something from the self, or to lie to the self, one must first be aware of the information on some level. If someone is genuinely unaware of something, it would be impossible to be in denial about it.

While these conceptions of denial are similar in some ways to Stein and Van der Kolk's ideas about dissociation, Cohen extends the scope of traumatic events beyond the child abuse and victimization that have been frequently endured by prisoners. All people, even those whose lives are not marked by poverty and violence, experience some sort of distress and suffering such as serious illness, accidents, natural disasters, or deaths of close friends and family members. It is impossible to go through life without experiencing some type of painful event, (although those deliberately inflicted by another person may have a different psychological impact). Folk wisdom about how it is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters, may be true of disturbing information or events. If people have internal patterns (models or maps) of how the world works, they filter and interpret information in an attempt to maintain the schema's stability. Cohen refers to a number of cognitive psychologists who have done

research that suggests that many individuals have beliefs that “people are benevolent, ... life is meaningful, ... and the self is worthy” (49). When bad things occur, these beliefs are challenged. (Furthermore, although Cohen does not mention it, if one believes in a benevolent God and a just universe, then painful events could be experienced as a betrayal or getting a “punishment” that one does not “deserve.”)

A traumatic life event – illness, disaster, victimization – confronts you with anomalous data that are too painful and too vivid to ignore, but do not fit these assumptions. Instantly, without intellectual cognition, this information is assimilated into existing schema. What looks like denial is an accommodation to cognitive threat. The attack on your life assumptions is blunted, and threatening information is cut down to tolerable doses. This leads to the provocative idea that mental health depends largely on our ability to sustain what are really *illusions*. These are ‘positive illusions’, buffers against events that threaten our sense, of meaning, control and self-esteem. These illusions do not necessarily negate known facts (literal denial), but they manifestly slant these facts (interpretive denial) to enhance self-esteem and confirm our map of the world. Paradoxically, these positive misinterpretations (poor information processing) are adaptive, especially under adversity. Far from indicating mental illness, these modes of ‘being out of touch with reality’ are necessary for healthy functioning ( 2001: 49).

Cohen’s research on denial can be used to reexamine the theme of moral decency in offender narrative. If it is common and sane to believe in the folk expression that “people are basically good” (and offenders know themselves to be persons), then this illuminates Presser’s finding of two types of stability narratives - either a moral self following a valid subcultural code or a moral self who made a common and understandable mistake; or a reform narrative - the rediscovery of one’s lost, and truly good, moral self.

### **Independent or Interdependent Selves?**

A discussion of the creation of personal identity through the use of words raises the difficult problem of how to define and clarify exactly what a “self” actually consists of, and whether this thing (the self) is stable and consistent or flexibly constructed

according to circumstances (even in ostensibly normal, non-deviant individuals). A central circumstance to consider is the role of culture in forming the self. Since no one exists in isolation, anthropologists are currently debating about whether particular cultures produce particular kinds of selves. Is it possible to identify and analyze specific concepts of the inner self (or what are persons) as they exist in various cultures?

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), there are two worldwide cultural views of the self which depend on how the self relates to others. One view is an *interdependent* self which “entails seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one’s behavior is determined, contingent on, and to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship” (227). The interdependent self could also be called sociocentric, collective, contextualized, connected, and relational. An interdependent self changes structure depending on the nature of the social context and types of relationships experienced with other people. In other words, persons exist only in relationship to objects, situations, and other persons which “is in opposition to the Cartesian, dualistic traditions that characterizes Western thinking and in which the self is separated from the object and from the natural world” (227). This Western conception of identity is considered to be an *independent* self, which could also be called egocentric, separate, autonomous, and self-contained. According to Geertz:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures [1984:126] (in Ewing: 256).



One line of criticism against the idea of the existence of a Western unitary self, however, has been argued by feminists and post-modernists who assert that “far from being a unitary and static phenomenon untainted by experience, one's core identity is made up of the various discourses and structures that shape society and one's experience within it” (Powell 1997). This critique asserts that no large group of people could possibly be cohesive in all of its ideas and dialogues which subsequently could then form consistent self-concepts in all of its members. The alternative is that each person consists of multiple internal selves that are fluid in their experience and expression.

Another point for this critique focuses on the presumed “contrast between *the* Western concept of an autonomous, decontextualized self and *the* concept of self as it is to be found in the particular culture under scrutiny” with the following logical conclusion that “another culture produces a characteristic ‘self’ in some form that can be described in terms of a few key concepts and symbols” (Ewing 1990: 257). In opposition to that Ewing posits that “in all cultures people can be observed to project multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly” (251). Her argument is twofold: first that “self-concepts are constructed and maintained by means of a similar process in all cultures” (252), and, second, that cultures themselves are not coherent systems, so the selves produced within them could not be completely consistent.

On the other hand, a case can be made that the independent self actually has some strong baseline forms in cultural reality. The idea of a Western unitary self in the United

States arises partially from an American philosophical tradition based on self-reliance and rugged individualism. Williams describes this valuation of personhood (beginning with Durkheim's concept of the "cult of individual personality," in Western society) as "independent, responsible, and self-respecting"; "not merely a reflection of external pressure" (1970: 495-498). This idea of individual personal responsibility is essential in order to maintain an ethical relationship with others in a society marked by free expression. Bellah expresses this concept as the sacredness of the individual person and the individual conscience. He cites Lipset as pointing out that "we are the only North Atlantic society whose predominant religious tradition is sectarian rather than an established church" (1998: 617). The fact that early American immigrants from Europe broke away from traditions and built a society built on plurality and religious freedom has formed a cultural foundation of independence in which each person follows his or her own internal sense of right and wrong. Yet, Bellah cites Hammond (1998) as suggesting that as formal religion has declined in influence over the country "the sacred core of the *conscience collective*, the very sacred center of our society, what might even be called our civil religion, has moved from the churches to the judiciary" (1998: 620). The Constitution and legal system of the United States support individualism due to the fact that (ostensibly) everyone is equally represented under all laws, and equally treated by the courts. All American persons are supposed to be able to live as they please, according to the dictates of their own conscience, as long as they do not interfere with the essential and legal rights of others. Since each person is completely free to choose

his or her own actions, then each individual is morally responsible under the law for any misdeeds undertaken.

This discussion of the ostensible boundaries of the self is important in reviewing the implications of crime and the criminal justice system because the American legal system operates almost completely by using the model of the Western independent self. In considering the performance of crime from an anthropological perspective, Strauss (2007) discusses two major presumptions about who or what gets blamed in the United States when a crime gets committed. One prevalent idea comes from the “dominant traditions in the Christian, European, industrial capitalist West” where there “developed a notion of the individual as a morally and metaphysically distinct being, completely free to choose his or her own actions, hence responsible for them” (810). To describe this concept Strauss uses Ortnier’s term “voluntarism” which in this case means “the metaphysical assumption that human actions are the result of unfettered voluntary choices. The voluntarist in this sense may be aware of external factors that have an effect on behavior but still highlights the individual’s freedom to choose how to act” (808). This cultural model of persons as autonomous agents is one way that Americans explain human action. On the other hand, there also exists in the United States another theory about behavior that demonstrates “a more passive view of persons assumed to be shaped by role models, media messages, peer pressure, and the quality of nurturing they received in childhood” (808). Strauss points out that social psychologists explain human action by using either “*dispositional attributions* which explain behaviors in terms of agents’ stable internal traits and *situational attributions*, which explain

behaviors in terms of contextual factors (Heider1958; Ross 1977). Such attributions in turn rest on cultural models of personhood, particularly folk theories regarding the causes of human behavior” (808). When a crime is committed, society’s preconceived notion of the culpability of the person or persons responsible is dependent on whether they view the offender as being *independent*, that is autonomous and making completely voluntary choices, or whether they view the offender as being *interdependent*, that is contextualized and influenced by others in society. In addition, these same two models of personhood affect the way that offenders view themselves and their own actions.

### **What is a Self?**

There are several concepts of the self that need to be considered. First of all, no matter how the internal or psychological self is conceptualized, each person only has one body (although it does change through time) and we all have to relate to each other as individuals in this material way. This may be one foundation of the unitary (independent) conception of the self and probably occurs biologically because we have a face recognition module in the brain and can instantly recognize familiar others by their appearance as unique individuals. (Furthermore, we recognize our own appearance in a mirror which many scientists have taken to demonstrate “self”-awareness.<sup>6</sup>) Putting aside scholarly discussions of constructed selfhood, the intuitive impression of the oneness of selves will never go away due to the physical perception of tangible bodies

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Gallup 1970 Mirror Self-Recognition Test

walking around in a material world, not to mention the beginnings (birth) and endings (death) of those bodies which gives the sense of selves a bounded reality. Furthermore, whatever the self may be, its location inside of just one body has created a universal, cross-cultural phenomenon of individual naming. A person is usually called just a few recognizable names both by its "self," and others, including the American legal system (which recognizes "identity theft"<sup>7</sup> as a crime). Furthermore, people can be individually identified by fingerprints and DNA as being particular unique individuals, no matter what names they are using or whatever psychological beliefs or feelings they have about who they are. The self, in the physical sense, is unitary and real. Most people have a strong sense of bodily continuity and identity in space and time, and this affects their inner, psychological sense of themselves as individual persons. The intuitive perception is of some "supraordinate, primary psychic constellation, the center of experience and initiative and the main motivating agency" (Curtis cited in Ewing 1990: 255) that acts (or instigates the body to act, if the body and inner self are conceived as separate entities).

On the other hand, while the corporal self does have some definitive elements, the concept of the psychological "self" is difficult to define. One framework for analyzing how a self is constituted is Bucholtz and Hall's approach in which they argue for

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<sup>7</sup> "Identity" means any name, number, or data transmission that may be used, alone or in conjunction with any other information, to identify a specific individual, including any of the following:

- a name, Social Security number, date of birth, official government-issued driver's license or identification number, government passport number, or employer or taxpayer identification number;
- unique electronic identification number, address, account number, or routing code; or
- telecommunication identification information or access device.

<http://definitions.uslegal.com/i/identity-theft/>

considering “identity as a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories” (2005: 585-586). They define sociocultural linguistic approach as the “broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the intersection of language, culture, and society” (2005: 586). This means that as people interact linguistically they bring about intersubjective constructions of who they are through locating themselves in reference to others. Their short definition of identity is “the social positioning of the self and other” (586).

Bucholtz and Hall’s model consists of five principles. The first is the emergence principle which means that identity is not simply a “psychological mechanism of self-classification that is reflected in people’s social behavior but rather as something that is constituted through social action, and especially through language” (588). Since an individual’s internal mental state can only enter the social world through discourse “accounts that locate identity inside the mind may discount the social ground on which identity is built, maintained, and altered” (587). The second is the positionality principle which means that identity emerges in discourse through temporary roles and orientations assumed by the participants during unfolding discourse. The third is the indexicality principle which refers to the creation of “semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings,” especially through using referential categories and labels.

Next is the relationality principle which means that “identities are never autonomous or independent, but always acquire social meanings in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors” (598). The relationality principle includes

three subcategories, the first of which is adequation (similar enough to be seen as morally or politically equivalent) versus distinction. (This subcategory could be simplified by referring to purported sameness and difference.) The second relationality principle is authentication (realness) versus denaturalization (identity which is crafted, fragmented, problematic, or false). The third relationality principle is authorization (or affirmation or imposition of an identity through structures of institutionalized power and ideology) versus illegitimation (ways that identities are dismissed, censored or ignored by those same structures).

Buchholtz and Hall's final principle is partialness which means that "because identity is inherently relational, it will always be partial, produced through contextually situated and ideologically informed configurations of self and others" (605). This principle "draws from voluminous literature in cultural anthropology and feminist theory" that has "challenged the analytic drive to represent forms of social life as internally coherent. This challenge, inspired by the postmodern critique of the totalizing master narratives characteristic of previous generations, surfaces in ethnography in the realization that all representations of culture are necessarily 'partial accounts' (Clifford and Marcus 1986)" (605).

This conception of selfhood is closely related to positioning theory which, according to Harre and van Lagenhove (1999: 1) is "the study of local moral orders as ever-shifting patterns of mutual and contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting." These concepts were first introduced to the social sciences in 1984 by Hollway who wrote about "positioning oneself" in relationship to other people. According to the

theory, personal conversations have storylines which construct meaning and participants who negotiate to locate themselves as “sorts of persons” (48) who could possibly exist in relationship to other possible sorts of person(s) engaged in the conversation. In positioning theory, people are conceptualized as taking different positions (or displaying sundry possible selves) according to the storyline of the particular conversation in which they are engaged. These positions can be contested because people position both themselves and others during the course of the conversation, and those others may not like how their interlocutor has positioned them and will then try to change positions.

According to positioning theory there are

three ways of expressing and experiencing one’s personal identity or unique selfhood: by stressing one’s agency in claiming responsibility for some action; by indexing one’s statements with a point of view one has on its relevant world; or by presenting a description/evaluation of some past event or episode as a contribution to one’s biography (Harre and van Lagenhove 1999: 62).

In this view, the self is formed by doing, thinking, and remembering. In fact, memory seems to be a key point in descriptions of selfhood.

The idea that the self is some internally coherent entity constructed from memories is crucial to the concept: “Human beings maintain awareness of self-continuity and personal identity in time through the recall of past experiences that are identified with the self-image. If I cannot remember, or recall at will, experiences of an hour ago, or yesterday, or last year that I readily identify as *my* experiences, I cannot maintain an awareness of self-continuity in time (Hallowell in Ewing 1990: 267). This view of the self, however, has been criticized on the grounds that this inner being is not always



logically connected through all its thoughts and memories. We do not recall everything that we have experienced, only a selective representative sample, and no one can explain why particular incidents or impressions are remembered or forgotten.

Memory, however, may not be a good correlate of self formation because the popular psychological theory of memory's function may be erroneous, especially considering what we now know about how it may have worked in an evolutionary context to promote fitness. Boyd (2009) has written:

Not only cognition but memory and imagination depend on simulation. Since Frederick Bartlett, psychology has realized how much memory constructs rather than simply records and retrieves, but over the last few years new evidence arriving from neuroimaging and from differences between normal and amnesiac individuals has proven highly pertinent to understanding narrative. Episodic memory's failure to provide exact replicas of experience appears to be not a limitation of memory but an adaptive design that helps us to retrieve and recombine memories in order to run vivid simulations of future experience. Where the exact memories of savants allow remarkable recall of the past, but at the expense of their coping with the future, our normal constructive episodic memory system "can draw on elements of the past and retain the general sense or gist of what has happened. Critically, it can flexibly extract, recombine, and reassemble those elements in a way that allows us to simulate, imagine, or 'pre-experience'... events that have never occurred previously in the exact form in which we imagine them."

Tellingly, for this *constructive episodic simulation hypothesis*, imagining the future recruits most of the same brain areas as recalling the past, especially the hippocampus and prefrontal, medial temporal, and parietal regions to provide a form of 'life simulator' that allows us to test options without the risk of trying them in real life. The vividness allowed by reconfiguring multimodal memories allows us to evaluate advance simulations rapidly and almost automatically through the emotional weighings our bodies assigned at the time to the initial experience (156-157).<sup>8</sup>

Models of the self based on the idea that memories should always be "true" or complete are working from a deficiency model of the self, that sees an ideal self as seamlessly recalling a perfect snapshot of the frozen past that can be represented to

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<sup>8</sup> Boyd uses as his sources Schacter and Addis 2007, (quoting Atance and O'Neill 2001); Buckner 2007; Suddendorf and Corballis 2007; Schacter, Addis, and Buckner 2008. Suddendorf and Corballis's article in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* is called "The evolution of foresight: what is mental time travel and is it unique to humans?"

others (and to oneself) at will. Instead our minds are probably performing correctly by sifting and mining highly selective personal histories that are innovative and adaptable because solving potential future problems is of immense importance to survival, and is probably more useful than producing meticulously literal memories, as Boyd's comment on savants demonstrates. What the mind does in the present seems to be intimately tied to both the past and how one feels about preceding experiences, and to the future which needs to be planned for and imagined before we can actually make our possible intentions a reality.

Despite this recent research and discussion on memory, other psychologists have different interpretive viewpoints of how people reconcile past and current selves in light of the fact that the self is always changing.

Two different approaches exist within a framework of mainly 'social cognition' research. In one, people are seen as skillful at denying personal changes and maintaining biographical consistency. In the other, people are seen as constantly 'reinventing' their past in order to fit with current circumstances. In both cases one's personal history is conceived as something 'within' the person that has to be 'recalled' and which is subject to 'cognitive biases.' Of course, all this presupposes the continuity of personal identity as a numerical singularity.

... Behind such views is a double conception of the self. On the one hand it is conceived as 'thing' within people that can be 'disclosed', 'distorted', 'perceived', 'fabricated', 'be subject to inconsistencies' and so on. On the other hand it is the conscious being who perceives and experiences this 'thing' and tells the story of its life. Moreover, what people present as their selves or think about their self is always seen as subject to comparison with the 'real self,' which is to a great extent to be equated with the 'real' biography or personal history of the person (Harre and van Langenhove 1999: 68-69).

Like the previously discussed idea that we should remember everything accurately, each of these social cognition conceptions implies that there is something amiss with our minds. They suggest that our thought processes are not working correctly; that we "should" be doing something else instead of "denying" or "reinventing." The word

“denying” implies some sort of treacherous deception or, at least, harmless dishonesty. This extremely well-accepted model of the flawed (or fraudulent) self that rewrites its own history creates a representation of the self that tries to revise the past in order to appear more benign in the present. On the other hand, the term “reinventing” oneself sounds delightful as part of a narrative in which a person creatively originates some improved and elevated self like trading in a battered used car and bringing home the latest, greatest model of the New Me. Denying or reinventing, however, looks a little different viewed through the lens of courtroom testimony and continues to look even more corrupt when the inventor of the new self has been labeled an offender or is currently a prisoner. Anyone regarded as a criminal is frequently seen as duplicitous, in fact, patently a liar – not a creative originator of a scrubbed and newly-minted self. Samenow describes criminals as propagating “innumerable misrepresentations and embellishments” (2004: 26). Despite the fact that not all criminal behavior involves lying itself in the commission of the charged crime, or even in the courtroom, there is a whole complex of negative associations attached to the idea of criminality, deviance, or offending against the laws of society. Prisoners are mistrusted, and may never again be socially trusted or integrated back into full citizenship -- which is the idea behind life-long penalties against many released criminals such as not being able to vote or carry a gun. This mistrust is also why it is so difficult for ex-convicts to find legitimate employment even though they have completed their sentences (Pager 2007).

In short, the way that people’s stories are viewed by others depends not only on the straightforward content of the story, but on the cultural context in which the story

was told, and on the social status of the teller. Plots of stories depend not only on what actually happened, but on how the actors' agency was infused with motivational force. Both the teller of the tale and the listener interpret events based on cultural models that often have moral undertones. D'Andrade suggests that morals "identify what is *good* and what is *bad* and to allocate *reward* and *punishment*" (1995: 399). Even when offender narrative is not making a specific moral claim, hearers or readers are often more skeptical about whether a story is not only true, but worthy of respect, when it is being recounted by someone who has acquired the label of criminal or who is currently incarcerated due to the perception that this is a person who is more self-serving and duplicitous than other people.

The distinction between object and subject is one of the basic human cognitive accomplishments. Normal people are expected to be able to recognize the difference between their response to an object and the object itself. Despite the cognitive salience of the objective/subjective distinction, in ordinary talk the two are often blended. To say someone is a 'crook' is to refer to more than the objective fact that something was intentionally taken by someone who had no legal right to it; part of the meaning of 'crook' is that the person who did this did something *bad* and is a *bad person*. Many of the terms of natural language blend the way the world is and our reaction to it... (D'Andrade 1995:399)

Criminals are *bad people* and so everything they say is tainted by their stigmatized status as "a blemished person, ritually polluted" (Goffman 1963: 1).

In other contexts, however, "normal" people are not necessarily offended by narratives that are not literal (or objective) truth. In fact, the entire category of fiction, or literature, or stories that are classified as myth, legend, or folk tale are products of human imagination, not accurate accounts of something that occurred exactly that way. Yet the best literary fictions are usually viewed as having some underlying Truth or as illuminating some deeper Reality about the human condition. Literature uses symbolic

representations of imaginary people and situations that draw in readers or hearers through their identification with characters' search for love, status, power, resources, and the meaning and significance of their lives and deaths. These types of stories fit into Aristotle's "poetry" or as carriers of universal implications.

On the other hand, stories that are told about oneself (personal narrative) are usually held to a different standard, that of Aristotle's "history," of particulars, which should be an accurate record of that person's past experiences and perceptions. The assumption made about personal narrative is that it should be an authentic record of what really happened, just from an individual (not panoramic) point of view. In short, people receive accolades for memorable storytelling either when the line is clearly drawn between the true and the imaginary (fact and fiction), or when the speaker falls inside the boundary that encloses the social identity of normal. Those labeled as deviant (or criminal) are subjected to condemnation when their inventiveness (or commonplace ambiguity) is not considered creative by others, but a lie. According to prevailing discourse, criminals are not artists with rich fantasy lives, but frauds who deceive others for their own selfish ends. This discourse, however, is flawed because it does not consider that some offenders may not be unusually duplicitous, (as Samenow suggests), but ensnared in social circumstances that generate considerable opportunities to splinter the ego into fragments and to create rifts between the self and the community.

### **The Offender and His Communities**

Most studies of offender narrative focus on why this particular individual committed this particular crime and treat the offence almost in a vacuum and as separate from larger social processes, such as culture, or from community interaction, although Presser (2008), acknowledges this issue as one that needs research. She suggests that conceptualizing offenders and their acts in isolation from a community is one of the problems not only with studying narratives, but is an important issue with designing offender treatment and rehabilitation, as well. This individualistic view of offenders as isolated actors with decontextualized narratives will be challenged in this study. Specifically African Americans from low-income ghetto neighborhoods form the largest imprisoned cultural group in the United States and should be considered as producing some collective offender narratives arising from shared experiences and assumptions about the world.

No human being can grow up alone without interacting with others in a social group that has a particular ethos and at least a few internally consistent dialogues. Persons usually come in contact with prevailing discourse through ongoing social interactions, particularly conversation, -- which is the most basic substance of the social realm. Childhood social interaction is the first step toward individuals internalizing values and behaviors from other people in their community.

Mead postulated a “generalized other” to explain where people acquired their sense of the collective attitude of their community. Interacting with one other person, I can take that person’s attitude directly; but how do I assess and incorporate the attitude of the group – the unwritten rules of a community – in order to interact socially, organizationally, cooperatively? “A person is a personality because he belongs to a community,” Mead answered this question, “because he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct. He takes its language as a medium by which he gets his personality, and then through a process of taking the different roles that all the others furnish he comes to get the attitude of the members of the

community.” The “attitude of the members of the community”, incorporated into the self is what Mead meant by the “generalized other.” (Rhodes 1999: 80).

Mead was a sociologist, but similar issues have been discussed by anthropologists.

Mead’s “collective attitude of the community” could be compared to anthropologists’ definitions of culture. One of those definitions is that culture

consists of whatever it is that one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members. Culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things, a set of unique rules that guide behavior and structure meaning, the form of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, or otherwise interpreting them (Goodenough 1957, cited in Fleisher, 1995).

Quinn and Holland coined the term “Cultural Model,” which means a shared assumption that people internalize when they belong to the same society. These models reflect an ideal standard of how humans in that society “should” behave. Quinn and Holland assert that the basic elements of cultural models will be lexically encoded and used frequently by people in ordinary conversation (D’Andrade 1992: 34). At the same time, even though most people in a society are aware of a cultural model, and may talk about it in reference to themselves or other people, that does not mean that they conform to that model.

...Knowing the dominant ideologies, discourses, and symbols of a society is only the beginning – there remains the hard work of understanding why some of these ideologies, discourses, and symbols become compelling to social actors, while others are only the hollow shell of a morality that may be repeated in official pronouncements, but is ignored in private lives...

In earlier decades it was conventional wisdom to think of cultures as integrated, stable sets of meanings and practices unproblematically reproduced through socialized actors. Now anthropologists are beginning to stress conflict, contradiction, ambiguity, and change in cultural understandings – the way cultural understandings are ‘contested’ and ‘negotiated’ in current jargon (Strauss cited in D’Andrade, 1992: 1).

During the process of analyzing why crime happens, Athens developed one explanation of why offenders do not conform to conventional cultural models. While

Athens agrees with Mead about the generalized other as a way to account for conformity (or similarities between people in a culture), the concept does not explain individuality: “You really don’t have a self if you’re like everyone else.” (Rhodes 1999: 81). So Athens realized that there is another important mediating factor operating in the interface between the individual and society:

Eventually he proposed that another, more intimate community assembled in the shadows of the self around the “I” and the “me.” There might be a “generalized other” even farther out, a collective set of attitudes that made Americans American and Chinese Chinese. But interposed between the individual and the broad collectivity of society were the significant others whose attitudes had shaped that individual – parents and other members of his primary group, the voices of his past experiences. Without such a portable, semipermanent bodyguard of past experience, Athens would argue “we would be forced to reinvent ourselves with each new, succeeding experience” which would create the “absurdity of a biographical-less self.” The internalized attitudes of our significant others were “the one constant in the self’s ongoing operation,” which made it possible “for people to have selves that endured beyond their immediate, passing experiences.” The incorporated attitudes could be visualized as “phantom others,” Athens decided, and together they constituted a “phantom community” (Rhodes 1999: 81-82).

So, while people are members of larger communities, they are also products of their individual microcosmic environments consisting of closely-associated other people, especially those who were influential in a person’s childhood or when forming schemas about how to act in society. Even when those persons are no longer physically present, they still exist as internal presences within the selves of other social actors. Because everyone has been influenced by numerous others, their collection of voices becomes incorporated into one’s self. These integrated beings create each individual’s unique “phantom community” (Rhodes 1999: 79-93).

In addition, contemporary people can also hear or absorb ideas without actually interacting with the live presence of others, but through reading text or listening to broadcasts on radio, television, or the Internet (and then thinking about what they read



or heard). This thought space can be an ingredient in a whole realm of language that is essentially self-directed and can occur as personal stories told to the self. A form of this is the way people can be involved in fantasy social relationships and conversations with various imaginary beings such as media figures, figures produced by the individual's own consciousness (ghosts, guardian angels, dream figures, or one's conscience), and replicas of persons they once interacted with in their daily lives (Caughey cited in Harre and van Langenhove 1999: 79). According to Watkins, imagined others influence our encounters with actual others just as our encounters with real others affects imagined interactions (cited in Harre and van Langenhove 1999: 79).

So, obviously, while all people are products of the culture they share with others, they are also individuals who have unique experiences and distinctive "phantom communities" that have been incorporated into themselves as meaningful aspects of their selfhood. African American males in the prison system, however, are also products of a robust and distinctive subculture that forms an additional level of mediation between themselves as individuals and whatever could be conceptualized as American culture. While they *are* Americans and have accepted many values of the culture at large, they also belong to a group with distinctive experiences that set them apart from others in the wider culture. This subculture adds a layer of complexity to their narrative voices, and which raises further questions about culture and selfhood. African American offender narrative has unique distinguishing characteristics that makes it an important source of scholarly inquiry.

### “Western Culture” vs Street Culture

The question of whether particular cultures produce particular kinds of selves is complicated by the fact that the words culture and country are not synonymous. When debates arise about so-called “Western” culture and a possibly distinctive Western type of self, the assumption usually made during these discussions is that *all* American selves should be thought of as if they were discrete independent selves, and set in opposition to the conception of persons in other countries or cultures. The assumption of one kind of American self can be criticized, however, because these ideas that center around the conception of a bounded, cohesive self come from Western privileged persons who are white, male, heterosexual, Christian, and middle-class. Anyone not falling into most of these socially-constructed categories has been written about and conceptualized as “The Other” and their ethos and experiences of being oppressed and subordinated by the politically powerful have been invalidated by the dominant discourse which has positioned them as inherently deficient. A famous expression of this experienced phenomenon for African Americans was expressed by W. E. B. Du Bois as “double consciousness”:

... the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (1904:8)

In this often-cited quotation, Du Bois refers to the “American world” which not only maintains his inferiority, but gives itself the power to define reality and to decide who does or does not belong within its protected boundaries. According to Williams, racism is one of the most important “powerful countercurrents of valuation” (1970: 498) that go against the stressing of individual worth and dignity in this country -- despite the fact that Americans purport to value humanitarian mores, equality, freedom, and democracy.

Pilgrim (2000) has identified several dominant caricatures of African Americans, each with their own hidden agenda that perpetuated ugly stereotypes throughout the history of the United States from slavery to the present. For males those included the loyal servant, (Uncle) Tom, the lazy stupid Coon, and the malicious Brute –“savage, animalistic, destructive, and criminal – deserving punishment, maybe death.”<sup>9</sup> The deepest fear associated with the Brute was that his “animalistic” impulses were sexually directed toward white women. All of these stereotypes of African Americans were summed up in the word “Nigger.” Furthermore, Muhammad (2010) has documented the way that public discourse promulgated by academics and journalists has been portraying African Americans as a dangerous race of criminals ever since slavery ended in the nineteenth century. This discourse about criminality intensified, but started to change into race neutral language (but not race neutral visual images) around the time of the Nixon administration. Alexander (2012) makes a very strong case that the “War on Drugs” and the massive expansion of the numbers of prisoners in the United States

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/brute/>

since the 1970s and 1980s were reactions to the Civil Rights Movement. When it became no longer legally or culturally acceptable to overtly treat African Americans as inherently inferior, there was a cultural shift in which racism took on a new mask with the idea of being “tough on crime” -- and it is not racist to be opposed to crime.

In the era of racially targeted ‘law-and-order’ policies and their sociological pendant, racially skewed mass imprisonment, the reigning public image of the criminal is not just that of ‘a *monstrum* – a being whose features are inherently differ from ours’, but that of a *black* monster, as young African-American men from the ‘inner city’ have come to personify the explosive mix of moral degeneracy and mayhem. The conflation of blackness and crime in collective representation and government policy (the other side of this equation being the conflation of blackness and welfare) thus re-activates ‘race’ by giving a legitimate outlet to the expression of anti-black animus in the form of the public vituperation of criminals and prisoners. As writer John Edgar Wideman points out:

*It’s respectable to tar and feather criminals, to advocate locking them up and throwing away the key. It’s not racist to be against crime, even though the archetypal criminal always wears ‘Willie’ Horton’s face. Gradually ‘urban’ and ‘ghetto’ have become code words for terrible places where only blacks reside. Prison is rapidly being reflexified in the same segregated fashion (Wacquant 2002).*

Significantly, as noted by Wacquant, the most familiar type of person who exemplifies the current obsession with the necessity for “tough on crime” legislation is not only young, black and male, but from the inner city. This points out that, despite the frequently used term “African American community,” many African American scholars, such as Gates, have recognized that black Americans have been separating into two distinct groups since the 1960s:

Two tributaries began to flow, running steadily into two distinct rivers of aspiration and achievement. By 1990, the black middle-class, perilous though it might feel itself to be, had never been larger, more prosperous, nor more relatively secure. Simultaneously, the pathological behavior that results from extended impoverishment engulfed a large part of a black underclass that seemed unable to benefit from a certain opening up of American society that the Civil Rights movement had long envisioned and had finally made possible. And for the first time ever, that inability to benefit seemed permanent (1998).

In the same article Gates still referred to all African Americans as his “community,” but wrote about incredibly immense racial disparities that are reflected in contact with the criminal justice system.

For my community, the African American community, it is the best of times and the worst of times. We have the largest black middle class in our history, and the largest black underclass. According to a report by the Alternative Schools Network, in 1990, nationwide, 2,280,000 black boys and men were jailed or imprisoned at some time during the year, while only 23,000 earned a college degree. That's a ratio of 99 to 1. For white boys and men, the ratio of inmates to graduates was six to one, with 2,412,000 locked up at some time in 1990 and 413,000 earning a bachelor's degree.

Another black scholar who has bifurcated African Americans into two groups is Anderson who has done ethnographies about low income African Americans in Philadelphia. There are people that he categorized as “decent” who are committed to middle-class values (whether or not they have a middle-class income) and those who subscribe to “an oppositional culture, that of ‘the street’ whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society” (1999: 32-33). There are several significant aspects of “oppositional” behaviors involved in street culture, but one major difference between middle-class and street values are the forms of resource acquisition that involve crime.

On the other hand, Venkatesh (2006) criticizes Anderson’s clear bifurcation of inner city residents into “decent” and “street,” and his ethnography about the involvement of Chicago’s low-income African Americans in a thriving underground economy describes a myriad of different ways in which inner city residents acquire resources, some of which would be perfectly legal if reported and taxed. He says that the off-the-books economy functions with a logical set of rules, but often leave residents caught “between their desires to live a just life and their desire to make ends meet as best they can” (61). In

his interpretation, the issues of deviance from or conformity to strictly legal occupations are more a matter of expedience than of a deliberate desire to break away from a cultural model of honest work. Venkatesh declares that “...there may be important links between the development of moral and ethical systems and the material world that supports them” (24).

This is echoed by Wilson who wrote:

...the extent to which communities differ with respect to outlook and behavior depends in part on the degree of the group’s social isolation from the broader society, the material assets or resources they control, the benefits and privileges they derive from these resources, the cultural experiences they have accumulated as a consequence of historical and existing economic and political arrangements, and the influence they wield because of these arrangements (1996: 66).

Hagedorn, writing about Milwaukee, has noted that since the departure of the black middle class, there has been a decline of social institutions in low-income black neighborhoods. In addition, communal ideals that inspired Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King or Malcolm X, have disappeared.

The polarization of economic classes within the black community has had a major effect on the outlook of Milwaukee’s black gangs. Today’s gangs see themselves as largely separate from the needs and struggles of their own communities and the traditions of the black movement for social justice. On the other hand, the aspirations of the middle class within the black community are seen to have little relevance for an underclass struggling to survive (1998: 141).

In other words, the divergent experiences of different groups of people have created different cultural models and competing narratives.

The differences between middle-class African Americans and those left behind in the ghetto are based not only on income, but on the frequently correlated spatial location. Upwardly mobile African Americans have associated with middle-class people of other ethnicities at school, work, and neighborhood locations in the classic melting pot model. Lower-income black people have been kept physically detached from most other people

and have developed a subculture that is distinct from the wider society. While it is true that the ancestors of African Americans arrived in the United States between 200 and 400 years ago, most people of African ancestry were extremely segregated from the rest of the population until the Civil Rights Movement, and those with low incomes have remained continuously segregated (Massey and Denton 1993, Kozol 2005). One obvious example of the effects of segregation is the robust persistence of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Labov studied AAVE and concluded that it reflected “isolated and self-contained linguistic communities” (Denton and Massey 1997: 163). As Bellah points out, “language is the heart of culture” (1998: 615) and the fact that many African Americans in segregated central cities speak a distinct dialect shows that they are disconnected in crucial respects from the rest of American society.

To be specific to the area under study, a 2011 [Salon](#) article named Milwaukee as the most segregated metropolitan area in the United States using recent census data based on “a dissimilarity index, a measure used by social scientists to gauge residential segregation.” The section about Milwaukee said,

"Most of our history is very similar to Chicago, Cleveland or even Baltimore," says Marc Levine, professor of history and economic development at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. "Every place has had the zoning ordinances, then restrictive covenants, the practices of realtors. The standard history. What makes Milwaukee a little bit different than these other places, which explains why we're consistently in the top five and often No. 1, in segregation? We have the lowest rate of African-American suburbanization of any of these larger cities." (Denvir)

It can be argued that low-income African Americans, including those in Milwaukee's ghetto neighborhoods, have been so continuously separated from the rest of America in some respects that, while the culture of the street reflects some elements of

mainstream American culture, many other elements developed on a completely separate course that has few similarities to the dominant culture.

Ayers has pointed out that African Americans began their American journey in the South and were influenced by the distinctive culture of the slave states. The early cultures of European immigrants to the North and South were very different: in the North was dignity, in the South was honor. Dignity was “the conviction that each individual at birth possessed an intrinsic value at least theoretically equal to that of every other person” (1984: 19). In the North, the Puritan concept of dignity made the self “the focus of mastery, of control, of restraint, the Puritan self assumed a separateness, an inviolability the self of honor could never attain” (1984: 23). This description of dignity sounds very similar to the so-called “Western” independent conception of the self.

On the other hand, honor is “a system of values in which you have exactly as much worth as others confer upon you. ... In a culture of honor, anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu explains, ‘the being and truth about a person are identical with the being and truth that others acknowledge in him’ “(1984: 13). Buss cites Nisbett and Cohen’s “culture of honor theory” as suggesting that early herding cultures (such as the Scotch-Irish who settled in the Southern United States) had more to lose if raiding parties stole their herds of animals, while land-based farming cultures (such as the Puritans, Quakers, Germans, and Dutch who settled the Northern United States) could not as easily be robbed of their entire wealth at once, so they did not need to cultivate such a fierce reputation to protect themselves. Buss also says that men in herding cultures would



have had a greater variability in access to resources (and therefore women), so that violence could result in really winning big (a winner-takes-all outcome), or in ending up with nothing, including your own life (2005: 205-214).

These descriptions of dignity and honor dovetail with Anderson's descriptions of decent and street people. He says that decent African Americans in inner city environments feel that "they can walk away from a possible altercation with their self-esteem intact" and refers to this as "strength of character." On the other hand, he writes that backing down from any insult or potential conflict for street people could "leave one's self-esteem in tatters, while inviting further disrespect."

In the inner-city environment respect on the street may be viewed as a form of social capital that is very valuable, especially when other forms of capital have been denied or are unavailable. Not only is it protective; it often forms the core of a person's self esteem, particularly when alternative avenues of self-expression are closed or sensed to be. ... Given its value and its practical applications, respect is fought for and held and challenged as much as honor was in the age of chivalry (Anderson 1999: 66).

The competitive inner city code of the street can manifest itself by raising oneself up by putting someone else down (1999: 75-76). Furthermore,

One way to campaign for status is to take the possessions of others. Seemingly ordinary objects can become trophies with symbolic value that far exceeds their monetary worth. Possessing the trophy can symbolize the ability to violate somebody - to "get in his face," to dis him - and thus to enhance one's own worth by stealing someone else's. The trophy does not have to be something material. It can be another person's sense of honor, snatched away with a derogatory remark (75).

As will be discussed later, the inner city crime of robbery (particularly robbery of drug dealers for both drugs and money) is a winner-take-all outcome that transfers both wealth and status from one person to another very quickly (just as would stealing another man's herd of animals in past cultures of honor).

The idea of honor being “a system of values in which you have exactly as much worth as others confer upon you” is poles apart from the specific model of the self-contained independent person or the hypothetical American ideal of “rugged individualism” which Williams associated with Durkheim’s cult of individual personality. This permeable view of the self is closely associated with the concepts of respect and disrespect that frequently lead to violent behavior in ghetto areas. According to Anderson a significant aspect of street culture is “informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence” (1999: 33.)

Some of the best-protected people in the environment are members not only of tough street-corner groups but also of families and extended families of cousins, uncles, fathers, and brothers who are known to be down with the street. Their family members, especially when the family’s reputation is secure, ‘can go anywhere, won’t nobody bother them.’ Generally, to maintain his honor, the young man must show that he himself, as an individual, is not somebody to be ‘messed with’ or dissed. To show this, he may ‘act crazy’ – that is, have the reputation for being quick-tempered. In general, though a person must ‘keep himself straight’ by managing his position of respect among others, including his homies; fundamentally, this task involves managing his self image, which is shaped by what he thinks others are thinking of him in relation to his peers (73).

The interpretation of this ghetto-related behavior is extremely contested. Gates called the codes of street culture “valorized violence, narcissism, and a curious form of masochistic self-destruction.”<sup>10</sup> Like Gates, many scholars are of the opinion that the codes of the street arise from social alienation and lack of hope for the future. Yet, few discuss the fact that the conventions of behavior are also reflections of undercurrents of violence pervasive in other historical and contemporary aspects of American culture, one of which is the honor code of the old American South.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/race/etc/gates.html>

Middle class African American professors (such as Anderson and Gates) see “strength of character” in cultures of dignity and “masochistic self-destruction” in cultures of honor due to the fact that these attitudes and behaviors are now connected to social hierarchy and prestige in the United States. Dignity is now a middle-class attribute and honor is now an element of lower-class behavior. According to Ayers,

Dignity triumphed because it was inextricably tied to the transformations of society and personality that accompanied the growth and development of capitalism. The idea of the inherent value of the autonomous individual grew up simultaneously with the new ideals of character, of self-control, of discipline, of delayed gratification that have come to be the hallmarks of the bourgeoisie (1984: 24).

What all of this means is that the competing narratives of two cultural models are now given status-conferring implications and messages tied to social class. It began with Northerners seeing Southerners as embodying “wildness” (in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson), and continues with similar attitudes today in members of the middle class who see the same lack of discipline and self-control in cultures of honor like African American street culture. In other words, persons who have grown up with the model of dignity have a self-concept that is more impervious to outside pressure, while persons socialized in the honor version of culture have a self that is more permeable to the slings and arrows of the outrageous behavior of others. Detached and dignified poise looks like cowardice to people who were raised in cultures of honor; the bellicose posture of men in cultures of honor looks like outrageous overreaction to people who have been raised to value the attitudes of dignity. In the United States, however, the two cultural concepts are associated with social power differentials so that the valuation of honor is

conceptualized as morally wrong by people in power, (which includes most members of the judicial system).

When Bellah was referring to “the sacred core of the *conscience collective*” moving from the churches to the judiciary, he was referencing the self-respecting inviolability of the Puritan ethic that each separate individual person will behave according to a moral code that accords dignity to self and others due to an intrinsic worth that cannot be taken away by others’ behavior. The court of blind justice is the arbitrator of this code. When middle-class people feel violated, they take their grievances to the law.

On the other hand, Anderson says that the code of the street is a cultural adaptation to the “profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system” (1999: 34). While today this comes from a low rate and quality of police response in inner city neighborhoods and disproportionate minority confinement, despite possibly equal rates of offending between races, (Leonard, Pope, Feyerherm 1995), it also has a basis in the Southern past of African Americans. This is summed up in a famous 1920 quote (Fosdick cited in Ayers 1984: 231), about how Southern police recognized three classes of homicide: “If a nigger kills a white man, that’s murder. If a white man kills a nigger, that’s justifiable homicide. If a nigger kills another nigger, that’s one less nigger.” According to Anderson, “the code of the street thus emerges where the influence of the police ends and where personal responsibility for one’s safety is felt to begin” (34). In addition, as Ayers says,

Honor and legalism, as students of other honor-bound societies have observed, are incompatible: “to go to law for redress is to confess publically that you have been wronged and the demonstration of your vulnerability places your honor in jeopardy, a jeopardy from which the satisfaction of legal compensation in the hands of secular authority hardly redeems it” (1984:18).

But, even though the ancestors of ghetto residents originally came from Africa, and were first settled in the American South, the culture has also embraced what Anderson called “oppositional elements” which are forms of resistance to attempts by the dominant culture to categorize them as inferior. This form of resistance to dominant discourse has taken a unique trajectory in the ghetto, part of which includes attempts to redefine and reposition themselves. As noted above, positioning is a way that people construct meaning in conversations by negotiating to locate themselves as “sorts of persons” who could possibly exist in relationship to other possible sorts of person(s) engaged in the exchange. This same dynamic can occur on a cultural level during which entire groups can locate themselves in relationships to other groups who have attempted to position or define them. Specifically, African Americans have a long history of negotiating their own positions according to what is possible in the culture at large. As the stereotype of the Brute began to circulate among white people as part of the American cultural mythology, black males began to also redefine and attempt to take control of the image or the character they could play in the American story. Their self-defined image became the “bad nigger” who transformed into

... the powerful subject of the imaginative life of the people. As psychologists Price M. Cobbs and William H. Grier say, the ‘bad nigger’ is ‘one of the constant themes in black folklore... It seems that every community had one or is afraid of having one.’ He demands his own place in the scheme of things and belligerently sets the standard for manhood. Some call the badman a permanent fixture in the black male character, a virtual archetype in the Jungian sense. (3)

This characterization became the long-standing subcultural hero that has remained (with variations) in African American music and literature since the nineteenth century badman ballads replaced the animal trickster tales of the slave era. Bryant describes

these “bad nigger” tales as “a projection of anger, frustration and isolation under Jim Crow, of a simultaneous helplessness and power. They enact the fate of the black male: to be pursued, caught, and punished” (16). The power of the archetype is to be reckless and defiant, not to bow to the oppression of the white world. Alexander says that today young black men embrace gangsta culture as a form of emotional self-protection. “Psychologists have long observed that when people feel hopelessly stigmatized, a powerful coping strategy – often the only apparent route to self-esteem – is embracing one’s stigmatized identity” (2012: 171).

For example, the recent reappropriation of the word “nigger” by some African Americans (to the positively-constructed “nigga,” as a term of endearment) has been accompanied by reappropriation of various other formerly negative stereotypes including a form of the brute in street culture. Many writers have noted that urban black males now extol the racist stereotype of the violent, emotionally cold black male into a matter of inverted racial pride. This “glorification of caricature” is explained by Nightingale (in reference to his ethnographic work in Philadelphia): “all the boys I know well have bragged openly about how black men make better lovers, have bigger penises, and fight better than white men – and though they are often joking about these matters, they also take great pride in the attributes they are claiming for themselves” (1993: 131). When Anderson referred to street being “an oppositional culture...whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society” (1999: 32-33), he was referring to a culturally-constructed binary opposition that has been underlying race relations between people of European origin and people of African origin in this

country since its inception, and even going back to European colonialism in Africa.

Despite the push for multiculturalism in recent years, there are still many people who construct a racial self both by what it is and what it is not. Since street culture is opposed to “acting white,” and defines this behavior as leaving the community through “upward mobility” (Anderson 1999: 65) and “respect for conventional protocols” (Kennedy 2008: 58), then there have to be some behaviors that are the antithesis of “acting white” which would then be conceptualized as “acting black.”

As hooks writes:

In his memoir *The Ice Opinion*, rapper and actor Ice T talks about the lure of crime as a way to make easy money. Describing crime as “like any other job” he calls attention to the fact that most young black men have no trouble with committing crimes if it gets them money. He makes the point that it is not only money that attracts black males to criminal activity, that “there’s definitely something sexy about crime” because “it takes a lot of courage to fuck the system.” There is rarely anything sexy about paid labor. Often black males choose crime to avoid the hierarchy of the workforce that places them on the bottom. As Ice T explains: “Crime is an equal opportunity employer. It never discriminates. Anybody can enter the field. You don’t need a college education. You don’t need a G.E.D. You don’t have to be any special color. You don’t need white people to like you. You’re self-employed. As a result, criminals are very independent people. They don’t like to take orders. That’s why they get into this business. There are no applications to fill out, no special dress codes... There’s a degree of freedom in being a criminal.” (2004: 28).

Through what it is arguing against (paid labor), this quote points out that an important cultural model for males in the United States has been the good provider or breadwinner. The good provider has been conceptualized as a hard worker who acquires cash from participation in the labor force or commercial enterprises, and then uses that money to support his wife and children. As Anderson says, a steady job is “the hallmark of American manhood” (1999: 182-183). Formerly, and even retaining strong vestiges today, the cultural model of the good provider is essentially an attribute that partially *defines adult masculinity*.

Men were judged as men by the level of living they provided. They were judged by the myth “that endows a money-making man with sexiness and virility, and is based on man’s dominance, strength, and ability to provide for and care for ‘his’ woman” (Gould, 1974, p.97). The good provider became a player in the male competitive macho game ( Bernard 1981: 4).

But in the recent past, and even more so since economic restructuring and the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs from northern cities, black men quite frequently have had difficulty earning enough to provide 100% of the funds for their own households (Wilson 1987, 1996). According to Bernard:

Just on the verge between the area of conformity to the good-provider role – at whatever level – and the area of complete nonconformity to it was the non-good provider, the marginal group of workers usually made up of “the under-educated, the under-trained, the under-employed, or part-time employed, as well as the under-paid, and of course the *unemployed*” (Snyder, 1979, p. 597). These included men who wanted – sometimes desperately – to perform the good-provider role but who for one reason or another were unable to do so. Liebow (1966) has discussed the ramifications of failure among the black men of Tally’s corner: The black man is “under legal and social constraints to provide for them [their families], to be a husband to his wife and a father to his children. The chances are, however, that he is failing to provide for them, and failure in this primary function contaminates his performance as father in other respects as well (p.86).” In some cases, leaving the family entirely was the best substitute a man could supply. The community was left to take over (1981: 6-7).

Since black men frequently have been unable to establish their masculinity by earning a good living in the mainstream economy, a very important predicament has arisen. According to Gilmore, not only do all societies distinguish between male and female, but they also endorse institutionalized sex-appropriate roles for adult men and women. Furthermore, all over the world, in all cultures, people “regard the state of being a ‘real man’ or ‘true man’ as uncertain or precarious, a prize to be won or wrested through struggle and ... build up an elusive or exclusionary image of manhood through cultural sanctions, ritual, or trials of skill and endurance’ (1990: 1). Some anthropologists have called this the manhood puzzle. Even though high percentages of black men do not



have jobs, or do not earn very much money at the jobs they have, they still have to prove that they are men.

According to Williams:

*Full conformity throughout a society or group is dependent upon actors' having adequate knowledge of the norms, an identification with them, and support and reinforcement from other persons. ... Open violations of a norm, strongly supported by most of the community, is simply 'crime' or 'misbehavior,' but if a large number of individuals commit such violations, the norm itself becomes problematical – the situation is either approaching a split into subcultures, with different standards, or the norm is losing its controlling authority generally (1970:418-419).*

Applying a dominant cultural model framework to the experiences of marginalized groups creates the psychological fragmentation felt by those relegated to the category of outsider "others," so the desire to feel whole or to escape Du Bois' "double consciousness" leads to forming alternative groups with their own cultural models. The field of criminology is rich with cultural deviance theories (or subcultural theories), mostly asserting that economically disadvantaged people have a different set of rational and consistent values, which tend to conflict with the values of the middle class:

*... the universal experience of man is conformity to the norms of the groups into which they have been socialized and to which they owe allegiance. People never violate the norms of their own groups, only the norms of other groups. What appears to be deviance is simply a label applied by an outgroup to the conforming behavior endorsed in one's own culture (Korhauser, 1978, cited in McCorkel and Miethe: 107).*

This need both to prove one's masculinity and to acquire resources in the absence of wider societal encouragement, (and, in fact, in an ethos of active discouragement), is the most highly significant reason why criminally-oriented street culture has arisen as a separate, unique subculture in destitute racially-segregated urban environments. As Messerschmidt has written, "Crime by men is not simply an extension of the 'male sex

role.’ Rather, crime by men is a form of social practice invoked as a resource, when other resources are unavailable for accomplishing masculinity.” (1993: 85).

As well as creating a new standard for manhood, there is another alluring element that makes street culture attractive. To begin with, the oppositional, or the deviant in whatever forms they take, fascinate most people because they are taboo. This is explicated by Polanyi as follows:

The exception is so exciting because it present new possibilities, shows new vistas, gives an indication of a world in which the traditional encumbrances are not felt. The different, the deviant, the exotic is so interesting because it represents a type of freedom. The individual experiences himself as more individualized, more in touch with inner capabilities, unfettered by tradition, *free*. Freedom unfettered, independent, able to experience the possibilities of the world, to understand its complexity. These are all self-evident goods. Therefore, we are always fascinated by the deviant, although often frightened and disapproving of it (1985:84).

The idea of freedom from convention has been an attraction of many American subcultures. The conflict between the uptight, straight-laced, repressed, rigidly conventional, conformist (old) and the radical, creative, avant-garde, energetic, independent (new, young) has been a frequent motif in storytelling around the world (Booker 2004). Street culture (with its rap music, distinctive clothing and self-presentation, and culturally-specific verbal expression) has appropriated this theme to justify illegal and dangerous behavior as inventive non-conformity that thumbs its nose at the establishment.

Young ghetto males have been rewriting their own American story that turns racism, poverty, and diminished expectations into a story about creativity and freedom. So, to return to the idea of cultural models or story archetypes, the example articulated by Ice T has become the contemporary living equivalent of the long-standing tradition in

African American folklore of the defiant “bad nigger” who has “the strength, courage, and ability to flout the limitations imposed by white society” (Levine in Bryant 2003: 2). This constructed heroic self defies the concept of being a defective “deviant” and turns the bad person into a mythological, glamorous outlaw who is not subordinate and defeated, but who is independent, plays by his own rules, and defies the rigidity of society. The stories of crime that discuss drugs as an enormous public health issue, or robbery as a personal violation of dignity and property, or firing guns at other people as taboo, has been turned into the legends of daring black Robin Hoods.

Street culture and the “Bad Nigga” archetype arose from prevailing discourses about race relations that have retained some static elements, but which also have been evolving for the last 400 years in the United States. The dominant discourse about race and social class has been in a conversation with people who are resisting their second-rate positioning by recognizing and making the most of being the object of fear and repression.

As Wacquant has written:

... a ghetto is essentially a sociospatial device that enables a dominant status group in an urban setting simultaneously to ostracize and exploit a subordinate group endowed with negative symbolic capital, that is, an incarnate property perceived to make its contact degrading by virtue of what Max Weber calls ‘negative social estimation of honor.’ Put differently, *it is a relation of ethnoracial control and closure built out of four elements: (i) stigma; (ii) constraint; (iii) territorial confinement; and (iv) institutional encasement.* The resulting formation is a distinct *space*, containing an ethnically homogenous population, which finds itself forced to develop within it a set of interlinked institutions that duplicates the organizational framework of the broader society from which that group is banished and supplies the scaffoldings for the construction of its specific ‘style of life’ and social strategies (2008).

Segregation is repressive by not allowing low-income African Americans to fully-participate in full citizenship, but it also has had the unintended consequence of

creating a unique form of solidarity in which those segregated came to embrace their out-group membership as a form of distinction and pride.

Both positive and negative moral judgments about the individual self, or the group with whom the self identifies, never occur in a vacuum, but always come into being situated within a social context. Just as some anthropologists think that only certain selves (story characters) are possible in certain cultures, some scholars also believe that only selected plots are possible in particular cultures. People live out those plots that are “made available to us in particular social, historical and cultural moments” (Presser 2008: 10-11). Narrators “draw on a common stock of narrative formulations” in which particular life events and reasons for them are accepted as normal in certain cultural environments (Atkinson and Silverman, in Presser: 23)<sup>11</sup>. In other words, the undertaking of "self-making" is closely related to the analytical premise of "world-making."

But the more that ghetto residents resist positions of weakness by stressing their strength, the more that their new position is then resisted by counter discourses in the broader culture. As Kelley has written, in the wider public imagination, any discussion of street culture has risen to the level of a moral panic – “a sudden and disproportional response toward a certain group, perceived as a threat to the social and moral order” (McCorkle and Miethe 2002: 16). The ghetto was created and aggressively limited by Americans in power. As it developed into a place apart, what emerged was a culture

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<sup>11</sup> (Linde calls this a “coherence system” and Agar and Hobbes call it a “cognitive world.” Presser 2008: 23 & 24).

apart. Now, in the public imagination, members of that culture have become transformed into folk devils. According to Goode and Ben-Yehuda, “folk devils are *deviants*; they are engaged in wrongdoing; their actions are harmful to society; they are selfish and evil; they must be stopped, their actions neutralized” (1994 cited in McCorkle and Miethe 2002: 15).

The moral panic behind the denouncement of the ghetto and its residents revolves around the *deviance* of the people, but the concept of deviance is a judgment, placed on others unlike oneself, that has a different connotation from a term like, for example, nonconformity. Nonconformists are creative producers of interesting variation; deviants are just bad people, - and large groups of bad people are threatening to the social order, thus the state must step in to enforce power relations in the form of criminal justice. Both laws and dominant cultural models are top-down phenomenon. They are created by people on the top, and often imposed on people on the bottom.

These two competing conceptions of reality are at the heart of examining African American offender narrative as a separate and unique category of personal storytelling that has not been examined in this way before. The life stories of black prisoners are social constructions that assert group membership in the distinctive subculture of the inner city, and which try to reconcile the mythic culture of exuberant freedom with the antithetical culture developed in situations of imprisonment and loss of liberty. As law professor, Lawrence Friedman, has written, “a rich culture of liberty has evolved in the United States, but it casts a dark and dangerous shadow” (1993:14).

# Research and Methods

## Research Questions and Methodology

Criminals and prisoners are a difficult population to study. The fact that they break laws and know there are legal consequences for doing so make them generally distrustful of anyone who observes them or asks them questions. Because the number one criterion for conducting research with this population is getting people to trust the researcher with confidential information, prolonged engagement is absolutely necessary. I have been observing and working with African American men in the Wisconsin prison system and on the streets of Milwaukee for almost eight years. While not all of that time was under the official purview of this study, it has all contributed to the ideas I was eventually able to form into research questions and into the conclusions I was able to draw about the population under scrutiny.

I began this research project knowing nothing (except what I read) about African American criminals. At the beginning of my study I started with a simple question, “Why do so many men in the inner city commit crimes?” My first step in field observation was spent in doing more than four years in general pre-research which was conducted as a volunteer in two all-male juvenile correctional institutions in the state of Wisconsin. In one transitional facility (The Transition Success Center in Milwaukee) I assisted in creating an art-based form of community service because service was required as part of the prisoners’ release plan. (I am currently an adjunct associate professor of humanities at Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. Thirty-five hours of community service is required of our students for graduation, so I was able to connect four of my consecutive semester-long service learning classes with groups of high school males

leaving the correctional system. The groups of college students and parolees painted room-sized murals at three homeless shelters and in a building used by Wisconsin Department of Corrections as a juvenile facility.)

My second volunteer work was done for thirty months (two and one half years) in a secure facility (Ethan Allen School in Wales, Wisconsin) where I conducted writing classes that helped some young men work toward their high school equivalency diplomas. I worked every Friday morning within the on-site high school either in a school office or the library. Sometimes I worked with small groups (of four or less) and sometimes with just one individual to write a series of personal letters between the prisoners and myself. I started with a form letter of introduction about myself and the prisoner/student had to respond by introducing himself on paper. The following week I would return to the prison with a personal letter to each prisoner, responding to whatever he had written, and he would have to reply to me on paper during the writing class. I felt that this work was very successful because several young men gave me credit for helping them pass the English portion of the HSED, so they could graduate from high school on the prison grounds. (I have a BA in English with Creative Writing Emphasis from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, as well as my second major in Anthropology. I would like to acknowledge that I was inspired to do this work by Mark Salzman's wonderful book, *True Notebooks: A Writer's Year at Juvenile Hall.*)

From each of those two volunteer positions I was able to identify one person who became a core research participant and who then introduced me to other people in a snowball sampling method. While this method did not create a completely



representative sample of black Wisconsin criminals or a control group, I was looking more for long-term relationships that would produce rich and complex ethnographic data instead of the more surface data generated by single interviews and large sample sizes. Almost all of the literature I reviewed on offender narrative was done through single oral interviews or survey research which has the advantage of large sample sizes, but the disadvantage of shallow time depth. I wanted a more concentrated and meaningful set of conversations with my consultants over time, instead of trying to profess to have sampled a wide-ranging representative group, but with only a small amount of information from each individual. Once I had identified prisoners who were willing to participate in the project, I felt confident enough that I was going to be successful in gathering actual research data on prisoners, so I was able to create a proposal in my department and to request permission from the university to conduct official research with human subjects.

Since this research project was done through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, it was necessary to get approval for the specific research undertaken from the Institutional Review Board. To begin that I had to go through the necessary web-based training program from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) to understand and follow the federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects in research, particularly noting the section on “Research with Protected Populations-Vulnerable Subjects: Research Involving Prisoners.” Once I had taken the course and passed the test, I had to submit a proposal to the University’s IRB. The University’s guidelines for prisoner research includes as a possible topic of research, “Study of

possible causes, effects, or processes of incarceration or of criminal behavior”. My proposal to the IRB included the following:

Area of Research:

This Ph.D. dissertation project in anthropology will use a few in-depth case studies to examine the support systems that Wisconsin African American male prisoners utilize while incarcerated.

Describe the purpose/objective:

This research will increase general knowledge about how relationships between family and friends adjust and transform when prisoners are under the constraints of interacting with others in ways that are bounded by prison rules and intensive supervision. This research will ask prisoners to discuss who sends them money, takes their collect telephone calls, visits, sends books or magazines from bookstores, and writes letters. (The “who” is a general category, such as grandmother or girlfriend, to protect confidentiality.) The research will ask about general topics of communication, how the relationships have changed under prison conditions, how new relationships are formed, and what reciprocity the prisoner can offer to persons on the outside. Furthermore, the research will examine associations with other prisoners who were both known and unknown to the prisoner before he was incarcerated. How do people conceptualize moral obligations / social contracts under these conditions? How much trust, security, and emotional support is subjectively experienced? The purpose of this research is to understand more about the complexities of human interaction under difficult circumstances.

My protocol was accepted in October 2010 under the number: 10.247

Since my minor classes for my PhD were in social work and criminal justice, I originally reviewed research on the relationships between prisoners and their families and friends. A great deal of that research was conducted by interviewing the families and friends (not the prisoners) when they arrived at prisons to visit. This, of course, had a closer focus on the impact of incarceration on the families, although there is research on how maintaining contact affects the prisoners. (This is all cited throughout the following paper.) I also reviewed research on prisoner reentry and on the impact of

high incarceration rates on communities with high percentages of offenders. In doing this, I realized that I also needed to conduct field studies with the families and friends of prisoners, as well as to find out about the lives of ex-prisoners when they are not incarcerated.

My field studies were conducted mostly with the very large extended family of one of my primary consultants. This family has a significant number of male members in the criminal justice system, as well as being currently involved in many types of illegal activities in their neighborhoods, so they were very helpful in providing multiple perspectives and discussions of ghetto street crime. I also met and/or spoke on the phone with family members and friends of most of my other primary consultants. This research was very helpful and important to put the prisoners' assertions into a different perspective. For example, one of my consultants told me that his family did not help him enough. His older sister, however, told me that she spent a great deal of money on him for clothes and tried to help when he was released from prison the first time, but then he got arrested again anyway. After that she started feeling like helping him was pointless and a waste of her money which she needed for other things. The mother of another prisoner (who was upset about lack of family support) told me that her sons got free food when they were in prison, but she had to work and pay for her own food. This, of course, falls under the rubric of family systems theory.

Another point to consider, is that ethnographic research and participant observation tends to generate a wide range of information due to the fact that the researcher is not in control of the conversations and activities that are happening around her (in contrast

to survey research or interviews in which the researcher asks a specific question and the participant answers it). Many times I was inserting myself into events that would have been occurring even if I had not been there to observe them, such as family conversations, drug sales, and court cases. During the time I was engaged with people, I asked them numerous open-ended questions, but they also volunteered a great deal of information that I would never have thought of as a topic of inquiry. While this was good in the sense that I was generating an enormous amount of data, it was also problematic because it made culling and interpretation more difficult.

Furthermore, like all ethnographers, I was aware of the fact that my presence also changed the situation. Specifically, when I was taken places on the street by my primary consultants, there were almost always people there who did not know me. Many times I was later told that unfamiliar people had thought that I was either an undercover police officer, a parole agent, or a social worker. I was informed that this had to do with how I “carry” myself, a term for which I could never get a precise definition, although it seemed to have something to do with the contrast between my modest clothing and lack of makeup compared to the other women present in those environments. (I did get a great deal of unsolicited fashion advice from the mother of one of my consultants who thought I needed to fix my hair differently, wear make-up, and put on clothing a couple of sizes smaller than I was wearing.) Alternatively, because of being a woman who was frequenting a “bad neighborhood” I was also taken to be a prostitute on several occasions, once by a police officer. To the indigenous population there seemed to be no other explanation for my presence in the ghetto, except that I was either trying to

prevent a crime or to commit one. This, however, did reinforce my consultants' assertions that crime is an ordinary everyday occurrence where they live.

Like my field studies on the street, letters from prisoners did not stay within a prescribed format. While I asked many specific questions, they did not always get answered, and sometimes prisoners decided to discuss things that, again, never would have occurred to me to investigate and many of those things turned out to be much more interesting than my original questions. On the other hand, letters are very different from face-to-face interviews because the response can be more than a week in coming and that can make it difficult to follow up on an unexpected point of conversation that appears promising the way one can during an oral interview. Written correspondence also is void of any extra-verbal cues to meaning such as body language or tone of voice, so it must be interpreted solely on the available content. Letters, however, were the best method to communicate with prisoners because they are quite inexpensive (compared to collect telephone calls and driving around the state for prison visits). They also leave a permanent record of the consultants' exact words, unlike field studies in which one must return to one's car and attempt to reconstruct the conversation on paper as field notes. The final data for this study included 320 handwritten letters from six prisoners incarcerated in Wisconsin adult prisons, as well as numerous telephone calls from prisons, conversations during prison visits, and field study on the street,

In the final analysis, I believe that it was important to observe and interview people who were both on the street and inside the prison because the two places cannot exist exactly as they are without each other.

Soon the black ghetto, converted into an instrument of naked exclusion by the concurrent retrenchment of wage labor and social protection, and further destabilized by the increasing penetration of the penal arm of the state, became bound to the jail and prison system by a triple relationship of functional equivalency, structural homology and cultural syncretism, such that they now constitute a single carceral continuum which entraps a redundant population of younger black men (and increasingly women) who circulate in a closed circuit between its two poles in a self-perpetuating cycle of social and legal marginality with devastating social and personal consequences. (Wacquant 2008)

As Wacquant suggests, the most frequent population that goes to prison is “younger black men,” so I chose as my primary participants males who were between the ages of nineteen and thirty-one during the time of this study. As I got to know many young men on a personal basis in both contexts, I began to realize two important things. One was that how maintaining or creating bonds between people seemed to be one of the leading motivators for their behavior, criminal and otherwise. I also began to realize that another important motivator was comparing oneself to others and competing with them for status. While these two poles may at first seem to be contradictory, they are both external motivations for action. These observations gave me the idea that this subculture may be composed of interdependent selves. Before reading the literature on independent and interdependent selves, the consultants’ behavior was mysterious and confusing to me and I was frequently asking, “Why do you care so much about what other people think?” This question was as baffling to my consultants as their behavior was to me, and at this intersection of mutual confusion, I found the place where our cultural backgrounds diverged.

Related to the point of interdependence, one of the first lines of inquiry I began to explore was literature on structure and agency. In my own mind, I could not decide what percentage of inner city crime should be attributed to racism and deindustrialization, and what percentage should be blamed on individual choices. (In other words, I wavered between feeling sorry for my consultants and being angry at them as a group. The anger usually arose whenever one of my friends, my college students, or myself got robbed or had a car stolen by a black man. Economic crimes often do have victims, a topic I do not explore very much in this study, but which cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. Furthermore, I also experienced contradictory emotions when I compared how I felt about the punishment of criminals when a young black offender I cared about was murdered, compared to how I felt about the topic of punishment when someone I cared about –one of my primary consultants - committed a murder.) As far as this research project goes, my personal opinions are not very important (or even very solidified), but the opinions of my consultants on their own agency became another important avenue of investigation when I began to examine their discourse on offending. One relevant quote from another ethnography was written by Bourgois:

I discussed this complex theoretical issue of the relationship between structure and agency with most of the crack dealers I befriended. They, like most people in the United States, firmly believe in individual responsibility. For the most part, they attribute their marginal living conditions to their own psychological or moral failings. They rarely blame society; individuals are always accountable (2003: 54).

In considering this topic, I began to realize that the questions of structure and agency are (at least marginally) related to independent and interdependent selves because

both issues are questions about who or what is responsible for a criminal offense. In defining agency Strauss used Karp's (1986) definition: "Agent refers to persons engaged in the exercise of power in its primary sense of the 'bringing about of effects,' that is, engaged in action that is constitutive. Agency implies the idea of causal power" (2007: 808). Her article about crime was concerning the 1999 school shootings at Columbine High School and she said:

With this definition of agency, another way of putting my question is "What did commentators on the Columbine shootings believe caused the shootings? Specifically, what causes were most responsible, and who was morally blameworthy?" This is a question about attributions: after the fact explanations for our own and others' behavior, divided by social psychologists (too simply I will show) between *dispositional attributions*, which explain behaviors in terms of agents' stable internal traits, and *situational attributions*, which explain behaviors in terms of contextual factors (Heider 1958; Ross 1977). Such attributions, in turn rest on cultural models of personhood, particularly the cause of human behavior.

In the particular cases of discourse on offending that will follow in this research project, I discovered that there were occasions when my consultants used some situational attributions that could be related to the structure of broader society. (An example is that black men cannot get jobs because no one will hire them. Therefore, they need to acquire money through committing crimes.) There were also a (very) few instances when the offenders took complete responsibility for their own actions. The consultant I call Capo wrote: "I am not perfect. I know I need to change my ways [before I end up dead or in jail and that's two things I don't want to be." But the most common cases were situational attributions that came from the offenders' interdependence with other specific persons with whom they interacted on a personal basis.



On the one hand, they claimed to be offending as way to help other people. Here is an example from a consultant for whom I created the pseudonym, Man O' War:

People use me or don't appreciate my good heart. I try, I really try harder cause I know my fault. I's street, I was content wit being street. I hustle 2 make sure me or my family don't have to struggle or go through wat I went through. I don't like seeing people hurt. Especially kids.

I felt obligated 2 do wat I did because I know wat it is not to have shit. I hate 2 go 2 school wit clothes 2 or 3 sizes 2 big. I hate to not have a full meal when I get home. I hate 2 have 2 make up a dish. We did a lot me and my sis [had?] 2 walk 2 the store wit \$3 worth of pennies 2 get food when mom was at work. Act like we only had that and we forgot the rest of our \$ bills or silver change at home. So I feel obligated to help people now. I know I'm doing wrong but I feel I got 2, 2 make sure I can support my family and friends.

On the other hand, the prisoners also claimed to be offending because of gaining (or maintaining) status through rivalry with others. Here is an example from a consultant I called Plato:

As for my little fight, well another gang jumped one of my brothers (member of my gang or nation) so I ask them who was going to "pay" - meaning come in the cell to fight me so no one goes in the hole. They said it had nothing to do with me, and refused to send someone down to make things "right." So I, seeing as how non-action would put me at risk, just started hitting anyone I could get my hands on. Only one chose to fight back, so I went for him. I was hoping to stay out of trouble and fight in the cell, but the last time I got sent to the super-max for beating blood out of the guy that came in the cell with me!

In another letter he said "As for why I'm in the hole, well I'm in a gang so when the 'nation moves you move.!' (The hole is disciplinary segregation or solitary confinement.)

In nearly all of the offenders' accounts they demonstrated a close reciprocal relationship between their actions and the words or actions of their associates, regardless of whether the connection between them was affectionate or adversarial. This clearly demonstrates Bucholtz and Hall's framework in which they argue for considering "identity as a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and

circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories” (2005: 585-586).

Finally, in terms of organizing and coding my data, I first typed all the prisoners’ letters into Microsoft Word documents. I then printed out the files and reread and recoded them numerous times looking for patterns and categories that occurred most frequently. I also used the “find” feature in the program to look for words that reoccurred. The pervasive pattern I finally used to organize the following chapters was a fairly straightforward way to get to the consultants’ most important descriptions of themselves as people. I simply used adjectives, which are words that describe nouns. While the adjectives I used for section headings were not all words that the offenders themselves used, they were words that were frequently implied by the offenders’ statements and self-reports. In short, the adjectives describe the claims that the offenders make about themselves. A simple example is from this quotation from the consultant I called Fanatic:

What I told you about females only wanting you because of your reputation basically means because people in your neighborhood know what you do (sell drugs) and you have a lot of people talking about you makes you famous in your neighborhood. It’s like being the most popular person. That’s what reputation means.

Statements that were similar from other consultants went into the section I called “Offenders claim to be popular.” As the offenders positioned themselves as certain types of people, they were describing themselves with linguistic phenomenon that fell into language categories , as well as psychological categories.

The final important point I realized after examining the data was that the young men told stories about who they were and how they related to others in ways that cast themselves as characters in dramatic forms that appeared to spring from archetypes and plots that had a certain resonance to me both as an ethnographer and as a person who also has BA in English.

The offenders' self-creation was made through both universal and culturally specific narrative forms. As Presser said (above):

Popular culture routinely depicts the good, usually male protagonist battling hostile forces, which all but overpower him until a momentous gesture of agency by the protagonist prevents such a fate. Accessing that cultural model is therefore another way of identifying oneself as a moral agent. The narrator as hero redeems his past to himself and others. In this light, a tale of heroic struggle is a way of co-opting the label of outsider and subsequently integrating oneself into the social mainstream (Braithwaite 1989).

Bearing in mind the heroic story form, I began to examine academic literature on the ways that persons create themselves through narrative and to review the (very) scant criminal justice literature available on offender narrative. I was not able to find any studies on offender narrative as a cultural form. As I stated above, most studies of offender narrative focus on why this particular individual committed this particular crime and treat the offence almost in a vacuum and as separate from larger social processes, such as culture, or from community interaction. Presser (2008) suggests that conceptualizing offenders and their acts in isolation from the wider society where they grew up, and to where they will return after their release, is one of the problems not only with studying the narratives, but is also an important drawback with designing offender treatment and rehabilitation. In this research project I will depart from this

individualistic view of offenders as isolated actors with decontextualized narratives.

African Americans from low-income ghetto neighborhoods form the largest imprisoned cultural group in the United States and should be considered as producing some collective offender narratives arising from shared experiences and assumptions about the world. My primary contribution to the research literature is through analyzing offender narrative through the lens of culture and community.

Having said this, it is important to explain why this research project was done in this particular location. Even though African Americans make up only 12% of the population of the United States, approximately 50% of U.S. prisoners are black. Since 93% of all prisoners are male, the recent escalation of the prison population has affected black males more than any other demographic group. National figures show that black men are eight times more likely to be locked up than white men (Ledger 2009: 51).

While the social problems arising from the black ghetto and its prison doppelganger are occurring in many urban districts, one place of special concern is Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a former manufacturing powerhouse, now transformed into the location of one of America's worst urban wastelands. According to a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Economic Development study in the year 2000, "The racial gap in poverty rates in Milwaukee is the largest of any metropolitan area in the country and twice the national average. The black poverty rate is 6.9x the white rate in metro Milwaukee. Nationally the black poverty rate is 3.1x the white rate."<sup>12</sup> Another study by the Center found that the black, male jobless rate is about 50% - fifth worst among

<sup>12</sup> <http://www4.uwm.edu/ced/category.cfm#income>

large cities, and highest in the disparity between racial groups (Dresang 2009: 1D, 3D). While Wisconsin has the second highest high school graduation rate in the United States (87%), it has the worst rate for African Americans (40%). In terms of cities, Milwaukee has the second lowest black high school graduation rate (34%, behind Cleveland's 29%) (Holland 2002). Furthermore, an African American juvenile's chances of being incarcerated in Wisconsin are eighteen times that of a white juvenile. Of every nine black men in Wisconsin, one is in prison and one is on probation or parole. (For Wisconsin white men, the figures are for every 200, one is in prison and two are on probation or parole) ("Another gap" 2007). Many studies have shown that on various measurements of well-being, the plight of African Americans, especially males, is the worst or close to the worst, and the gap between black and white is either the worst, or close to it, in Wisconsin, and more specifically in Milwaukee – where most black Wisconsinites live ("Another gap" 2007).

In addition, Milwaukee has been the subject of numerous stories in the national press about its unusually high murder rate (such as a 2006 article in *Time* magazine called "The Next Crime Wave"). Even *The Source* featured a sidebar called "Killa Mill" about Milwaukee in a special report on violence in Hip- Hop, including this quote:

In fact, Milwaukee is so bad that in the July 2005 issue of *Black Commentator*, Bruce Dixon wrote, 'Wisconsin, and in particular the Milwaukee area, justly merit the invidious distinction of the worst place in the nation to be Black.' Not only does the jobless rate for inner-city adult males hover around 60%, but the high school dropout rate is nearly 55%.

These harsh statistics often push Black youth to participate in the traps of the informal street economy where the consequences can be deadly. But, according to Jenkins, most are doing so for survival. 'These kids are selling dope to their parents and grandparents who have given up on life because they think there aren't any options' he says in front of one of the dozens of street shrines commemorating murdered loved ones that adorn trees and light poles throughout the city. 'It's funny. People talk as if the crack epidemic is over, but it's very much in effect here.' (Baker 2006: 67).

The exact words of the Black Commentator article were:

Wisconsin leads the nation in the percentage of its black inhabitants under lock and key. Just over four percent of black Wisconsin, including the very old and the very young of both sexes, are behind bars. Most of the state's African Americans reside in the Milwaukee area, and most of its black prisoners are drawn from just a handful of poor and economically deprived black communities where jobs, intact families and educational opportunities are the most scarce, and paroled back into those same neighborhoods. So Wisconsin, and in particular the Milwaukee area justly merit the invidious distinction of the Worst Place in the Nation to be Black (Dixon: 2005).

Milwaukee is the worst place in the country to be black, so it was the best place in the country to study black prisoners.

### **My Social Location**

All interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others. Even when knowledgeable, sensitive, fluent in the language, and able to move easily in an alien cultural world, good ethnographers still have their limits and their analyses always are incomplete (Rosaldo 1993).

The fact that I am a woman made it possible for me to observe characteristics of street culture that most other ethnographers have not fully examined. Most women who have done street ethnographies have done research about other females. The majority of contemporary ethnographers of street men and male prisoners have been men. (Those male ethnographers that I have most frequently referenced in this paper are Anderson, Fleisher, Bourgois, and Venkatesh.) As they have observed and spoken to low-income African American and Hispanic street males, they would have been positioned subjects, as I was. Rosaldo's term "positioned subject" means that an ethnographer's race, social class, age, gender, and other salient social characteristics are the place from which they participate, see (and are seen), in any social world.

While male street ethnographers have done excellent work, I believe that men speaking to other men will generate one type of information and males speaking to females will generate another type of information. Tannen (1990) has noted that men tend to see the world, and relationships between people, in hierarchies. They are concerned about status and frequently see conversations as contests. Because of this, street men would have felt it necessary to emphasize their own conceptions of masculinity – being physically tough, emotionally cold, and sexually promiscuous -- to other males, even when those other males were outsider ethnographers. On the other hand, Tannen wrote that women tend to strive for affiliation and cooperation in the way that they communicate. These differences mean that when men and women speak to each other, they often misunderstand each other. To fully communicate, they must recognize these variations and find ways to express themselves that somehow move across or transcend the boundaries to create a different conversational sphere than when people speak to other persons of the same gender. I believe that I was able to find out more about relationships with other people from my consultants than a male ethnographer would have because males tend to deemphasize emotion in discussions with other males.

In her ethnography of masculinity and sexuality in a high school, Pascoe, (a woman), observed that males “become masculine in groups” (2007: 107). Her consultants “postured and bragged” in front of other males, but when they were alone with her, they behaved and spoke differently. Pascoe said that in one-on-one interviews, the young men “posited themselves as ‘different from other guys’ while in public they acted

just like the guys they derided” (108). I had exactly the same experience in doing this ethnography: when I interacted with my consultants, gun-toting gangbangers became sensitive and caring males. Some of what they said to me was obviously a constructed respectable “better” self than what they showed on the street, but my perception was that I was also observing certain aspects of themselves which were also genuine. (Even if some of what I was told was partially fabricated, these fantasy selves were still significant because the men made choices about what they thought *should be* fabricated in order to make their perception of a better impression.) But, in the final analysis, these are human beings, and human beings have feelings – even if male human beings are not supposed to express certain feelings in particular contexts, especially in front of other males with whom they may be competing on some level.

In addition, the fact that I am white and grew up in a rural area put me in a position very different from African American urban males. Few of them had ever known anyone from a rural area. Most of them frequently referred to *all* white people as being “rich” and from “the suburbs.” They were incredulous when I told them that I have never lived in a suburb. I was often told that they had never met anyone like me, and that my odd behavior was both a source of confusion and amusement. These differences often made communication difficult because there seemed to be few places of shared understanding. Discourse between us was often halting because, in ordinary conversation, many things go unsaid due to the fact that understandings rely on what one assumes all cultural members already know. When speaking to African American urban males I frequently had to stop the flow of conversation to ask people exactly what



they meant. Many of my questions were met with answers that revolved around some expression with the phrase “well, you know,” and I constantly had to assert that, no, I really did *not* know, (or else I would not have asked).

### Introduction to the Consultants

- **Plato** is 26-years-old. As an adult, he has been charged with multiple armed robberies with threat of force, bail jumping, possession of THC, and being a felon in possession of a firearm. According to the newspaper, he and a group of ten other male gang members robbed twenty-six businesses and homes, although each person was not present at all of the robberies. Plato also had sealed juvenile cases. He has been incarcerated continually for over eight years on a twelve year sentence, and is currently housed at the Super-Maximum security prison for fighting while in a maximum security facility. He belongs to a well-known gang that is based out of Chicago. His family moved to Milwaukee from the housing projects in Chicago when he was a little boy. From his mother he has eleven living siblings who have nine different fathers. He also had a sister who died as a baby. He has half-siblings in Chicago from his father, but he has never met them. He is African American, but frequently refers to French Creole and Native American ancestry. He has no children.
- **Capo** is 25-years-old. As an adult, he has been convicted of manufacturing and delivering cocaine, possession with intent to deliver THC, possession of narcotic

drugs, resisting or obstructing an officer, two counts of armed robbery, and reckless homicide. He has been in and out of jails and prisons several times in both Wisconsin and Illinois, and is currently in a maximum security facility in Wisconsin. He is in his second year of a twenty-year sentence for shooting and killing another drug dealer while attempting to rob him. Capo is originally from Chicago, and belongs to a well-known gang, (but not the same gang as Plato). He is a close friend of two of Plato's brothers and got his drugs from a supplier in Plato's family. He met Fanatic and Doctor See when he was in prison. From his mother, he has three siblings, each of whom have different fathers. He is African American. He has no children.

- **Man O' War** is 25-years-old. As an adult, he has been charged with possession of narcotic drugs, manufacturing and delivering cocaine, possession with intent to deliver cocaine, possession with intent to deliver THC, resisting or obstructing an officer, and being in possession of a firearm by a felon. He also had sealed juvenile cases, (some of which he told me were for home invasion, i.e. burglary). He has been in and out of jails and prisons for the last ten years. He has recently been released from prison and is currently on active community supervision (parole). He met Plato while in a juvenile facility. He is a leader of a crime crew (a loosely affiliated group he calls a clique) that, at one time, included Fanatic and Doctor See. His father is Vietnamese and his mother is African American, but they are no longer in a relationship. He has one sister. Both his Asian and African American male

- family members sell drugs. Man O' War has four children with four different mothers.
- **Doctor See** is 25-years-old. As an adult, he has been charged with possession with intent to deliver cocaine, bail jumping, small claims, and traffic violations. He has been released from prison and is currently on active community supervision (parole). He is Man O' War's cousin. He belongs to the same crime crew as Man O' War and Fanatic, although they do not always get along with each other. His mother is Puerto Rican and his father is African American. He has one brother with both of the same parents, although his parents are now divorced. He has no children.
  - **Fanatic** is 23-years-old. As an adult, he was charged with possession with intent to deliver cocaine. He also had sealed juvenile cases. He has been released from prison and is currently on active community supervision (parole). He belonged to the same crime crew as Man O' War and Doctor See, but they are no longer friends due to street rivalries. He has seven siblings from his mother, but they all have different fathers. Fanatic is legally married, but has no children. He is African American.
  - **Geppetto** is 32-years-old. He was charged with resisting or obstructing an officer, armed robbery with the use of force, and being party to first degree intentional homicide. He also had sealed juvenile cases. He is originally from Racine, but he has

been incarcerated continually for the last fifteen years on a thirty-year sentence for being the getaway driver during a robbery when one of his accomplices shot the victim. He was in a maximum security prison with Plato at one time, but has moved down to a medium security. He has several siblings from both parents. Geppetto has two children with two different mothers. He is African American.

# PRISONERS' STORIES

## Chapter Three

# Money and the Criminal Self

## Introduction

The self-creating narratives of the offenders in this study are intensely connected to a practical standard of ethics, which revolves around how they treat and are treated by other people they know well. An examination of prisoner discourse, shows that how they are seen by or how they see middle-class white people or members of the black middle class are almost completely inconsequential issues to them. Many times I have heard members of the middle class, both black and white, express moral condemnation for and/or fear of black inner city criminals. The offenders themselves, on the other hand, spend very little time thinking about or discussing the beliefs and behaviors of people who they see as being The Other. They seldom leave their own neighborhoods or come in contact with people outside of their own subculture – except school teachers in their early years and representatives of the criminal justice system as they become older. The actions, manners, and moral conventions of the middle-class (either white or black) and their judgments about ghetto residents are of little concern to them.

For the most part, black inner city offenders do not see themselves as identifying with anything larger than their own subculture, so its unique conventions and moral systems are very important to them. More specifically, members of their own family and friendship groups are the individuals whose esteem they desire and whose opinions they value. As Hagedorn wrote “Despite the alienation and bitterness, the gang founders we interviewed clearly wanted and needed a ‘sense of community.’ ” (1998: 146). As will be demonstrated, one of the primary reasons that young African American drug dealers and armed robbers give for committing crimes is to financially support

themselves, as well as their friends and families. Their relationships with other people are of paramount importance to them, especially since they are not pursuing other life experiences that could be contributing to their identities (such as hobbies, educational opportunities, or careers). For African American offenders, the association between “morality” and self-concept is most commonly linked to their rights and obligations connected to their natal families, fictive kin networks, and romantic partners. While all of these people may be following principles that are part of the same subcultural ethical system, the important issue is not the code itself, in an abstract sense (despite what they sometimes assert), but the bonds and rivalries between individuals who matter to them.

In considering both their own conduct and that of others, offenders are always making judgments that involve moral approval (praise) or moral condemnation (blame). While they are quick to justify or excuse their own activities, they are biased by the need to appear rational and decent to the person(s) hearing their performances. On the other hand, they are more critical of the actions of others so their discourse regarding the deeds and misdeeds of their family members, friends, and acquaintances more effectively illuminates their cultural models of right and wrong -- without the embarrassment of defaming their own characters. One of the best ways to understand the fundamental ethical world of African American prisoners is to examine what they say about other people’s actions, especially when the offender has been personally affected by the behavior of someone else. In this study almost all of the thoughtful



conversations about morality involved the offenders' feelings of being mistreated or wronged by other people.

An example of this comes from one of the first letters I got from Fanatic in which he said, "most of everybody I know has did me wrong." Like all other prisoners I came to know, he had a very clear sense of what he considered to be good and bad behavior. In one of his letters he wrote, "But although I live my life like this I still know right from wrong." These young men do not live in a gray world of moral relativism or in an amoral universe where anything is acceptable. In this way, they are very much "typical Americans" with "moral orientation" as described in Williams' fifteen cultural themes and orientations.

A third major value-configuration relates to a particular type of ethical quality in the total cultural orientation. Authoritative observers from abroad from Tocqueville, through Bryce, Siegfried, and others, down to recent studies have agreed on at least one major point: Americans tend to 'see the world in moral terms.' They do not mean mere conformity to detailed prescriptions of a particular moral code, but rather to a systematic moral orientation by which conduct is *judged*. It is asserted that the quasi-mythical figure, "the typical American," thinks in terms of right and wrong, good or bad, ethical or unethical (1970: 461).

In the following excerpt from one of Fanatic's letters, it is obvious that at each point that he discusses his behavior and that of his family and friends, a moral judgment is being made:

I am writing this letter to tell you a little about me and my life. As you know my name is [Lester South] but everybody calls me [Fanatic]. I was given that name because I'm a cancer and everybody thinks I'm so sweet and it's true that I am, I would give a person my last, and it takes a lot to get me mad. But once I get mad I turn into a [fanatic] and nobody can tell me nothing, but it's very rare that someone sees that side of me, because I'm a good hearted person.

But anyway I have six sisters and one brother, all of us have different fathers. The crazy thing is sometimes I feel like an outsider. I never met my dad he stop coming around before I was born so all I had was my mother in my life. But when I was 14 my mom kicked me out because I went to jail. I had no one to turn to and nowhere to go.

I was friends with this older dude named [Tomas] who lived with his sister. Once I told him about my situation he let me come and live with him. At the time I was still in school, but started slowing down on going to school when my money got low. Now my friend was a drug dealer and I needed money to help pay rent, for food and other stuff that was a must in the situation I was in. So I started hustling with him to the point where I just stop going to school. After a while I fell in love with the money that came with the hustle game so I hustled even harder and really got into dealing. Then one day my friend [Tomas] got caught and went to jail. With him going to jail I was left with the house and the responsibility of taking care of his family. So I did, I took care of everything that needed to be took care of for a while, made sure he was good in jail with a phone on and money on his books.

But when I turned 17 I was caught in a dope house with my cousin and a couple more friends. The day I was caught [exact date] my whole family moved on me, they all moved to [city in another state] and left me here by myself in jail. The crazy thing about my situation was even though I wasn't living with my mom I was still paying her bills. But as soon as I got locked up she takes my whole family and leaves. My brother stayed up here so he could try to bail me out. But he ended up playing me too. My wife gave him the money to come bail me out and he moved to [another city] with it. I was so mad that my family disowned me like that, that I just took my plea. I caught a program and did sixteen months. Throughout my whole sixteen months no one sent me anything but my wife. Not a letter, not money, nothing.

So when I got out [exact date] everybody thought I was gonna go right back to hustling so they was all in my face, asking for this and asking for that. But I was trying to do right. Now my friend [Tomas] got out before I did and we was hanging out together all the time. He wasn't dealing any more either. But a lot of people know us for dealing so one day when he was by his self some guy shot and killed him. That's not all, during my incarceration time I loss five family members.

Immediately Fanatic describes himself as a good-hearted person, and he maintains that description with examples of his good-heartedness: "I would give a person my last." Examples of this include the fact that he could not be a free-loader when he lived with Tomas, so he had to help pay for the rent and the food. Then when Tomas was arrested, Fanatic had to take care of his friend's family, as well as making sure that his friend himself received his financial help while incarcerated. Furthermore, Fanatic was paying his own mother's bills. Also, the line about people being in his face asking for things implies that after Fanatic was released, people expected him to help them financially since he had done so in the past.

The polar opposite of Fanatic's good and ethical behavior is the contrast with that of his family, which is judged to be bad and unethical. His father left before he was born. His mother kicked him out of the house when he was fourteen instead of being patient with his youthful recklessness. Several years later, she moved away and abandoned him in Milwaukee when he was arrested a second time. In addition, his brother took the money he had gotten from Fanatic's wife and used it to move, instead of bailing Fanatic out of jail. (In another letter I asked him why his wife had not just taken the money to the courthouse herself, and he said that she was supposed to be paying half of the bail, and gave that to Fanatic's brother who had agreed to pay the other half.) Then no one in Fanatic's family sent him mail or money, even though he had been assisting them economically before his arrest.

Besides Fanatic, the only two good people in this story are his wife (who sends money and mail to him during his arrest) and Tomas, the older drug dealer, who takes him in when he is homeless. To analyze all of these behaviors, most of them fall into the polar opposite categories of helping other people as being good, and not helping family and friends as being bad. Even though Fanatic does conceptualize drug dealing as being bad (as can be seen by his abstention from dealing being referred to as "trying to do right"), this bad behavior is rationalized by showing that the higher goods of being independent (or of pulling one's own weight) and the opportunity to help other people overrides the less significant bad of performing illegal activities. This entire account that positions various actors as good or bad depending on how they treat other people – not depending on whether they break the law - indicates that social attachments to persons

are more emotionally resonant moral behavior than abstract laws made by the government.

### **Offenders Claim to be *Rational***

Much of the collected offender narrative that focused on the actual crimes committed had the theme that economic crimes were the rational choice under the circumstances. The point that the crimes originated from financial motives reinforces what Agnew said regarding the fact that one of the most common storylines in offender narrative is “a desperate need for money.” It hardly bears mentioning that people need money in a capitalist economy, although offender narrative can be used to determine why crime was the vehicle through which many prisoners chose to obtain it.

Participants in this study expressed strong beliefs in the popular ghetto expression “Money Over Everything.” All of them had either sold drugs, committed armed robberies, (or both), and all of them asserted that these were necessary behaviors under their life circumstances due to the fact that they needed money. Yet, needing (or wanting) money, even desperately, is not considered deviant behavior. Acquiring money through illegal means is deviant behavior.

A discussion of conformity to cultural models and deviance from them depends on a broader community to which an individual can be compared. In order to discuss deviation from the norm, it must first be established what actually is the standard or how people understand what it is to be normal. By breaking a law the prisoners made a choice to think (and behave) outside the box, so first the box itself must be defined. To

discuss African American males in the prison system in Wisconsin, the first issue is how to categorize and analyze the ways in which they share either a community as a geographic location or a community as a value system and/or a suite of behaviors with others. Then a discussion can commence as to how they are following conventions in the various communities they share, followed by how and why they are making choices that led to the behavior that ultimately gave them the deviant label.

The largest relevant category to which African American prisoners belong is that they are American citizens which means that, due to their geographic location, they share some aspects of American values or culture with others who live in this country.

Williams defines values as “those *conceptions of desirable states of affairs* that are utilized in selective conduct as *criteria* for preference or choice or as *justifications* for proposed or actual behavior” (1970: 442). While it can be difficult to describe American culture, there are several underlying themes in the popular imagination and in scholarly writing that people present as being typically American.

First of all, the term “American Dream” is pervasive in popular discourse. According to the “Center for the Study of the American Dream” at Xavier University the four most prominent definitions of the American Dream are "a good life for my family," "financial security," "opportunity," and "freedom." The basic idea behind the American Dream is that all adult persons have equal rights and opportunities, and can achieve their own definition of success strictly on their own merits through individual effort. Another popular way of phrasing a similar concept is by referring to the Horatio Alger myth in which someone of a lowly station progresses steadily in upward mobility through

honesty and hard work. This myth, however, was born among people whose ancestors came to the United States from Europe to pursue freedom – not among those whose ancestors came from Africa in chains.

Noted historian, John Hope Franklin (as cited in Fersch, 1978) has concluded that by the end of the nineteenth century, American standards of ethnicity accepted Anglo Saxons as the norm, placing other whites on what might be called “ethnic probation” and excluded all others from serious consideration. Thus it seems logical to describe Anglo Saxon values as representative of the culture of the United States (Locke 1992:4).

According to Williams, there are fifteen cultural themes and orientations that reflect the dominant Anglo Saxon culture of the United States, and two of these are related Weber’s Protestant work ethic: (1) Achievement and Success, and (2) Activity and Work (Locke 1992: 4). The concept of the virtue of productive labor has very deep roots in Anglo Saxon history and goes back to the European origins of the immigrants who brought their cultural models with them from the Old World. The principle can be traced back at least 650 years to the Statute of Laborers passed in England in 1349 which illustrates the longstanding moral surveillance of the ambition and effort of others (Handler 1995: 10). In fact, the concept goes back to the Bible which was followed by early American settlers who came here from Europe, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (II Thessalonians 3:10). Work is good, idleness is bad. Anything acquired should be *earned*. The American cultural model of the work ethic now is supposed to transcend political and ethnic boundaries, and applies to any adult who is physically capable of labor.

Yet, in post-industrial Milwaukee, there are problems with inner city African American men following the cultural model of productive labor because, at one time, the city had the highest percentage of African Americans employed as industrial

laborers in the entire United States (Schmidt 2011: 22A), but thousands of jobs have been outsourced to other countries over the last thirty years. As noted above, a study by University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Economic Development found that the black, male jobless rate in Milwaukee is about 50% - fifth worst among large cities, and highest in the disparity between racial groups (Dresang 2009: 1D, 3D). Some of this is the economy and some is simple racial prejudice. Pager (2007) found that, in Milwaukee, black men *without* criminal records had worse luck in being hired than white men *with* criminal records. In Milwaukee there are twenty-five job seekers for each one available full time job in the nine zip codes considered to be the inner city. In addition, very small percentages of ghetto residents have driver's licenses or cars, while many jobs are not on bus lines.<sup>13</sup> Due to this specific employment climate (which certainly has some objective basis in reality), my consultants held the belief that black men simply could not get jobs. This idea was the prerequisite to the thought that there was no point in even trying. Plato's younger brother, Slam Dunk, who was arrested for armed robbery with him, (but who went into the juvenile system and was released), told me, "Milwaukee is a women's town. Even if a black man had a Master's Degree, he could not get a job." According to Maruna, there is some research in criminology that shows that "if people believe that society is against them, they might logically decide to disregard that society's laws" (2001: 138).

This idea is the first of several premises referred to (either alone or in combination) by the prisoners and their families that demonstrate the rational basis for deviating

<sup>13</sup> <http://www4.uwm.edu/eti/2009/MilwaukeeSocioEconomicAnalysis.pdf>

from the American cultural model of hard work: (1) It is difficult, if not impossible, for a black man to get a job. (2) Crime makes more money for less effort and takes less time than working. (This was frequently expressed as: Work is “slow money;” crime is “fast money.”) (3) No other black men they know are working, therefore that is not what “we” do. The first two premises demonstrate crime to be a logical and efficient choice, and lead to the third which forms the foundation for a subcultural principle that creates solidarity around a behavior that became acceptable for the group as a whole.

According to Wilson:

where jobs are scarce, where people rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to help their friends and neighbors find jobs, and where there is a disruptive or degraded school life purporting to prepare youngsters for eventual participation in the workforce, many people lose their connectedness to work in the formal economy; they no longer expect work to be a regular, and regulating, force in their lives. In the case of young people, they may grow up in an environment that lacks the idea of work as a central experience of adult life – they have had little or no labor-force attachment. These circumstances also increase the likelihood that residents will rely on illegitimate sources of income... (1996: 52-53).

Since many adults think of their occupation as a central concept of their identity or selfhood, an environment without work must form identity in other ways.

For African American street men, being a person who is clever enough to survive economically without a job is an identity which encompasses intelligence and a sense of power. Illegal sources of income hold out the promise of necessary money – without the struggle and humiliation of looking for work, but not finding it. Crime generates revenue as long as one does not get caught (or shot) in the process of participation in the street economy. Plato frequently wrote about assessing the merits of crime (versus work), attributing to himself an amazing array of skills that were going to waste:

I can weld plus build houses from nothing, but to be honest no one where I'm from likes to wait on honest money!



In another letter:

When I was in EAS<sup>14</sup> I took computer graphics and many other classes, but you don't get to use any of the stuff in the hood. I mean no one is really looking for a job, not to say honest work isn't good just slow money. Well, CDs, Magazines, and cards is some of the things we learned to do in that class I took! I also took marketing classes and printshop.

In another letter he said:

I'm into mostly whatever come my way, my motto is "why not"! I know how to read blueprints and weld with all kinds of other skills people ask why I never got a job, and I just think back to sitting in the house selling crack \$20 a bag or working hard for at the most \$20 an hour. When I sell maybe 15 bag per hour on a bad day, I seen the cash so why look into the light?

I was in LHS<sup>15</sup> and EAS schools for boys, kiddy prisons so I learned all kinds of skills.

From a fourth letter:

In the past, bad economic times would give people of our crest lots of good and bad ways to make money. I want to teach my brothers other ways to make money. What a lot of people don't know about me is all the side businesses and deals I would make to get quick money. Everyone thinks drug money comes fast, but it like running a store good day and bad day when shit moves so slow you go out and do dum shit to push off time.

I just started to get the hang of this writing stuff, you should see my spelling and hand-writing from a year ago. I mean in the hood these are not needed skills, mathematics and conversation are the only key tools.

Setting aside moral issues (such as crack is not healthy and selling it is illegal), Plato is making a fairly reasonable argument. If it is true that he was selling 15 bags of crack per hour at \$20, then he was grossing \$300 an hour and, (if I understand this correctly), that would be about \$135 profit after subtracting his cost of the cocaine. That is almost seven times more than the \$20 gross per hour he thinks he could make while working at a conventional job. This argument looks even better if the man does not have or cannot

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<sup>14</sup> Ethan Allen School

<sup>15</sup> Lincoln Hills School, another juvenile correction facility.

get the \$20 per hour job – or any job. On the other hand, Plato does admit that there were “bad day[s]” when he was not making a lot of sales.

Another view of rational choice comes from what Fanatic said in this previously cited quote about dropping out of school and becoming homeless:

But when I was 14 my mom kicked me out because I went to jail. I had no one to turn to and nowhere to go. I was friends with this older dude named Al who lived with his sister. Once I told him about my situation he let me come and live with him. At the time I was still in school, but started slowing down on going to school when my money got low. Now my friend was a drug dealer and I needed money to help pay rent, for food and other stuff that was a must in the situation I was in. So I started hustling with him to the point where I just stop going to school. After a while I fell in love with the money that came with the hustle game so I hustled even harder and really got into dealing.

Fanatic was a fourteen-year old boy who needed to support himself. How many choices did he have at this point? He had never met his father, and his mother would not let him live with her because he had gotten in trouble at school for seriously beating up another boy who hit his girlfriend (an assault charge). Under the circumstances, selling drugs seemed like rational behavior. All of the African American prisoners in this study (as well as most of those discussed in other academic literature) began to commit economic crimes as young teenagers when it would have been extremely difficult to find legitimate work because of their age and the fact that they had not graduated from high school. As they get older, some offenders eventually arrive at a position where they begin to seriously weigh the merits and drawbacks of the street economy versus the legitimate economy. This consideration of both possibilities, however, must not just include potential earning power, arrest risk and physical danger, but whether the legitimate economy is genuinely a viable possibility for them due to a deficiency of

human capital such as education, job skills, job history and references. Fanatic wrote

this:

The point I was trying to make with that letter I wrote you is that we do have a society where the rich keep their selves at the top by keeping the poor at the bottom. So for me growing up with no father in this society and my examples (at least the ones I could see) for making money and being successful were rappers and drug dealers. Being without that father figure I turned to the streets, and after my subsequent incarcerations I see now that making money or being successful can be done without being a street thug. Yet I also acknowledge that I have not yet acquired the skills to earn money and be successful by "legitimate" means according to this society. So I'm faced with when I get out of prison this time having to learn how to earn a living support myself and my wife, having virtually no job skills and with a felony record, limited prospects.

From Man O' War:

I'm use to having my back against the wall being an underdog. I know when I get out I'm gona have 2 grind. Get back on my feet in every way. Not just illegally. If I have a legit way to hustle, work, get cash, I will. But it's usually not likely that I will be able to get a job right out of prison. Little work experience. Right now suspended license. I even gotta buy another car. So I have to get my tickets paid off, pay the reinstatement fee, and buy my car. Get a new apt.

These circumstances create within the men irresolvable inner conflicts that interfere with any possibility of arriving at a definitive conclusion about whether crime is a good idea due to the fact that much of the situation is out of their personal control. (These are examples of what Strauss would call situational attributions in which the offender's agency is called into question because he is not able to bring about the effects he desires.) On the one hand, they know that selling drugs or committing robberies is dangerous, both because they could get arrested and because it makes them vulnerable to street violence which can be lethal. On the other hand, they also know that getting a job can be very difficult, due to the massive loss of industrial jobs in the Milwaukee area, their low level of education, and the well-documented racism that makes black men especially vulnerable to being rejected for jobs that they actually could perform (Pager

2007). Furthermore, even if they do get jobs, they are often for temporary agencies or are very low-paying. For example, after being released from prison, Fanatic got a job to dress as the Statue of Liberty and stand on the street corner advertising Liberty Tax Service, but that job was over after the few months of income tax season. Because Fanatic, like many of the African American men in the prison system, had spent many of his teenage years in and out of prison, he had missed getting a regular high school diploma or job experience that would have given him a reference for progressing upward in the job market. Rationally, his best choice for making money was still the street economy.

Even when men from the ghetto get into the adult prison system, they do not always come to the conclusion that committing economic crimes was a mistake, but only that getting caught was a mistake. This is what Doctor See had to say about that:

Men in general are egotistical. We don't have to necessarily be competing with others cause our biggest competitor is ourselves. We push ourselves to do better than we did last time. That type of motivation can be aspiring<sup>16</sup> but also dangerous. Those of "us" (men) who've been to or are in prison want to do better. We either want to change for the better or continue what we've been doing, but in a "smarter" fashion.

In another letter he wrote:

That's so crazy about us (black men), we don't realize what we have until it's gone. When we're behind walls we seem to talk a good game, but relapse as soon as we're released. Reason being is we have no plan. Our plan is usually something like this. This time I'll be incognito and let no one know what I'm doing.

Drug dealers and robbers have accepted some of the ideas from the cultural model of the American Dream. They believe in upward mobility and in achievement. They do not accept that poverty is tolerable or that idleness is acceptable. They take action toward

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<sup>16</sup> I believe he means "inspiring."

their perception of an opportunity, substituting (as Ice T put it) being “self-employed” for the uncertainties of wage labor.

The story of Capo, which was on the first page of this study, is an example of the ultimate catastrophe for African American street males. While on parole after serving his time in Wisconsin for selling crack to an undercover officer, Capo got a temporary work release job in a factory and was earning legitimate money. Then, one day while walking down the street in Milwaukee, he was arrested for selling drugs in Chicago -- which he had done prior to his Wisconsin conviction. After serving another year in an Illinois drug prison, he was released and attempted to collect the \$1067 work release money he had earned from his Wisconsin factory job. The state of Wisconsin had seized almost all of his earnings (\$925), leaving him with \$142. With no money, and very little family support, Capo returned to the streets with the belief that his options had been attenuated to the point of crime or starvation. (His mother, a crack addict, had recently died. He did not know his father. His brother was in prison and his two sisters were single mothers.) Less than three months after being released from prison in Illinois, Capo was arrested for fatally shooting another drug dealer during an attempted robbery in a Wisconsin city. Capo’s story is similar to many others I encountered in the literature: the prisoner is released with the determination to leave crime behind. He has a serious financial (and emotional) setback such as losing a job or not being able to find a job. Then he gets desperate and commits another crime. Because most prisons do not provide any practical job training and release prisoners to the streets with no money, the men are in exactly the same position as they were in before their arrest –

except that they now have a felony record and another long period of unemployment (the time they were incarcerated) which makes them look like a bad prospect to employers. Frequently, the men's perception is of having *no choice* but to commit another economic crime. At his sentencing hearing for homicide and two counts of armed robbery, the first words out of Capo's mouth were "Where I come from, this is what we *have to do* to survive." For African American men from the ghetto, whether they believe that crime is a faster more efficient path to financial freedom than working, or whether it is perceived to be the one last choice left before starvation, these beliefs are based in a form of logical analysis of the available options. Their self-concepts remain intact as being rational under the circumstances.

### **Offenders Claim to be *Intelligent and Competent***

One issue related to whether people embracing street culture even have a realistic prospect of attaining the American Dream conventionally goes back to the subject of education. African American offenders have a very low rate of high school completion or any education at all past high school.<sup>17</sup> While it is purported that African Americans participate in the same educational system as all other Americans, Kozol (1991, 2005) has pointed out that almost three-quarters of African American students attend schools which are primarily minority and these poverty-stricken majority-minority schools

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<sup>17</sup> 44% of incarcerated African Americans have not completed high school or a GED, and an additional 21% have a high school diploma, but no further education. More than half of all black males who do not have a high school diploma have a prison record. In addition, many prisoners test at a very low level of literacy.

<http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PIC-LOCKEDUP.pdf>

receive considerably less funding (due to a lower property tax base) than schools in higher income districts. Kozol argues that the extreme segregation of low income black children in poorly-funded dilapidated inner city schools gives children in those environments the impression that wider society does not value them, and they learn to value themselves less. He quotes Thurgood Marshall's remarks in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision about how separating black and white children based solely on their race "generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone" (2005: 29). Feeling isolated from or rejected by wider society increases the need to cling to one's neighborhood-based support systems, and makes it less likely that children in those schools will feel comfortable leaving their local social circles to pursue opportunities in the majority community.

A complex and nuanced view of the probable reason for school failure by black boys has been arrived at by several scholars. Ferguson concluded that "boys distance themselves from the school's agenda to avoid capitulating to its strategies for fashioning a self for upward mobility – strategies requiring black youth to distance themselves from family and neighborhood, to reject the language, the style of social interaction, the connection in which identities are grounded" (2001: 228-229). Delpit (1995) is also critical of the American school system from a similar perspective, demonstrating that specific issues of pedagogy are designed by white middle-class culture and are hostile to poor black children who must decide whether to identify with their home culture or with that of the school system. In addition, the idea that doing well in school is equated

to “acting white” or “selling out” on one’s blackness has been frequently discussed by academically successful African Americans such as Kennedy:

“Acting white” is a derogatory term said to stigmatize blacks who are said to betray the expectations of their own racial group by assimilating the expectations of white society. This use of the term has itself been harshly criticized, since it disparages as “white” such socially useful traits as studiousness, academic ambitiousness, attentiveness to proper grammar, and respect for other conventional protocols. That there exists among certain groups of blacks peer pressure to avoid “acting white” is clear. (2008: 58)

Anderson has also written:

Since their efforts to achieve upward mobility tend to be viewed as ‘disrespecting’ their own community, decent people, particularly children, must often struggle to advance themselves. In fact, as Yvette’s account shows, street-oriented people can be said at times to mount a policing effort to keep their decent counterparts from “selling out” or “acting white,” that is from leaving the community for one of higher socioeconomic status. This retaliation, which can sometimes be violent, against the upwardly mobile points to a deep alienation present in parts of the inner-city community (1999: 65).

Internalizing the perception that the rest of society does not value them, black boys cling to the support of their family and friends, and embrace identities in street culture that make them feel accepted and valued. Given a choice between the culture of school that expects them to change to be different from the people who love them (Ferguson’s “strategies for fashioning a self for upward mobility”) and the familiar culture of home, many black youth leave the school system for the street economy. The whole concept of “acting white” and the fact that school expects certain types of behaviors that are very different from their home culture (such as using Standard American English, and abstaining from fighting – but telling a teacher - when provoked) are an example of a subcategory of Bucholtz and Hall’s relationality principle. In this case, an identity is being formed for the children from the ideas of adequation versus distinction. The



social meaning of being black is set against the social meaning of being white, and the children are black, so they do not feel that they belong in schools run by white people.

Plato said this about school:

School was fun for me but I always knew I was smarter than most of my class, because my moma didn't play no games about school. She would beat the skin off you for any wrong doing at school. One time my teacher called her, and she came and hit me in my mouth in front of everybody and said, "Muthafucka if these white people call me up here again – you won't need to worry about school for weeks."

Plato's mother had the perception that the school was run by "these white people."

Usually leaving school happens when offenders are so young that they do not yet realize that they later may regret their decision to drop out of school if they ever do decide to look for a legitimate job. Fanatic was typical in that regard. At fourteen, drug money looked like a good economic strategy, but at twenty-one, with two prison terms behind him, the choices between work and crime seemed murky and confusing. Returning to school to get a GED and job training would take a lot of time, and he would be without economic resources while continuing his education.

Of my primary consultants, only Doctor See graduated from a regular high school. Man O' War and Geppetto got GEDs while incarcerated, and the other three have not graduated from high school at all.<sup>18</sup> Discussion of school and education took three themes in the prisoner's letters: extremely positive assessments of their own intelligence<sup>19</sup>, how what they perceived as financial success on the street diverted their

<sup>18</sup> Completion of educational programs is positively viewed by parole boards, although many prisoners also participate in prison education just because they are bored and want something to do.

<sup>19</sup> While I tend to agree with the prisoners' assessment of their own intelligence, I am aware of the fact that I deliberately chose prisoners who could articulate their thoughts well on paper since this study was done by an extensive series of letters instead of by oral interviews.

attention from school, and (after getting caught committing crimes), hating prison so much that getting more education actually might be necessary to get a job. None of the prisoners expressed the idea that formal education had anything to offer them in terms of personal growth, but only that it could be a stepping stone to employment. In addition, since most of them were still minors when they left school, it is important to note the roles ascribed to adults in their lives in encouraging them to attend school. Mothers tended to encourage it in the early grades, but not as strongly as the young men got older.

Even though I did not ask specific questions about it, everyone in my sample spontaneously chose to tell me about their assessment of themselves as being bright and competent. Doctor See told me that he had both “book smarts and street smarts” and referred to himself as “a scholar and a gentlemen.” Furthermore, during the time that they were in prison, some of the men wrote letters about the books they were reading, although they often complained about how their choices were constrained by what the prison system had available in their libraries. Plato frequently asked me to send him books. He writes poetry, of which he is very proud, and hopes that his poems can someday be published in his own book. He referred to himself as a “scholar gangster.”

The men’s choices to abandon the school system seemed to arise not so much from anti-intellectualism or an inability to understand the lessons, as from the rules, the structure, and the feeling that school was irrelevant to the authentic issues they faced in

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their lives. My consultants have, on one level, internalized a belief in what Willis described as education as the key to “a chain of exchanges” which are “that of knowledge for qualifications, qualified activity for high pay, and pay for goods and services” (1977: 64). Yet, they have not followed through to insert themselves into that chain due to the fact that they did not believe that there would be a job waiting for them when they got out. While many fine books<sup>20</sup> have been written with discussions about “resistance” to school, both from the perspective of blue-collar employment and from the perspective of inner city African American subculture, the men in my study all felt that education (especially independent book learning) had moments of being enjoyable and worthwhile. In fact, several of them told me that they liked school and missed it. Instead, all of my consultants felt a sense of time pressure, of adulthood being thrust upon them by circumstances. Like many teenagers, they were more concerned with living in the moment than with long-range planning. This present-time orientation, however, continues into adulthood in street culture due to the fact that the future seems so uncertain (Wright and Decker 1997: 37).

In referring to his youth, Geppetto said:

School was very easy for me. But the thing that was difficult was keeping my mouth closed. Whether it be standing up for something I felt was right or trying to be the center of attention. My mom was adamant on me getting my education and I took it all for granted because it was so easy.

In referring to his present situation he wrote:

The 5 percenters believe that 85% of the world is the walking dead. Unconscious of what goes on around them. 10% of the world gains knowledge and share it amongst themselves. But

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<sup>20</sup> Examples include Willis' *Learning to Labor* and MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin It*.

there's 5% of the world that obtains knowledge and gives it to everyone. This is a religion that grew from the nation of Islam. I am not of their religious beliefs but I am a part of that 5%.

Plato wrote:

I always tested well. My moma didn't play about that school stuff, you either go or get the fuck out her house. Me, I chose to get the fuck out, and sell some drugs. When I went to LHS I found white people thought most black are under educated, so I wouldn't read shit unless they give me candy first and after. 😊 (LOL)

Fanatic said:

I don't mean to sound so direct but I just want you to understand that we don't choose to live this way we're born into this and also brought up to live this way. I am a very smart individual, street wise, and school wise, and even though I don't have a GED or anything doesn't make me dumb. Growing up in my neighborhood, most people who isn't from my neighborhood, or any other neighborhood that lives in poverty, most of the time just assume that we are dumb (not meaning you). But although I live my life like this I still know right from wrong.

Each of the prisoners positions himself in relationship to other people who they consider to be less intelligent. Plato says he was "smarter than most of my class," and Geppetto puts himself in the top 5% in terms of gaining knowledge and sharing it with others. At the same time, they are aware that other people are trying to position them as deficient in terms of intelligence. Fanatic says that "most people who isn't from my neighborhood ... just assume that we are dumb" and appears to be conflating "dumb" with not knowing right from wrong. Plato wrote "When I went to LHS I found white people thought most black are under educated," so he is taking the attitude of the juvenile prison officials to be representative of "white people" in general, as his mother did about school teachers and administrators. (Then, even though he knew the correction officials to be wrong, he used their belief system as a way to acquire the candy they offered as a bribe for him to read.) From the maximum security prison he wrote:

I love history and philosophy along with many other mind strengthening subjects. I'm something like a scholar/Gangster, because I do lots of reading and thinking up ways to out smart my peers or part them from their money!

Man O' War enjoys mathematics and sent me a very complex chart he had made that showed his buying and selling prices for the various kinds of drugs he sells. It looked very much like a wholesale and retail price list from a legitimate business. When he was in prison, he wrote:

I'm tryin to think more. I like things to think about. Work my mind. I haven't been in a real school since '2001.'<sup>21</sup> '2000' -1999 was the last time I feel I really challenged myself. I feel I'm slowly getting stupid. I love #s. Mental math. Seen #s I was able to predict answers. I got slower. I can't do as I used to.

After I read the book Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything, I wrote to Man O' War about the chapter called "Why Do Drug Dealers Still Live with Their Moms?" I discovered that he had also read the book. The book uses the work of Venkatesh to demonstrate that street level Chicago crack dealers only make \$3.30 an hour and have a one in four chance of being shot. Man O' War explained that gangs in Chicago are very different from the situation in Milwaukee. He described street level Chicago drug dealers as employed by upper level gang members, but Milwaukee dealers as being self-employed entrepreneurs who could make more money because they did not have to return a cut to the gang. Man O' War referred to his own group in Milwaukee as being a clique, (which he spelled "click"), not a gang. He also had ideas about selling higher quality drugs and larger portions so that his customers would return to him instead of going to another drug dealer.

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<sup>21</sup> He would have turned fourteen in 2001.

Oh yeah b4 I forget I read some of that book called Freakanomics don't it got green or orange writing on the cover? When he talk about the "why do drug dealers still live with their moms?" He was with a gang in Chicago right? Then well didn't he say he went into the apartment then they thought he was the police or something then he met the leader and I 4got. But I was interested when I read that because drug dealer part. I thought it was funny. Inaccurate well 4 certain circumstances. Well 1<sup>st</sup> in Chicago they have like a team. So it's like u have 2 pay dues 4 the gang. The only person that gets money is the leaders of the gang. They get money from anyone who sells on they block, prostitutes, steals, and sell around there. It's a business in Chicago. So the people who sell are workers they are not using their money and sellin 4 themselves. The gang gives them drugs 2 sale and says "bring me this and u keep that".

But other places u make more / u buy u're own. 3.5 grams is a ball<sup>22</sup>, small dealers pay about \$100 4 that. Most people make \$220 off of that, if u have enough people 2 sale 2 u can make a lot of money fast. Most people sell dimes \$10 or dubs \$20. I'll make \$175 off of that but I do it 4 business. My product is bigger so most people would want mine instead of urs. Yeah u make more off of a ounce but I would get more off b 4 u. Mine would go faster. Anyway enough about that. I'm good wit business. I love numbers 2 calculate things. I'm decent at that.

Unlike some other drug dealers, he expanded his market to sell to business owners because they had more money to spend than street addicts. He said, "I use to deal wit a lot of restaurant owners, construction, salon, carpenters that own their own biznus." Also, like many other entrepreneurs, he had other people working under him. Man O' War referred to his loose network of employees as people "kind of workin 4 me." Like any other business owner, he had some trouble with his workers, especially after he went to prison: "Now I'll never trust my friends, that were suppose to pay me \$250 a month 4 my phone with my customers on it. Which made \$1300 a day (well \$600 profit a day) so that's a nice piece of change and only pay \$250 a month is chump change." Once, while he was free, I observed him trying to appease a customer who had been sold drugs that had been cut (with another non-drug substance) by one of Man O' War's

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<sup>22</sup> A "ball" is 1/8 of an ounce or 8 ball.

employees. He was willing to give the customer replacement drugs or his money back because Man O' War did not want to be known for fraudulent business practices.

While their stories differ somewhat in details, each of the young men felt an exhilarating sense of accomplishment when they first began obtaining illegal money. This feeling of money as power and independence overshadowed the time-consuming routine of attending school, despite the fact that each of the men believed themselves to be of above-average intelligence. Actually, this belief in their own cleverness may also have been a factor in thinking that they were too smart to be stuck in school when they could bypass the tedious workload in classrooms to enter the adult world of the cash economy. While doing participant observation, I was constantly told that I could never make it where they are from, but they are tough and resilient survivors because of their intelligence. Plato wrote: "Street wisdom is more important at the moment than you university education, experience is the high in the game of ghetto life." Nearly every juvenile and adult male prisoner I spoke to during my years of volunteer work in prisons and in doing participant observation on the street said to me, "You may be book smart, but I'm street smart." They exhibited no doubt as to which (in their mind) was the superior set of competencies.

### **Offenders Claim to be *Mature and Independent***

Since all children begin life dependent on adults for their well-being, including economically, the growing ability to bring in resources to provide for oneself (and possibly for others) is recognized by nearly everyone as a sign of adulthood. For young

black males who are raised in the ghetto, the ability to acquire money is perceived as a sign that one has grown up and is now independent. Financial success on the street is felt to be a positive achievement even when the amount of money (in an objective sense) is not very large since it is more than they had before. Also, teenagers have a naïve view of how much money is really necessary for genuine independence because they are still living with their mothers (or other adult family members) who are paying for housing expenses and food. Any money they acquire is their own to spend as they choose. Even though many young men are arrested as teenagers and taken to juvenile facilities where attending high school classes is a requirement (as opposed to being optional as it is in the adult system), they are still under the allure of the street economy and do not make an accurate assessment of the positive merits of education as a long-term vocational strategy. The illegal market holds out the tenuous promise of big money and fast payouts, as long as one is stealthy and cunning.

While it is true that many offenders use the storyline of a “desperate need for money,” I know from over four years of volunteer work in the juvenile correction system that most African American male prisoners began to commit economic crimes when they were young teenagers who were still living with their mothers (hence not needing to pay for their own housing expenses). So the important question to answer is not really about economic hardship, but what social meaning money has for the offender. As mentioned above, acquiring money is a way to prove that one is an independent adult. Polanyi has shown that Americans believe that “not having” proves that one is not an adult because an adult “has what he needs” and “can do what he must do in



order to satisfy those needs” (1985: 134). Each of the men in this study talked about “being on my own” or “doing me<sup>23</sup>” since the early teenage years (usually about ages 14 or 15), and took pride in their youthful self-sufficiency. While the situations were sometimes cast as framing family members (especially fathers) in a negative light for not providing more financial support, each of the men felt that obtaining resources on the street was a sign of autonomous manhood. As Plato said above, “My moma didn’t play about that school stuff, you either go or get the fuck out her house. Me, I chose to get the fuck out, and sell some drugs.”

A second meaning of money for these prisoners was a way to help family and friends. To begin with, assisting others can also be another indication of adulthood because having something to give away shows that one has more than enough. In addition, the shared money is considered to be a sign of community solidarity with those they care about. All of the prisoners in this study discussed the fact that they had given money to others, and referred to themselves as “generous” or “having a good heart.” As will be discussed later, however, most of them felt that the norms of reciprocity were being violated when they were locked up and the people they had helped in the past did not then come forward with financial assistance. Economically valuable gifts were given generously, but (except with small children), still unconsciously tabulated as part of a running social balance sheet so that the recipient “owed” them something later.

Another social meaning of money is to win in a competitive situation against other males. This started when they were only children, according to Geppetto:

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<sup>23</sup> Focusing on oneself.

I was really close to two other guys and we were all leaders in our own groups but amongst each other we assumed leadership depending on the situation.

Well one of my friends [A.J.'s] daddy was the biggest hustler ever in Racine. He had plenty of illegal money. Anyhow, [A.J.] wanted to keep beating and bullying people for pennies. After a while I was tired of it for several reasons. 1) I'm a people person and I prefer to get along or not deal with you period. 2) I get into trouble at home for getting into trouble at school. 3) There was no money in that.

So I decided to get them to try to help me steal candy and kool-aid. They weren't with it at first but when they seen me with pockets full of change they fell in line. That to me was a show of respect by them respecting my hustle and my mind.

Shoplifting is seen as an amusing game when committed by children, but as the men become teenagers, they frequently graduate to greater risk-taking and more dangerous competition. The ultimate competitive game is armed robbery which is taking something by force or threat of force, legally classified as a violent crime. Unlike shoplifting or burglary, armed robbery involves confrontation and intimidation which means that the victim is brazenly made aware that the crime is occurring at the moment it transpires. On the street, the choicest people to rob are drug dealers who are carrying not only drugs, but large amounts of cash because they do not use banks or credit cards. (Since many men who commit robberies also use drugs or sell drugs, getting both drugs and cash is useful.) In addition, drug dealers cannot call the police and say that they were robbed, so there is no risk of arrest for the robber. For example, Man O' War robbed another drug dealer and got marijuana, cocaine, and \$3500 in cash. In a situation like that, there is a large pay-off for the winner and a large loss for the loser which, as mentioned above, is one of the correlations with a culture of honor that revolves around respect. The winner not only gets an economic payoff, but has triumphed in the social interaction by disrespecting and defeating someone dangerous.

The fact that confrontation during the taking of another's property is essential to being an adult was expressed by Plato during a discussion of another prisoner stealing something out of his cell.

Stealing and taking to us are two different things, by force or gun point is to us ok – but waiting to someone has their back turned is right out cowardly. Stealing is a no, no up here people really hate cowards, and they will take your stuff & humiliate you every chance they get. Yes, I robb, shoot people and at time beat people up, but I don't steal. It might sound silly, but that's the way shit goes in my world.

Acquiring money on one's own -- and doing it in a bold confrontational way - is one way to separate the men from the boys on the street. Economic crime means no longer being dependent on others for support, possibly being a provider of resources instead of a recipient, and demonstrating a willingness to take adult risks in a high-stakes game.

### **Offenders claim to be *Popular***

Two more significant benefits acquired with money are the ability to attain local prominence, and to attract women with that elevated status. All of the young men found being sought out and admired for their high status to be pleasurable and exciting. Yet, once they were arrested, their popularity plummeted and they discovered that they did not have as many friends as they had thought. Man O' War wrote:

On the outside I am always in the center of attention. I get called 4 money, ride, help 4 this, and 4 my pharmaceutical connections, but in here I barely get letters.

Doctor See said this:

I feel so lonely cause everyone I thought was my family<sup>24</sup> and cared about me showed they really don't give a damn. As long as you're partying and making money they smile in your face and give

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<sup>24</sup> By "family" here he means close street associates and fellow members of his crime crew – not his biological family.

you fake love. Once the partying ends and you're sitting in a cell, they can't take 15 minutes out of their day to send you a piece of mail.

Furthermore, their extreme attractiveness to women was conceptualized as being a somewhat ambiguous asset due to the fact that women who are attracted to drug money are not necessarily faithful or dependable once the money is no longer flowing.

According to Man O' War:

First I was talkin street so fame, spotlight all that is, is street fame 2 b known in the street. 2 b acknowledged, people know who they are, locally. It really ain't shit. But females glorify it. like being an actress but only in the hood, only smaller. So a man can get female status just cuz he is known or females want him so it makes it cool to b wit him. So if he is havin money and nice car, females just want 2 b by him. So they'll just have sex 2 get 30 sec of fame. Bad, huh?

In another letter he said:

U call a girl street she's nothing, 2 me. She's a hoe, that wanz be in the eyes of the drug dealers. She like the money, the fast life.

This was corroborated by Fanatic:

What I told you about females only wanting you because of your reputation basically means because people in your neighborhood know what you do (sell drugs) and you have a lot of people talking about you makes you famous in your neighborhood. It's like being the most popular person. That's what reputation means. But I don't know why females treat their mans with no respect, and they also have no respect for their selves. So if you don't have respect for yourself, why should we is the mentality males have nowadays.

In another letter he said:

The propensity of black men to sell drugs, act like thugs, and mistreat women has everything to do with poverty. When me as a black man in an urban environment grows up seeing nothing but poverty then the only recourse is to go after fast money, fast women, and when I don't have money I get no respect, I get no women, and have no hope. So I sell drugs, I get money, I get cars, I get women, and how am I supposed to respect a woman when I have no money wouldn't even acknowledge my existence, and now that I roll up in a nice car with a fat stack then she's all over me. So I can't have respect unless I buy it when poverty is the umbrella factor in my life.

Here Fanatic is downplaying his agency by saying that the "only recourse" for black men in impoverished environment is to sell drugs and "buy" respect. He does not suggest that any other possibilities could exist for either obtaining money or getting respect.

On another occasion, when I was talking to Fanatic about leisure pursuits, he said that people in impoverished inner cities do not have money for hobbies, so they turn to sex which is “basically free entertainment and another way to escape the bleak reality of their lives.” Subira has written:

Certainly the primary reason a person sells drugs is to get the money. But money is a means, not an end. In selling drugs, most of the competitive disadvantages that young boys suffer in their competition for girls disappear.

... Without question, most African American women do not knowingly support the drug trade. But a significant number, a number big enough to provide the average Black male drug dealer with at least several girlfriends *are* tied in with the drug business/culture. That means more Black women are *indirectly* tied to drug money than men are! (1994).

According to sociobiologists, most women are attracted to men with resources and social status. “The evolution of the female preference for males offering resources may be the most ancient and pervasive basis for female choice in the animal kingdom” (Buss 1999: 104). The problem with this scenario is that illegal ways to acquire resources are, in the long run, unreliable. If a man is arrested, he goes from being provider of resources to being a drain on the woman’s finances if she decides to stay with him. Men drop in mate value as soon as they are arrested. The term “break bad” was common among my consultants and other men in the prison system who saw that many women stopped investing in the relationship as soon as the man was no longer in a position to give her something or do things for her.

The temporary popularity of street men who have money in an environment with very little resources can lead to many short-term relationships that result in pregnancies. Incarcerated men have higher than average rates of fathering children

with more than one woman (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006),<sup>25</sup> which then puts them in a position of needing even more money if they intend to support the children financially. More often, however, many of the children are essentially abandoned as the men move on to other relationships.

When men father children with more than one woman, they are faced with competing demands on their time and resources across households, which may lead to 'swapping' their commitment from children they had in a previous relationship to children with whom they are currently living (Manning and Smock 2000 cited in Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, and Holcombe 2008).

Man O' War has sons with four different women, the last two of whom were born two months apart. Two of the women have children with other men. The last time I spoke with him, Man O' War was just about to take a paternity test with another woman who claimed her daughter was his. When I asked him if he had a girlfriend, he said that two people wanted to be his girlfriend: baby mama # 2, and another sexual partner who he could not classify. He said, "She's not my baby mama and she's not my girlfriend. I don't know what she is."

When I spoke to Man O' War about the births of his third and fourth sons (with baby mama #3 and baby mama #4), the conversation went like this:

*Julia:* "What were you thinking?"

*Man O' War:* "I was just trying to make up for lost time" (This meant that he could not have sex when he was incarcerated.)

*Julia:* "Didn't you think about using birth control or a condom?"

*Man O' War:* "They told me they *were* using birth control. They just wanted to have my baby, I guess."

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, & Holcombe (2008).

*Julia:* “Isn’t this situation going to divide you up, emotionally?”

*Man O’ War:* “I don’t love those women.”

*Julia:* “But the children. Aren’t you going to love your children?”

*Man O’ War:* “Yeah, I guess so.”

Man O’ War, like many street men, found it flattering that women found him to be so alluring, some even to the point of wanting him to father their children, despite the fact that he was partially aware that it was his illegal money that made him so popular. Each of the men had introspective moments in which they would effectively articulate how sad it is for children to grow up without fathers, or for someone to become emotionally attached in a relationship, only to find out that person is cheating on them. Yet, none of them could resist the fantasy that they were irresistible to women. Plato was especially fond of listing his amazing attributes and extreme popularity with members of the opposite sex, and many of his letters were peppered with affirmations of his popular self-image:

I don’t know what they told you about me, but I want you to know women find their self falling for my looks and personality. I am as they say a true ladies man.

I’m beautiful and women love the thought of having me for them self.

I’ve been with many, many women so many I don’t remember most of their faces or names. You can say or define my actions as those of a player, but I know what I want and if I’m not getting it then there is no need for wasting time. I say what I want from the start and I compromise only when I want to.

I’m very, very good when it comes to getting women to have sex. I have an unbelievable count of virgins and women of all ages and colors or sizes that’s fallen to my ... (LOL) 😊😊 ... I used to say “I was god’s gift to women.” Plus my listen skills are always what puts me in place that makes women say he understands and dosen’t judge “why not”?

I know I’m guilty of some not so nice womanizing, but I think sex helped me escape the thoughts of not being what you might call loved or maybe the climax of someone giving their self to me made me feel special.

Furthermore, in the neighborhoods from which the offenders came, there are significantly more women than men due to high incarceration rates and death on the streets (Wilson 1996; Clear 2007). So the men have even more of an illusion of popularity due to the fact that a surplus of women creates a situation in which men do not have to work very hard to attract women. On the other hand, “popularity,” has some very serious downsides. Epidemiologists Thomas and Torrone found that the “pressures on men for safe sex and monogamy are reduced as the ratio of women to marriageable men gets very high.” In the area that they studied, they found that rates of sexually transmitted diseases and childbirth by teenage mothers increased with incarceration rates (2006 cited in Clear 2007: 104). My attempts to discuss this subject with my consultants failed on all accounts because almost no one would admit to ever acquiring or spreading a sexually transmitted disease, although it was obvious from the number of births and paternity tests discussed, condom use was very low. Plato’s cousin, Dog Dayz, did tell me that he gave his girlfriend a sexually transmitted disease when she was pregnant with their daughter, but he was the only male that I encountered during this project who would admit that actions sometimes have very negative unintended consequences when it comes to being “popular” and attractive to women.

### **Offenders Claim to be *Responsible***

Despite the fact that the stereotype of criminal is that of having an antisocial personality, many offenders in African American street culture are proud of the fact that



they were protecting women and children, and were financially responsible for the welfare of family and friends. This sense of responsibility was frequently explained as coming from a sense of understanding suffering from their own past experience which subsequently led toward empathy for others. Man O' War wrote:

People use me or don't appreciate my good heart. I try, I really try harder cause I know my faults. I'm street, I was content wit being street. I hustle 2 make sure me or my family don't have to struggle or go through wat I went through. I don't like seeing people hurt. Especially kids.

I felt obligated 2 do wat I did because I know wat it is not to have shit. I hate 2 go 2 school wit clothes 2 or 3 sizes 2 big. I hate to not have a full meal when I get home. I hate 2 have 2 make up a dish. We did a lot me and my sis had 2 walk 2 the store wit \$3 worth of pennies 2 get food when mom was at work. Act like we only had that and we forgot the rest of our \$ bills or silver change at home. So I feel obligated to help people now. I know I'm doing wrong but I feel I got 2, 2 make sure I can support my family and friends.

Most people know I'm a person who gives, try to help at times of need.

In another letter he said:

When it's a problem and [my mom] or my aunts want someone to back em up or fight intimidate someone I get called cuz I'm STREET. I do wat need 2 be done illegal or not. I do anything 4 family.

Fanatic, as described above, went to live with a friend after his mother kicked him out of her house but he said that once he started acquiring large sums of money, he gave some of it to his mother: "The crazy thing about my situation was even though I wasn't living with my mom I was still paying her bills." This role reversal (with mothers accepting drug money) is described by Anderson who calls this providing of financial help the "Robin Hood phenomenon."

Many parents see but don't see for another reason [other than fear]: they realize that their own son is probably involved in the trade. They disapprove of it, but they also benefit from it. A mother who receives money, sometimes even large sums of money, from her son may not ask too many questions about its source. She just accepts the fact that the money is there somehow. Since it is sorely needed, there is strong incentive not to interrupt the flow (1999: 133).

This was a frequent pattern I also observed when getting to know prisoners' families, although not all drug dealers give money to their parents. Plato's mother complained to me that "I ain't seen none of that" which meant that her five adult sons who sold drugs did not give her any of the drug money they acquired. This made her angry – especially since her sons were always showing up at her house to eat the food she cooked.

The general ethos (or at least the prevailing rhetoric) is that illegally acquired money should be used to care for women and children, as well as friends who end up in jail or prison, although the latter seems more honored in the breach than in the observance. Most of the young men claimed to have supported others who were incarcerated, but did not get financial support from them when they themselves were in that situation.

When his friend was arrested, Fanatic continue to support his friend's family:

So I started hustling with him to the point where I just stop going to school. After a while I fell in love with the money that came with the hustle game so I hustled even harder and really got into dealing. Then one day my friend [Tomas] got caught and went to jail. With him going to jail I was left with the house and the responsibility of taking care of his family. So I did, I took care of everything that needed to be took care of for a while, made sure he was good in jail with a phone on and money on his books.

Doctor See also used his drug money to help his friends:

When I got out last summer I helped my godbrother while he was in jail. I sent money, took care of his babymomma and accepted phone calls (\$15) a call. When [Fanatic] got sanctioned last summer for a week I accepted about \$100 in calls from the county jail, probably more. Both individuals showed no type of appreciation towards me for looking out. I live and I learn. I didn't look out for them expecting something in return. I did it out of the love I have for them.

Throughout this study (and in other academic literature about African American offenders) the men's narratives revolve around image of themselves as *males* who take on a unique version of the masculine "good provider role" which involves being committed to the well-being of others. In this situation, however, the logical conclusion

of their actions is to become the visible targets who end up getting arrested and punished for their crimes – even though they were not the sole beneficiaries of the money that flowed through their hands. As Messerschmidt has written, “Crime by men is not simply an extension of the ‘male sex role.’ Rather, crime by men is a form of social practice invoked as a resource, when other resources are unavailable for accomplishing masculinity” (1993: 85). For African American inner city offenders, crime becomes not only a way to “do gender” by showing themselves to be strong and powerful (and unwilling to take a subordinate role to employers), but also to be in charge of providing economically for those for whom they feel responsible – and being willing to suffer the negative consequences in order to support their friends, and especially to protect the women and children.

## Honor and the Reputable Self

## Introduction

As mentioned above, African American street culture is a culture of honor that creates interdependent selves in which (as Bourdieu said) “the being and truth about a person are identical with the being and truth that others acknowledge in him”.

According to Ayers, “since the heart of honor [is] the respect of others, public life offer[s] the opportunity to garner honor from the broadest of all audiences” (1984:16).

For African American offenders, their self-presentation in public is of paramount importance because their status depends on their reputation in order to gain the esteem of their own community. Some aspects of gaining prestige in street culture are related to manifesting abstract principles through speech and (usually violent) action.

The most visible exhibition of honor, however, forms a connection between money and behavior, as well as between the street and mainstream American life. People must appear honorable, and that involves self-presentation.

### Offenders claim to be *Proud*

Much of the social meaning of money is expressed by what it can buy, and the status connected with particular conspicuous displays of wealth. To return to Williams’ fifteen Anglo Saxon cultural themes and orientations, an important point of reference that is shared between mainstream culture and ghetto males is material culture and “material comfort.” This is, in essence, an emphasis on economic consumption, which was seen originally in America as a reward for hard work, but which has been changing over the last century into one that is less of a “future-time orientation” and more into something

immediate. As Williams has written, “new patterns of consumption and leisure actually are being assimilated to older values, for instance, ‘consumption’ may be interpreted both as a reward for achievement and as a kind of achievement itself” (1970: 472). Many scholars such as Bellah (1998) believe that the market is one of the predominant socializing factors in the United States. Even in low-income areas, African Americans participate in the same market as other Americans due to the pervasiveness of advertising on television, radio, and the Internet. For African American street culture, clothing is the most important expressive medium through which success is demonstrated and exhibited.

Nightingale emphasizes the culture of material consumption among African Americans and cites historian Robin D. G. Kelly who wrote that even as far back as the late 1800s Southern black sharecroppers, coal miners, domestic and tobacco workers dressed up to discard “the degradation of work and collapsing status distinctions between them and their oppressors” (1993: 142). Goffman referred to this type of consciously constructed sign of alternative status as a disidentifier because the transformation from lower to higher status items breaks apart the expected stigmatizing characteristics of a person with features that have more prestige (1963: 44). The emphasis on consumer products as a form of “compensatory status” by African Americans was exacerbated by twentieth century advertising that has entered the mainstream culture. In Nightingale’s ethnography he compared hundreds of case records left from four private Philadelphia welfare agencies in the 1950 and 1960s to the people he studied in person in the late 1980s and found a persistent and growing

demand for “outrageously expensive symbols of belonging and prestige” (1993: 153).

According to Anderson, street reputation partially depends on expensive clothing, jewelry and grooming which “reflect not just taste ..., but a willingness to possess things that might require defending” (1999:73).

In keeping with their status orientation, all ghetto males are of the opinion that the appearance of prosperity exhibited on the body is of the utmost importance. None of my consultants had any sense that poverty or humility are virtuous in the sense of Puritanism or Christian asceticism (“blessed are the poor”), and they seemed either skeptical or incredulous whenever I suggested that character or inner being might be as important as how they looked. Wearing the right clothing is a significant part of fitting into any social setting and is considered essential by ghetto males who have their own distinctive dress code. Only particular styles are acceptable and only certain national brand names have a suitable cachet. A number of students at Ethan Allen told me that girls would not date them if they were wearing the wrong shoes. Wearing the correct clothing and having one’s hair properly cut and styled (if short) or properly braided (if long) is of paramount importance, and this aspect of the presentation of self appears to be the number one use of illegally acquired money, past that of the barest necessities (which would be shelter, food, drugs, alcohol and, often, cigarettes). Conversations about their own hair and clothing, as well as that of others are frequent and taken very seriously as aspects of social prestige and respect from their peers. Anyone who is not properly dressed is laughed at and made fun of for being “bummy.” Despite the fact that proper ghetto dress is very expensive, hip hop clothing is a very different style from

what is considered respectable by the middle class. While working in a transitional program that purported to prepare juveniles to move from the correctional system back into free society, I frequently heard black parole officers (both male and female) chastise the young men for sagging their pants, not wearing belts, and allowing their boxer shorts to show. Also, they were constantly being admonished to remove their caps and doo-rags. The fact that clothing is a political statement was not lost on either party and is a constant source of tension between middle-class black men who think they are “role-models” and ghetto men who think that middle-class men are Uncle Toms and sell-outs.

This is what Man O’ War wrote,

I have grown ecostom to a lot of beliefs about appearance clothes, shoes, and how certain people should or shouldn’t keep up with themselves. Like I was taught that you should always be neat, by ironing your clothes. We use to say “wrinkled person don’t mean nothing.” It’s a mendo to have clean shoes neat. You can tell how a person is by his/her shoes. Hygiene wise hoes take bird baths. Well there are a lot of things that I can say. At times my mom don’t match but growing up she made us match, it looks better. My mom is shorter than me and she’ll wear my clothes if I ain’t want it. She doesn’t like when I use to buy big clothes or sag my pants. She’ll wear a shirt way too big it looks sloppy. It’s partly her fault because she set some of my beliefs but doesn’t fully ride by it.

One time, when Man O’ War was incarcerated, he had left his apartment with new furniture in the care of a female friend who absconded with his possessions. When someone told him about the treachery of the woman he wrote:

Then my apt is not mine no more. My clothes are nowhere to b found, my computer, I expected my cash 2 b gone so that wasn’t a worry. My shoes. I need to start all over from clothes to cars. I ain’t got shit. This is crazy cuz I take pride in my appearance.

I had a lot of clothes. My closet was color coordinated, all white shirts, blue, purple & so on & so on. Shoes like 15-20 pairs. 7 pair were brand new. Glasses \$250 a pair, 3 pair. I want to know who is wearing my draws. They wouldn’t mind being locked up. Wearing another man’s draws, socks, shit anything bothers me. But, yeah I’m gona have 2 get my shit right.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> “Get my shit right” means earn more money to buy more things.



When I sent a photograph that I took of Slam Dunk and his cousin to his brother,

Plato responded to the photograph by saying this:

What the fuck is these niggas wearing? I think they need some real help on the gangsta, but I hope you don't think that shit they got on is ghetto dress. God, I feel bad because I know them dudes are hurting, and a picture is worth a thousand words. "Real Talk."

I'm into dressing really nice every day of the week, so it must have slipped my mind how [Slam Dunk] likes to look off sometimes. I have to grow my hair back, that little shit of your's [Slam Dunk] is doing it wrong. Tell him I said what it do with them "BrethAss" Beads. I wonder who came and told him that shit is in style... The shoes are really nice, and yeh we share all clothes but he doesn't treat them well.

As Goffman has stated, "Society is organized on the principle that any individual that possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way" (1959: 13).

Another example of the importance of clothing and self-presentation is in the criminal justice system when defendants come to court dressed in conventional suits – even if they would never wear such a thing outside the courtroom. On the other hand, low-income persons are unable to bail out of jail while they are still in the stage of being accused of a crime, but not yet convicted. Then they have to go to court wearing the clothing issued by the county. People who have a support system who can amass enough cash to bail them out, so they can arrive in court dressed well and without a guard as an escort, make a different impression. Man O' War discussed this:

So money makes it better. If u have money you look better, a better outcome. You can pay 4 a lawyer, bail out fight your case in your clothes instead of jail clothes. In jail clothes it makes u look partly guilty because ur in jail. Orange suit looks like an offender. We know that's what u where when u go to jail. The chains, cuffs, shackles looks worst for the defendant also like ur just a menace or a risk.

Another aspect of social prestige is the use of transportation. Man O' War said, "I don't catch the bus. Won't! I haven't bused it in 7 years. If I can't drive, or get a ride, or a cab I'm not going. It's another issue with my pride." Plato's take on the subject was:

I don't know anything about cars, if one stop working I would call a cab and never go back to get it. I never liked getting my hands or clothes dirty if it could be helped, would quickly find another car or ride with one of my guys. In the hood most good drug dealers have cars or some way to get around to make a sell, so I would tell my guys I had some weed to smoke and gas money and we'd roll around all day. Most people work off the phone but driving around and smoking is not that bad with loud music and picking up girls.

Cars, like clothing, are moveable possessions. This is important because many street men are "urban nomads" who may sleep at different houses every night (moving between the homes of multiple girlfriends, female relatives, and friends). Very few ghetto males have homes or apartments in their own names or stay in one place very long. Possessions of inner city males seldom include any type of property that is not easily moved, and when a man is arrested, his property is almost always appropriated by whomever has access to it. Impending releases from jail and prison usually involve a great deal of drama revolving around acquiring the clothing needed to walk out of the facilities. Although very cheap clothing will be issued when inmates cannot get anyone to bring them proper release clothing, no one wants to be seen wearing it.

While the American cultural model of conspicuous consumption has taken on a unique trajectory among African American men who cycle in and out of the prison system, it is still recognizable, although modified according to circumstances. The American Dream of the appearance of upward mobility is still adhered to, albeit in a form that has shed the modifiers of discipline, hard work and honest gain. For inner city males, pride in looking prosperous is a significant aspect maintaining both self-respect

and respect from others. As will be discussed below, when men go to prison and are forced to wear low-status government-issued clothing they are in a position of having an identity imposed by structures of institutionalized power. The identities that inner city African American men wish to project through their clothing is illegitimized when they are arrested, and this decrease in their ability to control their self-presentation and identity leads to an increase in their need to demonstrate their honor even more through the medium of speech, and if that fails, violence.

### **Offenders claim to be *Honest and Trustworthy***

While physical appearance is a highly meaningful aspect of gaining respect on the street, the appearance of a particular type of character is just as significant and takes on an added value when men are imprisoned and cannot visibly demonstrate their status through material culture. One variety of character display is an assertion of integrity. As was discussed above, anyone regarded as a criminal is frequently seen as duplicitous. Much of this perception comes from the fact that criminals must conceal their crimes in order to escape being arrested and punished. Many crimes involve a certain degree of deceiving the victim or hiding who they are in order to escape detection. Some crimes involve sneaking up on the victim from behind, wearing masks or gloves, or breaking into houses and cars under the cover of darkness. Even armed robbery, which involves a degree of power seeking to make the victim afraid, still usually involves a swift escape to avoid police intervention. In fact, many murders (that do not involve pre-existing anger at the victim) are done so that the victim cannot identify the perpetrator of a

robbery or rape. All situations involving illegal competition for resources involves concealing information, especially from those who can either inflict punishment or access the services of those whose job it is to maintain order. All of these circumstances create the general portrait of law breakers as being devious or fraudulent.

When Goffman wrote about the presentation of self in everyday life, he said:

An 'open,' 'flat,' or barefaced lie may be defined as one for which there can be unquestionable evidence that the teller knew he lied and willfully did so.... Those caught out in the act of telling barefaced lies not only lose face during the interaction but may have their face destroyed, for it is felt by many audiences that if an individual can once bring himself to tell such lie, he ought never again to be fully trusted. However, there are many 'white lies' told by doctors, potential guests, and others, presumable to save the feelings of the audience that is lied to, and these kinds of untruths are not thought to be horrendous (1959: 61-62).

Criminals are people that most everyone else believes "ought never again to be fully trusted." According to Plato, *everyone* in his home neighborhood has a very low level of trust for other people. He wrote, "Where I'm from everyone thinks your lying at the first hearing, and you must prove the truth."

In discussions with prisoners, there were several categories in which issues of truth and deception were discussed. First of all, for prisoners, the problem with being located under the broad umbrella of dishonesty is that not being trusted makes it very difficult to establish close and authentic relationships with other people. The characteristic that is probably most important in any relationship is truthfulness because it create trust (Dimitrius and Mazarella 2008: 251). According to Ennis, Vrij, and Chance (2008) falsehoods fall into three categories: self-centered lies to protect the self, other-oriented lies to protect another, and altruistic lies to protect a third party. (The first could be compared to Goffman's "barefaced" and the other two could be categories of his "white" lies.) Their article focuses on the issue of lying as an aspect of attachment

theory which can be seen as a reflection of attitudes about the self in relationship to others:

Attachment anxiety represents a negative model of the self (Bartholomew & Horwitz 1991) that includes preoccupation with intimacy, jealousy and fear of abandonment, as well as dependency on close others' approval rather than an internal sense of self-worth (Brennen et al., 1998; Cole, 2001). Attachment avoidance is characterized by a negative model of other people (Bartholomew & Horwitz 1991) that includes lack of trust, fear of intimacy, and avoidance of closeness due to expectations that others will not be available and supportive (Brennen et al., 1998; Cole, 2001). Consistent with other researchers we will also use "model of self" interchangeably with attachment anxiety and "model of others" to refer to attachment avoidance (2008: 106).

Ennis, Vrij, and Chance did their study of university students (who are supposedly conventional, or at least not criminal) and found a fairly significant practice of lying to close friends, romantic partners, and strangers, albeit for different reasons (sometimes positive, i.e. "white lies") which was referred to by the authors as "regulating intimacy"(117).

Just as competition involves deception, cooperation or closeness involves communication. Hiding information or making up lies makes it impossible for people to have a close relationship because the self is being deliberately fabricated or concealed from the other. Criminals are aware of the fact that they are seen by others as people who "ought never again to be fully trusted" and often make serious attempts to dispel that perception, sometimes as a way to perpetrate more deceptive crimes and sometimes because they genuinely want to be close to other people.

To begin with, every prisoner whose correspondence I examined wrote many sentences such as "I would never lie to you" or "I am an honest and truthful person." To refer back to the terminology of Ennis, Vrij, and Chance, this could indicate a way of "regulating intimacy" that probably stems from "negative model of the self" that

suggests “dependency on close others’ approval rather than an internal sense of self-worth” (2008). Prisoners are aware of their stigmatized status and try to manage their image by making frequent assertions about their honesty, as well as their morality in other respects. On the other hand, it may be that the assertion of truth could be covering up a lie because most persons in ordinary conversation do not feel the need to assert the truthfulness of their statements unless someone questions their veracity. According to De Becker, a criminal profiler, “When people are telling the truth, they don’t feel doubted, and so they don’t feel the need for additional support in the form of details. When people lie, however, even if what they say sounds credible to you, *it doesn’t sound credible to them*, so they keep talking” (1997:60). Driver, another profiler, says, “Honest people convey information. Liars, on the other hand, try to *convince* us that the story is truth” (2012: 106).

One interesting situation involving assertions of truth happened when I was first introduced to Geppetto -- quite unexpectedly when I received this letter from him, a total stranger.

Hello & how are you? I hope that everything on your end of the spectrum is well and your in good spirits & great health. If for whatever reason today was a bad day, I hope this letter can put a smile on your face.

Your info was given to me and it is my understanding that you too are looking for someone to correspond with. I hope to find a woman who’s honest, sincere, goal oriented, with dreams and aspirations. A woman who’s kind with a great personality & a heart of gold.

I fit into these categories and many more. I know they say opposites attract, but honestly who’d want someone the opposite of all these good qualities?

I’m looking for a female that’s a woman not just on her age but by her maturity and actions. Someone I can share lifes ups & downs with. Someone to laugh & smile with on the bright days as well as on the dark when it seems the cards we’ve been dealt don’t look to well.

As you can see from my whereabouts I’ve been dealt a hell-of-a-hand. But I came to the conclusion that it was God’s plan and I’ll sit still in the storm...

Needless to say, I found this letter to be a little surprising, but I concluded that Plato had given my information to Geppetto because both of them were in the same prison at that time. (I had not, however, told Plato that I was looking for a prison boyfriend.) After writing and telling Geppetto that I would be glad to correspond with him, but not as a girlfriend, I asked him about getting my name from Plato (using his street name). Geppetto replied by saying “I thought I should mention that I didn’t get your information from [Plato]. I can’t say even if I know him or not, I’m sure I do but I can’t picture his face.” At the same time I had written to Plato and asked if he gave my name to Geppetto. This started a whole series of interesting letters.

From Plato:

I wouldn’t give anyone your address. This bitch [Geppetto] is a thief, “real talk” and when I get out the box<sup>27</sup> I’m going to send him off grounds for medical help. I went back to the hole that’s how these bitch ass niggas<sup>28</sup> took the address, but on my return I’m going to do what gangster do.

Julia, this world is not some playground this dude knows to act dum. Think about this he never told you who gave him the address, because if he knew there was no danger he would’ve said who his guy was. I know you do not want to believe this bitch nigga would play with fire, but as I told you I’m in the hole and might be hard now to get where he at. Why would you say I would give your address away? I don’t fuck with these dudes like that, I’m a [Copperhead] and don’t talk about females around hard legs<sup>29</sup>. I want this dude full name and J number. I’ll ask him some questions before I put my hands on him, if I like his story then we good if not, so sorry.

From Geppetto:

I’d like to address your concern and questions about your address. First I must say this, I am very honest & truthful. I don’t believe in lies and to start a friendship or any other type of communication off with a lie would have a drastic effect on our foundation.

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<sup>27</sup> Plato was in disciplinary segregation, i.e. the box or the hole.

<sup>28</sup> “Bitch ass niggas” means cowards.

<sup>29</sup> “Hard legs” means males.

With that said, the truth is I was inquiring about finding someone to write to and someone I know gave me your info . Along with several other address. I was led to believe that all these females used to correspond with him but it didn't work out and some of the infos came from other hook-ups he had in the past. This individual and I were on great terms and unfortunately I can't inquire about where he got it from because he is no longer here.

I am a real loyal person and that I can say is my best & worst quality. Best is obvious and worst is because I'm so loyal that I'm blindsided by the inevitable betrayal

Because I am loyal I won't reveal this person's name because that is snitching also. However, I don't know the man's real name either. But rest assure I as a man will address it whenever our paths cross in the future. Prisons are too small and I'll see him down the road. I also don't respect people who steal from others in here. Because if you steal from one you'll steal from all, if given the chance. Stealing is sneaky and rat like.

I also have no respect for people who "dirty mack." The definition of "dirty mack" is someone who purposely gets someones loved ones info and defiles the person on this ends character in order to gain that persons trust and builds a relationship with that person as they left & felt burnt by the one they loved or known.

I don't know if that's what happen but [Plato] said his info and other property was stolen. As I said before I don't know the man (Plato). I have no problems with him. However, I don't take the threats lightly and I'm not hard to find if & when he gets out of the hole. I don't want to do nothing to this man and I will try & let him know the truth of the matter. Once he sees me and I see him we will probably know each other and he'll already know the type of man I am and know that it is not in my character to steal or "dirty mack." He will also come to the conclusion that I couldn't have anything to do with his stolen anything because we aren't in the same vicinity.

No Julia, as a man I stand before you and have told no lies. I will also stand in front of [Plato] and tell no lies. What happens happens.

From Plato, (after he calmed down and I told him Geppetto's real name):

I know who [Geppetto] is I've been knowing him from sometime, and he's not a thief. I'm not going to let it go, because I would like the name of the thief.

I'm writing [Geppetto] today, I know who this guy is now. I was in this group with him and I talk to him every time I see him. This dude is stand up<sup>30</sup> so I'll ask him how in the fuck he got your address without all the bullshit. No one calls him [Geppetto] that's why I couldn't find him, they call him [Geo] and he is from [name of city]. I'm not going [to] apologize for shit I said, muthafuckas know better and he saw me like ten times and didn't say shit but what's up.

Eventually, after talking to each other, Plato accepted Geppetto's story about someone else stealing my name and address from his property while he was in disciplinary segregation, so they did not fight.

<sup>30</sup> "Stand up" means a person of good character.



Both Plato and Geppetto agreed that stealing is wrong. It was in this context that Plato wrote this paragraph (quoted above in the discussion of confrontational versus devious crimes).

Stealing and taking to us are two different things, by force or gun point is to us ok – but waiting to someone has their back turned is right out cowardly. Stealing is a no, no up here people really hate cowards, and they will take your stuff & humiliate you every chance they get. Yes, I robb, shoot people and at time beat people up, but I don't steal. It might sound silly, but that's the way shit goes in my world.

Plato, however, wrote this paragraph to me when I pointed out that both he and Geppetto had been sentenced for armed robbery (among other crimes), so how could they now assert that stealing is wrong? I said that it did not matter whether the victim was looking at the perpetrator at the time the crime was committed or not – in either case, the crime involved taking something that did not belong to them. The response to me from both men seemed to revolve around the idea of being cowardly (or a “bitch ass nigga” or “sneaky and rat like”) which meant that the thief was too fearful of being seen because he did not want to physically fight to get what he wanted. While the morality of stealing seemed on the surface to be an important issue (at least to me), however, the underlying (and perhaps more salient) issue appears to be what the reputation of coward would lead to – getting publicly humiliated and having your status lowered in the presence of people who are even more predatory than you are. Plato's initial reaction was that Geppetto was not saying where he got my address because he had stolen it and was afraid of Plato. Geppetto then insisted that he was not afraid of Plato, but he just did not know where his mysterious benefactor had gotten the women's addresses, i.e. Geppetto was the victim of the other man's lies. Then Geppetto said that

he would “as a man... address it whenever our paths cross in the future.” So, once both men had let it be known that they were not liars, thieves, and especially were not afraid of *anybody* under any circumstances, the matter between them could honorably drop.

As a side note, I know that the trade in women’s addresses is quite active in prisons since I did get another unexpected letter from a different prisoner who must have stolen my address from Doctor See when they were in the same prison. Also, Man O’ War wrote:

I have a new celly. If no one writes, or calls then don’t worry but I feel that someone is reading my mail. I don’t know. Let me know if someone writes or calls. People do and say anything 4 mail. Pay 4 pictures of females they don’t know. I hate it. People will write, call #s just 2 get mail. I don’t get it.

I’m not sure but people are nosy. They want to know who is writing, when u get mail, who visit, all who u mess with, sends money, who is your girl, who u had sex wit. They want to know everything.

While obviously some of this “nosiness” is just boredom in an environment with very little to occupy one’s time, some of it is the competitive maliciousness of attempting what Geppetto called “dirty macking” as a way of stealing someone else’s friends or girlfriends.

I have frequently been called by prisoners I do not know because they managed to get my telephone number somehow from prisoners I did know. Except for a few female guards, teachers, or nurses, there are very few women to meet while in prison, and many men will do anything to not only get mail from women, but to try to convince women to send them money while they are behind bars. Of course, this made my project of meeting prisoners easier than I had originally expected, although I was initially skeptical of anything I was being told, especially when they all approached me (as

Geppetto had) with letters and conversations liberally sprinkled with the words “honest,” “truthful,” and “trust.” After getting to know Geppetto, however, I did get the impression that he prevaricates much less than other prisoners who I often caught telling contradictory accounts at different times, mostly because they forgot how they told their stories the first time – and I had most of their narratives preserved in their own handwriting. Every prisoner I met, however, positioned himself as one of the few honest men in the prison system, although almost everyone else is a liar.

Only once, however, did lies from a prisoner I know have genuinely serious ramifications. I met Capo on the street in the fall of 2006 when he was introduced to me by Plato’s brother, Slam Dunk. Several months later Capo was arrested for selling crack to an undercover police officer. After serving two one-year drug selling sentences (with very brief bouts of freedom between each one), Capo called me from the central processing center for Wisconsin prisons and told me that he was serving a third drug-selling charge. As we corresponded over the next nine months, I noticed that he seemed unusually depressed and was constantly getting into fights which sent him to disciplinary segregation (i.e. “the hole”). This was not the way he had behaved during his first two incarcerations. During the third incarceration, Capo’s ex-girlfriend, Alexa, mentioned to me on Facebook that a detective had called her and said that she had gotten Alexa’s number off of Capo’s cell phone and asked her whether he had spoken to her about committing a homicide. Alexa told the detective that Capo was “not that kind of person.” When I asked Capo about the conversation, he said that the detective had made “a mistake” and he did not want to talk about it. Right before he was about to be

released from his one-year sentence for possession with intent to sell marijuana, he was sent to another county and charged with armed robbery and first-degree intentional homicide for fatally shooting another drug dealer while trying to rob him during his last short period of freedom.

Capo denied the accusation (to the court, to me, and to all of his family and friends), even though his friend and fellow gang member said that he had been there and was the getaway driver. During every visit, phone call, and letter for nearly nine months after being charged, Capo insisted to me that he had been at a party at the time of the shooting and knew absolutely nothing about it. I did suspect that Capo may have been guilty anyway, however, because Plato and Slam Dunk's cousin, Dog Dayz, belongs to the same gang as Capo. He told me that Capo had called him around the time of the murder, had sounded very distressed, and asked Dog Dayz to pick him up from the city where he was and "get [him] out of there." Dog Dayz' car was broken down, however, so he could not rescue his friend. Then, just as the case was about to go to trial, the prosecutor used Capo's cell phone records to demonstrate that he had been in the area at the time of the shooting. Capo's oldest sister then told Capo that if he did it, he needed to confess and ask God for forgiveness. At the last possible minute, Capo pled "no contest" to reckless homicide (down from first-degree intentional) as part of a plea deal. During the sentencing hearing, the judge said that one of Capo's friends in that city had told the police that Capo had been so upset after unintentionally killing the other man, he had been throwing up. As was described at the beginning of this paper,

Capo said at the hearing "I'm not no monster. I'm not no murderer. I'm not no killer. I just made the wrong decision."

This situation was an example of a rejected part of the self being dissociated, as was described by Stein (2010) and Van der Kolk et al (1996). Capo was in denial (both to others and to himself) about what had happened during a few moments of his life when he shot in the direction of a complete stranger who was running away from him during a robbery. Even though I could see an obvious personality change in Capo after the murder, he was able to carry on many seemingly normal oral and written conversations with me about many other subjects after killing another person. In two of his letters written after the shooting, but before I knew about it, he wrote, "I am not a bad guy I just made a mistake" and "I just want somebody to love me I'm not that bad, am I".

Capo's story was in the constant process of revision between the time of the shooting and the sentencing hearing which was almost exactly two years later. In a letter to the judge requesting leniency, he was positioned by his oldest sister as a victim of their mother's crack addiction, his father's abandonment, and the Chicago ghetto neighborhood where he grew up. When he tried to position himself as drunk, high on marijuana and not fully responsible for what he did, the judge counter-positioned him as a drug dealer, so how could he request leniency for the bad judgment he exhibited while under the influence of drugs and alcohol? Furthermore, the judge countered Capo's sister's version of her brother's life by saying that good people can come out of bad neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the victim's family and friends tried to position Capo as the cold-blooded killer of an innocent and wonderful man (even though the victim

had numerous criminal charges including two for selling crack, one for stealing a car, a weapons charge, criminal trespass to a dwelling, several for bail jumping, and six different charges for obstructing police officers.) Capo's counter-position was that the killing was a tragic "mistake," and unintentional – and that he was sorry. Faced with all of these positions, it is difficult to make definitive assertions about truth and lies. Apparently Capo did shoot the man, but the rest of the story depends on who is telling it and what they suppose it means.

Meanwhile, Rashad, the Mambo gang member who had committed the crime with Capo, had been an associate of the victim (their girlfriends were sisters). He had set up the robbery and sent Capo out of the car to commit it because the victim would not recognize him. Because of this, the victim's family told the court that Rashad was an even worse person than Capo<sup>31</sup>. To the state, Rashad was a valuable witness who got a reduced sentence for "telling the truth," although fellow gang members positioned him as a traitor and a snitch who would not be safe in prison because someone would probably try to hurt him for snitching on Capo.

Like Geppetto telling me that he could not give me the name of the person from whom he had gotten my address, ("because that is snitching also"), ghetto males are theoretically only responsible for revealing truths about themselves, but must maintain silence when the subject of other people's behavior may be under discussion – especially to members of government authority. Lying is not always necessary, but

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<sup>31</sup> At the sentencing hearing for the driver, the victim's mother said that Rashad was more responsible for her son's death than Capo "because you knew him and set this whole thing up. It was really senseless."

silence, or at least restraint, is preferred. This is part of a set of conventions about behavior that determine the morality of many interactions in the inner city, and especially, when residents come in contact with those outside their subculture.

### **Offenders claim to be *Principled***

One of the forms of being respectable in the inner city is a kind of honor among thieves mentality, based on subcultural standards similar to those in other places where a strong central government is perceived as the enemy of the common people. The system relies on the principles of a code of silence, especially in reference to never cooperating with authorities or reporting anyone else's activities to representatives of the people in power, in this case the police, lawyers, judges, or corrections officials. As discussed above, going to the authorities is perceived both as a sign of weakness and of a betrayal of one's own community. Real men handle their grievances among themselves.

Plato insisted that gangs have their own moral values and are following a valid and mutually understood systematic schema of behavior (referred to by several of the men as "concepts"). The following quotes are from several letters written by Plato who is very proud of being a Copperhead gang member and asserts that ghetto society has a clear set of logical and honorable rules that he follows. It distresses him that others in his environment do not follow the code the way that he thinks they should.

I understand what your saying about the legal and illegal things we do in our union, "but your world is not my own and your laws has no voice in my ghetto"! I admit to being a citizen, and pride that comes from being born in such a land as ours. If you look around you most the class comes from all over the US and different states have different law and consequences for

breaking them. I know right from wrong in most if not any situation but breaking laws is what Americans do best besides business and war.

Prison has a system similar to the army, but you go home and get to shoot guns. Here we use knives to go about our objectives. I'm in a gang and we sometimes fight other gangs or robb drug houses and sell drugs and alot of other things to hold blocks and make money. My concepts aren't as compelling as the constitution or other things our founding fathers might have wrote, but it applies well to our struggle in the hood. Lots of people assume and say their killing in the ghetto for nothing, well all those people don't live in the ghetto and couldn't tell you what a wish sandwich<sup>32</sup> is!

I got a letter telling how [Dog Dayz] and all the rest of them dude are acting. I never really liked being around people in my age group, but I see they lost touch of all the concepts of family and hood life. They say its like crack all over again a race to the dollar and leave out the pipe and throw in a pill.

I hear about that July 4<sup>th</sup> shooting before it hit the news. Those guys were "Murder Mob"<sup>33</sup> and their people up here are going to do bad things to the shooters. They just stop a war like two years ago with B.O.S. (Brothers of the Struggle) and they lost a lot of good brothers now they are cool. I guess that no one can truly run from the past. That was one of my niggas (friend) brothers and close friends.

I see and hear things that come out of my ghetto and my soul just finds a dark place and try to run away. I fill like I should have lived in a different time, it seems like no one wants to be the true essence of what our concepts mean and to me with this falling down the body and soul dies together with that lost of meaning.

Being a "[Copperhead]" is just a concept I've chosen to help define me better so others would maybe have a wider understanding of who I am. I guess some people assume I'm racist at first, but I always tell them what I stand for seeing how my personality comes out mostly at first meeting. But to be honest everyone has a little racist in them that comes out time to time. I don't know what shit [Slam Dunk] and all them other motherfuckas out there in the world yelling but [Movin On] is a [Copperhead] and if he says different tell me.

I tried several times to get more specific descriptions of the "true essence of our concepts," but I could not get Plato to make a list of explicit beliefs and behaviors. The most explicit he got about moral concepts were:

I'm loyal, and if someone tells you I'm not tell them 30 years says I'm loyal "Real talk." I like everything out in the open, If I want to fuck something else for a little time I'm going to say so. As far as other niggas go I'm a gangsta so my word is my oath, and if you can get it out of me then it will never be broken.

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<sup>32</sup> Having two pieces of bread and wishing you had some meat.

<sup>33</sup> I did not change the names of these two gangs because none of the prisoners I know are members of these two gangs.



This quote is in reference to the fact that he was charged with being a felon in possession of a firearm, although his mother told me that the gun did not belong to him. I saw a letter to Plato written by his female cousin, Moonbeam, which said “Sorry about the gun,” so I think it was hers. The letter was written from a women’s prison where she was serving a sentence for armed robbery with threat of force. Plato, as is required by the code of silence, did not inform on his cousin and just accepted the sentence, along with those for the crimes he did actually commit. Once, on the street, one of Plato’s uncles told me that sometimes you get charged for things you did not do, but other times you are not caught for things you actually did do, so it all evens out in the end. This picture of the capriciousness of detection and arrest clearly shows that, in the minds of the offenders, there is no real linear correlation between the cause of crime and the effect of punishment by the authorities.

Plato sometimes wavered in his assertion about whether gang membership is an important part of his self-concept.

I’m a “[Copperhead]” from Chicago’s west side. I don’t look to gangs as a way to grasp an identity. I’m a man before anything else. “Real Talk.”

We have this saying that real nigga’z do real things. I told you that I’m in a gang, but gangs don’t hold you down when you go to the joint. I have some of my brothers in here and we do what we can for each other, but no one goes out of their way. I’ll kill and fight for you, but my girl can’t bring your mama up here. I hope you can understand if your out of sight your out of mind. “Real talk.”

Almost everything that Plato said about gang behavior in the prison had to do with other men getting into fights and Plato being required to back them up by also fighting, or staying in shape for fighting. While I think he accepts gang concepts in an abstract

sense, he wrote to me several times about being annoyed with individual members of his own gang who kept dragging him into fights that he thought were stupid.

I hope you do get the phone thing worked out because I've been trying to work-out and its not fun. If you're not doing anything here like talking to your family on the phone you must work-out. They call it fight ready, if you don't work out the gang make you pay a taxe. So, I find reason not to work-out because I don't like to be around a lot of sweating men☺ (LOL) Don't tell anyone like your friend [Geppetto], because it goes up if you get caught playing hookie.

As for my little fight, well another gang jumped one of my brothers (member of my gang or nation) so I ask them who was going to "pay" - meaning come in the cell to fight me so no one goes in the hole. They said it had nothing to do with me, and refused to send someone down to make things "right." So I, seeing as how non-action would put me at risk, just started hitting anyone I could get my hands on. Only one chose to fight back, so I went for him. I was hoping to stay out of trouble and fight in the cell, but the last time I got sent to the super-max for beating blood out of the guy that came in the cell with me! Wisconsin prisoners don't really do any stabbing so its not life or death just some black-eyes and fat lips. If you don't get hit with a lock or t.v. upside your head! (LOL) ☺

It was important for Plato to fall into his conception of being authentic. He said "I'm the way-out image that comes to mind when people think about the hood, most of the guys you've seen so far [are] third to second hand gangsters." His biggest insults for other people were "wantbe gangsta," "fake ass gangsta," and "bitch ass niggas" (coward). Men in these categories were from the ghetto, but did not live up to the codes either through their lack of courage in fist or gun fights, committing of crimes against children, or through their breaking of the code of silence.

Its people here for raping kids and they are still embraced by these fake ass gangsta up here. I don't let my people even talk to their kind, and if they do we disassociate with that individual. I personally make people like [that] time here hell, so they stay out of my way.

You asked what a "bitch ass nigga" is, well a bitch ass nigga is "want to be gangster." This dude would let you talk to him any kind of way and don't want to fight or shoot anything other than their mouth. These dudes are not really criminal, their victims trying to fit in. Cowards come in many shapes or forms. This form of coward will get you killed in the ghetto fighting there battles. I know some things that go on in the ghetto, my reach goes beyond these bars. People like to talk, and I'm a good listener. My voice is supreme in my part of the world in which I once walked. Imagining the things I might do, or have someone do, keeps me forever informed.

In another letter he wrote:

I have my times when I'm controlling and arrogant, but I have a right to be. I'm a "boss."

As far as Plato is concerned, gang membership should involve a certain degree of courage, independent action, and integrity. (When Man O' War discussed the same things, he used the term "valid" for authenticity.) All of the prisoners agreed that just being a black male from the ghetto means nothing in and of itself. Even attempting crime means nothing because many men do not have the courage or leadership qualities required to live up to the image of "real" gangstas. This is almost a perfect example of Bucholtz and Hall's relationality principle of authentication (realness) versus denaturalization (identity which is crafted, fragmented, problematic, or false). As Plato wrote, "We have this saying that real nigga'z do real things."

In a letter to his younger brother, Smoker, Plato wrote:

It takes skill to be real, because the easy road is always taken by the weak and fake-ass people in this world. In the world we live in tomorrow is a long-term goal, it's not promised we'll reach. Please lil bro, be strong for yourself, then you can be strong for me and the others we love. What ingredients do you need to live life, but what you already have inside your hands. Our destiny is beyond anything you can dream or picture within your heart. Look at all that's around you, and see how no one but a chosen few wants to escape the sad life the ghetto brings. Smokeing weed poping pills and letting their minds die, but none can see what moma "Africa" wanted them to be. Have you ever seen a slave without chains, because there's no one color for stupidity. "Julia" wants to help you learn and you can forget that thought of how money makes the world turn, because wisdom tells you how to possess that money and always have it at your use. Start to read books and learn my nig, don't be dum and a child of the ghetto under somebody else's shadow.

In the letters quoted in this section, Plato is making several important moral claims. First, he is saying that the ghetto is almost a separate political entity. He compares the "laws" of the ghetto to the analogy of each state in the United States having separate laws. Second, many American laws "has no voice in [his] ghetto" which implies a certain

degree of tribal sovereignty, almost like Native American reservations which have their own separate authority in certain issues. Third, he knows right from wrong, echoing almost exactly what Fanatic wrote (above). This means that he is not amoral. He believes in codes and standards, just not the same ones I believe in. Fourth, most other Americans also break laws or have a contingent sense of morality anyway, just like he does. Lastly, gang membership can be a way of efficiently bringing all of the important ideas together into a coherent alternative system – providing that all gang members actually follow the system. Unfortunately the “meaning” of the concepts can be “lost” when people “lose touch” with the deep and essential underlying value system. Plato is nostalgic for a mythical past Golden Age (i.e. “a different time”) when people genuinely followed the ideal rules and traditions. This was “what moma ‘Africa’ wanted them to be,” people with a great destiny “beyond anything you can dream or picture with your heart.” Unfortunately, the ghetto is now experiencing a fall from grace when people are being lazy, selfish, cowardly and adopting an every-man-for-himself kind of cultural decline into anarchy that is not becoming of men of character.

### **Offenders claim to be *Respectful and Worthy of Respect***

Respect and disrespect are key themes in street and prison cultures. Respect is of paramount importance in cultures of honor, and in the minds of the incarcerated, worth sacrificing almost anything to acquire. Gilligan, a medical doctor and prison psychiatrist, has written:

... The inextricable connect between disrespect and shame is emphasized by anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers, who concluded that in all known cultures “the withdrawal of respect dishonors... and this inspires the sentiment of shame.”

In maximum security prisons, this is the story of men’s lives

I have yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by the experience of feeling ashamed and humiliated, disrespected and ridiculed, and that did not represent an attempt to prevent or undo this ‘loss of face’ – no matter how severe the punishment, even if it includes death (1996: 109-110).

Later in his book, Gilligan goes on to cite a study by Sennett and Cobb on the psychology of social class in America, “ ‘The terrible thing about class in our society is that it sets up a contest for dignity,’ a contest that those on the bottom rung of the social ladder by definition lose” (1996: 200). Gilligan points out that race and income are two ways in which social class are attributed in the United States. Poor black men are already in a position to feel shame due to getting messages from society that they are inferior to white people and/or people with money. Gilligan says that people who are constantly in a position where they are made to feel inferior become violent over trivial matters because they feel ashamed to be ashamed; that a trivial slight makes them feel so unimportant that they overreact to take back their honor.

Of course, the ultimate humiliation is not just to be black, and to be poor, but to also be imprisoned and therefore, lose all control over one’s own life. My consultants tried desperately to fight back against their poverty and shame by committing crimes to acquire resources – which then made them admired, and a social success. Getting arrested and going to prison, however, forces prisoners to move through a series of status degradation ceremonies that removes their money and property, dresses them in low-quality standard issue clothing, takes away their control over their own body through cavity searches, hand-cuffs, leg shackles, and bars, destroys their power as

active participants in their relationships with others outside of the prison, and strips away what little pride they have left. At that point, they must fight (often literally) to maintain whatever sense of worthiness they can retain to get the respect of others and to maintain their self-respect. The prison system then punishes men for fighting, which usually results in being sent to the hole (or disciplinary segregation). If they get into too many fights, they are sent to the SuperMax, (like Plato has been twice).

In my opinion, a related major issue that creates fights in prisons is that in normal human societies there are social hierarchies that locate people as having a particular status in relationship to other people. As soon as black men get into a jail or prison they are forcibly placed into a social world with a mixture of persons that they may or may not know from the street. Then they have to test each of the other people to see where they personally will be located on the social hierarchy of prisoners. The problem with this is that prisoners are constantly coming and going: people are released, new people are sentenced, prisoners are moved to other jails and prisons due to space considerations or going to higher or lower security levels. This creates a situation similar to the well-known experiments done with chickens in which adding or removing birds means that a new pecking order must be continually established and the constant disruption of the social order makes it more difficult for normal peaceful activities to occur.

Prisoners in this ethnographic research project constantly referred to features of respect and disrespect, using the concepts as explanations for many forms of behavior, but particularly for status interactions that often ended in violence. They were taught

about respect from childhood and those lessons stayed with them as they moved into the prison system. Most of these lessons from childhood involved violent punishments.

As quoted above, Plato wrote this:

School was fun for me but I always knew I was smarter than most of my class, because my moma didn't play no games about school. She would beat the skin off you for any wrong doing at school. One time my teacher called her, and she came and hit me in my mouth in front of everybody and said, "Muthafucka if these white people call me up here again – you won't need to worry about school for weeks."

Geppetto wrote this about his childhood:

My mother is huge on respect. So I was always taught to respect my elders. But my mom taught me early on that I shouldn't respect elders who didn't respect me. But when I didn't show respect I was chastised.

My mom believed in whoopings for everything. Yeah I got punishments but they usually came with whoopings. Whoopings taught me what's considered right and wrong and how to behave.

Since respect was a big thing in my family. Being polite and courteous was a big part of respect. To show the outsiders that my mom ran a tight ship and we were good kids we (my brothers & I) were paraded around in the same outfits and attitudes to match.

Even though my mom stood on us it wasn't only my siblings and I. Any child family or not didn't call her by her name. Auntie [Lisa] to family and extended family. Momma [Winston] to our friends if they wanted to say it or Ms. [Winston]. Some people thought my mom was flaky or acting white when she would demand respect from children and correct our grammar. But most friends thought that she was cool and hip cause she listened to our music and new all the flyest dances.

In relationship to moral education through physical punishment, Nightingale points out that the American tradition of "spare the rod and spoil the child" with the "respectability of its Christian and mainstream origins, and the official sanction it receives from the law-and-order policies of America's police, courts, and prisons all help to make the forceful child rearing approach an importance source of legitimacy for values of violence in the inner city" (1993: 81). While many members of the middle class have moved away from corporal punishment of children, harsh physical punishment has tended to remain as an important aspect of discipline in inner city

families. According to Nightingale, this teaches that “might makes right” and has “communicated a tolerance for violence” (105) that spills out into the streets.

For the prisoners, the concept of respect manifested itself differently as they grew up and had to manage interactions with their peers instead of their elders. Instead of “being polite and courteous” to older people who outranked them by virtue of their age, respect began to become a matter of competition among young males. Almost every description of respect and disrespect given by any of the young men in this study was in regard to peer group competition which meant other young inner city males. (Mostly this meant other black males, although it also included males of other races who inhabited the same geographic spaces in the cities and the prison system. Man O’ War and Doctor See are biracial and spend time with Asian and Puerto Rican relatives, and Plato grew up near Mexican and Puerto Rican gang members). The words “respect” and “disrespect” were never used in reference to middle-class white people or people of other races, ethnicities, or social classes who do not inhabit the same geographic or social spaces occupied by inner city black males. In examining the following accounts about respect, even though the persons with whom the prisoners are competing for respect are sometimes called “people,” they are also referred to as associates, guys, cats, dudes, peers, brothers, gangstas, niggas, and men (which are all terms referring to other males in similar social positions as themselves.) In other words, the competitors would be considered of equal status by virtue of the way that those outside of their subculture would view them. So power is negotiable within the existing social structure by winning (or losing) in any contested situation. None of the prisoners I encountered



had any political aspirations to change the way they were viewed by persons outside of their subculture. While a few of them occasionally referred to the white guards as “racist,” that was also accepted almost as a given and not discussed as anything in reference to respect or as something that was possible for prisoners to change through their own behavior.

Furthermore, African American prisoners are completely aware that different subcultures have different rules and do not judge people outside of their circle using the same set of criteria. Plato wrote:

I joke around all the time and I forget how other people might take my jokes. I still seem to be liked by most people, even when they find out I’m well read in a lot of different subjects. I don’t feel you have to be careful with my feeling when writing to me, I laugh at everything and I’m not deeply into what others say about me. I look at if someone is directly trying to disrespect me, because everyone is not from the same place – what might be commonplace to me might be really taboo to you!

In addition, the fact that respect is more a matter of following a masculine subcultural code than a racial category was frequently expressed by Plato who had a label for people he did not respect: “fake blacks.” Like the scholars Gates, Anderson, and Hagedorn, Plato agrees that middle-class African Americans belong in a completely separate social class. Unlike the professors, however, he believes that people in that category are *not* respectable because they have assimilated into white culture and do not exhibit solidarity with residents of the insular society of the ghetto.

Black men that have no hood in them, are sadly looked at as uncle-toms or gay’s and even sellouts. You see every well known black men, tries to place his self in some degree on the front lines of the black struggle as in the hood!

Again skin color doesn’t mean shit, just like white have different nationalities – blacks do too! In American we use our inner struggle meter, now you can be a sympathizer but you better not bring yo black-middle-class down in the hood unless you know somebody. Listen, just because

your skin is dark doesn't mean your entitled to what we call a ghetto pass. Now as for your black friends ask them when was the last time they went down to the ghetto, and if they hung around! If I got to the northside I don't hang around unless I'm with my family or a member of my organization/gang. Ask [Slam Dunk] about some DVDs called hood to hood or Who Got beef, and you'll get a better idea what I'm talking about. I don't believe blacks must be criminals, I just understood the different experiences brings different allegiances. You do have a very small amount of people white, black, yellow and red plus brown that do escape the ghetto, but how many come back? You want to know why I get into so many fights, well listen to me speak. I don't have much of any of my slang, so dudes think I'm a victim without asking around first.

Plato was explaining that middle-class black people were as out of place in the ghetto and in as much danger (of becoming a victim) as he would be if he was in another gang's territory.

Plato was also of the opinion that middle class African Americans were the enemies of those in the ghetto. On several occasions on the street, I heard his mother call African American police officers "house niggas."<sup>34</sup> Plato wrote:

You should do some research on where all that money goes after it hits the ghetto. Look at the so called black leaders life style, then you'll see why people make it out the ghetto in one's and two's. Middle class blacks like to pimp their skin out, so does poor blacks hoping for a push at the front of the line.

I want to tell you that you shouldn't look at the past oppression of the black man, but the situation that now kills our hoods! The free money and short cuts given to us by the government, is the worst thing to happen to the black man since slavery. We were the hardest hit by the housing market crash, because the government to bank to give \$300,000 in loans and loans for 100,000 to poor blacks that would never be able to pay them back. Our own people push us down so they may make it out, and have someone to look down on and take pity. How many black leaders do you know who are poor? We've been pimped<sup>35</sup> and the pimp tells us the white man is the one who makes him slap us down. The Black man has been kept down and set against other races. Look to your brothers of every color, know that this world never gives anything for free – good or bad.

In another letter:

I've been to both world's white and black, plus rolled around with the red, yellow men to. They all have someone they hate, and never want to talk about "love."

<sup>34</sup> Docile pawns of the white ruling class.

<sup>35</sup> Pimped in this context means used and/or abused.

You are right, Nigga is not a bad word amongst blacks, but if whites use it 9 out of 10 he's going to get his head bust. Me, I understand how white feel bad about the past, and how some truly want to be brothers not enemies. If you've been around blacks for some time they might start to call you nigga, I do it with my white friends all the time.

In these passages, Plato is saying that people are arranged in a hierarchy (what he calls "a line" with a front and a back.) Middle-class black people try to get to the front of the line (or become powerful) by striving to be leaders in organizations that get government grants or special privileges that can be dispensed to those other black people beneath them (or behind them in Plato's terminology). Those black people are not positioned as "brothers," but as "pimps." On the other hand, some white people feel bad about the past and do want to be brothers, so they can become positioned as honorary "niggas" (as can Native Americans and Asians).

This is what he said in another letter:

Color is used as a means of making people identify them self when feeling less powerful as an individual. I don't need to hide behind no fucking color or use words like my people, because I came out the pussy alone. The only colors in this world that matters is green, gold, silver and anything else is bullshit.

Having money overrides any other privilege or solidarity gained in any other way, including skin color. While still on the street, obtaining money through hustling (*not* welfare or government programs) is the most highly regarded way to win against male competition in terms of respect.

This is seen from these two letters (also quoted above). From Geppetto:

I was really close to two other guys and we were all leaders in our own groups but amongst each other we assumed leadership depending on the situation.

Well one of my friends [A.J.'s] daddy was the biggest hustler ever in [name of city]. He had plenty of illegal money. Anyhow, [A.J.] wanted to keep beating and bullying people for pennies. After a while I was tired of it for several reasons. 1) I'm a people person and I prefer to get along

or not deal with you period. 2) I get into trouble at home for getting into trouble at school. 3) There was no money in that.

So I decided to get them to try to help me steal candy and kool-aid. They weren't with it at first but when they seen me with pockets full of change they fell in line. That to me was a show of respect by them respecting my hustle and my mind.

From Fanatic:

There is a constant theme in your letters that I have picked up on, and it is something your not understanding "poverty." The propensity of black men to sell drugs, act like thugs, and mistreat women has everything to do with poverty. When me as a black man in an urban environment grows up seeing nothing but poverty then the only recourse is to go after fast money, fast women, and when I don't have money I get no respect, I get no women, and have no hope. So I sell drugs, I get money, I get cars, I get women, and how am I supposed to respect a woman when I have no money wouldn't even acknowledge my existence, and now that I roll up in a nice car with a fat stack then she's all over me.

Besides money, the other critical way for young males to campaign for respect is

described by Geppetto:

I'm getting a good understanding of what it is that you want with my definition of RESPECT. But its much more easier to give examples of disrespect. So I'll try to give you examples of both.

Respect to me is for one person to have a high consideration for someone, or something. Respect is more of an action too, more verb than noun.

Growing up I was always a leader or at least for the most part I was. To earn respect I had to be a great fighter and a good thinker. If you notice I used "great" with fighter and "good" with thinker. Fighting in an adolescent mind was much more important.

We moved around a lot and fighting was the only way you can get along with new associates. Either they heard about your fighting ability or they'll test it for themselves. After you win your respected because they can't be[at] you. If you lose then they'll be the leader and your respect is given to them. Then you get one more scenario. You fight & lose but each time you see the other person you fight until you win. Those are the rare ones with so much heart to win or lose that they earn respect from many.

I've been in lots of fights and they were all for some sort of disrespect. Name calling was the most. I've been called Nigger, white boy (because of my light skin), people talked about my momma, clothes, shoes, my large feet, hands, forehead, even my hazel eyes.

With name calling it was ok to talk back but I was never good at it so I immediately got more disrespectful and challenging.

Respect between men covers several important aspects: acquiring money and displaying high status objects that money can buy (such as women<sup>36</sup>, cars, and clothing), successfully managing verbal duels (including both insults and rapping), being skillful at physical combat (such as basketball or fist-fighting), and displaying courage when handling weapons or being shot at during altercations. Man O' War explained the dilemma of street life this way:

"Is a man someone who values his life and freedom enough to walk away from the troubles that tried to bring him down even if it cost him his respect. Or is a man someone who values his respect even if it cost him his life and freedom."<sup>37</sup>

This is another way of stating the manhood puzzle in which males in all cultures need to prove that they are men. Is life even worth living if one is always the low man on the totem pole?

Once someone has been arrested , and the freedom has been lost, the attenuated range of possible ways of acquiring respect when confined within the prison system makes those proficiencies that are still available increase in importance, especially that of never backing down from any type of challenge. This is how Plato described the position of respect in prison:

I'm always respectful to those that respect me. Here that is the number one rule, Respect everyone as a man until he shows or tell you different and never allow yourself to be disrespected at anytime.

Again I'm trying to get the hell out of this prison, where you have to keep fighting these dude for common respect. If these dudes got any more artificial they would disappear or vanish from sight.

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<sup>36</sup> Defining women as objects here is deliberate because I am discussing the display of the women in front of other men, not necessarily having a close, caring relationship with any one woman.

<sup>37</sup> He put quotation marks around this in his letter, although I am not sure who he is quoting.

I don't feel I have anything to prove to anyone, remember this is not daycamp – somethings must end with physical action. I'm very humble, I don't go around saying, "hey you want to fight." All I want to do is my time, but no one will oppress me in anyway. I've been push down enough by the state, so peace is negotiable by might! I'll continue to try to talk things out with my peers, but never will I be made to yield to oppression.

This description demonstrates that not only does the loss of many (free world) avenues of expression make fighting more likely, so does the fact that the men are suffering from a daily, visible hierarchical arrangement between prison officials and prisoners, and they obviously have less power. So they focus their efforts at status negotiation on the other prisoners. Plato also wrote:

As for fighting goes you see so good one now and then, there mostly bigger guy jumping on the smaller ones. I'm into avoiding fights but not losing any respect, if someone disrespect you here you better fight or at least hit him or spit on that person, because if not you'll be washing underwear, giving your canteen, being punch or cecked<sup>38</sup>, maybe raped if you run into a shamless boy-lover. You can tell but the C.O. only use you into they can get what they need to move up to a better position, You can try saying you got Aids or Hiv, but people will beat your ass anyway.

Man O' War described the situation this way:

Respect is something I feel truly about. If I'm not respected as a man, hustler, father, and a friend, I try to do things to let people know I'm valid. But I like to be feared so I won't b tested. So my kindness won't be taken 4 granted. But I've been going about things the wrong way. I'm not here to please anyone but my family & fuck wat others think and say. I didn't understand that. My main focus is me getting out to my sons.

In another letter:

I chill stay to myself & gamble wherever I am. Here 2. I don't loose people always quit. But it can cause problems like when people don't want to pay or can't pay. U gotta fight, well I do. I can't let someone just test me to see wat they can get away wit. It's a weakness we have.

I feel we give people the power over us. They can say words, or gamble and not pay, and we will fight. If they want 2 draw us into an altercation. I will probably fuck up my release 4 words.

<sup>38</sup> I think this means "checked" as in the game of chess, as to stop or block.

Someone can test me b-4 I get out. That's a problem that I have to much pride 2 fix at this time, I know my pride is a terrible thing, that I also love about me. I will stand on wat I believe. If I say something I mean I'm not going to change for one time basis (make exceptions).

In a third letter:

Speaking of the hole I almost went yesterday. This dude tried to put dirt on my name behind my back. I confronted him and he acted like he wanted to fight. I let it be known I got 20 days I will go to the hole. You can get a 21 day extension to fight ur ticket so if u have less than that u can go home without getting time for ur ticket. So people get scared cuz I go home they will still be in the hole. Like me when I was in the hole.

Capo described the situation like this in a letter to Doctor See:

What's good my nigga? Ain't much over this way but I'm in the hole again for fighting but other than that I'm cool. So you about to get out soon that's what's up. I'll be right behind you bro. ... Yeah I'm done with this shit too. Jail for the birds real nigga ain't post to be here. So we got to stay out and stay away from this bitch. When I get out this time I'm bout to sit down and lay low cuz these people ain't going to keep playing with us. So we got to be more careful and smarter. I got to stop wilding out for they give me some more time you dig. But you already know how I am it's all about respect. And if you can't do that stay away from me. But I'll be cool, but people need to learn how to watch their mouth you know brotha. But I'm about to stay to myself in here cause nigga don't know how to act so I got to stay sucker free and away from blow pop world.

This is what Capo wrote to Shake Down (Slam Dunk's best friend):

What going down Joe? Me I'm up in [name of prison] doing me but I'm also in the hole. That shit so crazy ain't it but nigga need to know when to respect nigga, but he know now, shit. When do you get out Joe? I get out next yer March but they might push my date back cuz this is my third fight. And they told me to come down or they might max me out or take some time away from me. But these people don't understand that all you got in jail is your word, respect, and space so when a nigga cross one of them you got to go in<sup>39</sup>.

An example of a specific altercation between Plato and another prisoner sent him to solitary confinement for months:

I'm back inside the hole and I need stamps to write, but I'm most sorry to tell you that I'll be in the hole for six to eight months. I had a really bad fight or that's what they say happened, and my charges are battery, false name and titles, misuse of state or federal property, and entry of another inmates quarters. I know this is not a happy letter but is there any such thing in the

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<sup>39</sup> "Go in" means fight

world from my situation. I really need money at this time, because I will [be] down her for a while. I hope you are doing well and you understand that I wouldn't do anything without a good reason. This dude wanted to make a name, so I gave him hands. I sent the conduct report. PS. I'm OK, [he] never even touched me.

According to the conduct report, Plato was in the wrong cell, and had blood on his face and ear. The correction officers found that he had removed his own bloody shirt after the fight and hid it at the bottom of a garbage can, then pretended to be someone else by switching cells with another prisoner<sup>40</sup>. The guards also found the person he switched with trying to clean up blood in Plato's cell. The injured party tried to claim his lacerations were from cutting himself shaving (not wanting to admit that he had lost a fight, nor wanting to also be placed in segregation for breaking the rules.) Plato explained it this way:

I'm not really into fighting but respect is worth most things in life some even go as far as giving their souls. I had a disagreement with this cat, and he called me some names and told me his door stays open to give "touch ups" so I took him up on the offer. So morning came I walk down to his room for my promised touch up, and he didn't have his tools. So I told him I brung mine, in the end he was clean up his blood and found the respect he lost the day before, do you follow? The C.O. seen the after-math and notice I was in the wrong room, so here I am! I'll be more careful in leave out the room next time☺.

After three months in segregation, Plato said, "Man, I wish I'd just let that dude get away with one then I would not be in this situation, but most things are hard to avoid."

In a letter to his father, Plato wrote:

I'm back inside the hole. I was doing well when some dude I had hit months ago was trying to disrespect me. He hooked some dude up with his sister and I'm guessing he was thinking this other guy was going to help, but I went inside his cell and put his blood everywhere I could. So I on my way to W.S.P.F. better known as the supermax.

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<sup>40</sup> The prisoner who switched cells with Plato was possibly a relative because he has the same last name as Plato's mother.



To analyze each of the above passages, the disrespect begins by what another person says. Geppetto wrote: "I've been in lots of fights and they were all for some sort of disrespect. Name calling was the most." Plato wrote: "he called me some names." Capo wrote: "people need to learn how to watch their mouth." Man O' War wrote: "Fuck wat others think and say." "This dude tried to put dirt on my name behind my back." "I feel we give people the power over us. They can say words, or gamble and not pay, and we will fight. If they want 2 draw us into an altercation. I will probably fuck up my release 4 words." The bottom line was eloquently expressed by Capo: "all you got in jail is your word, respect, and space so when a nigga cross one of them you got to go in." The altercation begins with words, and the men do recognize that, on the one hand, words are not that important, but on the other hand, not reacting violently means that the next stage of being disrespected will be, as Plato put it, "you'll be washing underwear, giving your canteen, being punch or cecked, maybe raped if you run into a shamless boy-lover. "

An example of the type of situation referred to by Man O' War's "fucking up" a release "4 words" is illustrated by a letter from Geppetto in which describes a personal case of a prison interaction revolving around the concept of respect. When this letter was written, Geppetto had been imprisoned for thirteen years and had recently been transferred from a maximum security institution to a medium security. He wanted desperately to look good to the parole board so he could be released and spend time with his two children who were only babies when he first went to prison. But, on the other hand, he could not lose face in front of the other prisoners because then they

would see him as an easy mark and take advantage of him in other ways. He wanted to consider the future, but he was forced to take a short-term view for survival in the present moment.

I got into a fight with someone who is older than me which is seldom now that I'm older. It's usually the younger guys who you have conflicts with if anything. Anyhow I was given a baseball hat by someone who was going home. It is common for people to leave and give away their property to others. Because it is so much easier to provide for yourself out there.

This brother gave me a hat and it had a name written on it. The brother said, "You can take my name off and write yours." At the time it was a nice gester.

After having it for like 2 weeks I'm approached by several guys as I'm going to class in a rush. They put the sweat down on me about this hat. Hey this, it looks like its mine, yeah its mine, etc. etc. I'm shown his I.D. and I notice immediately that his name was on the hat and it isn't a common name. I'm in a rush and the situation is turning sour so I humble myself and agree that it may be his and how I got it, and it is his, he can have it. Well now his attitude is even more crazy and bravado up to the sky. I'm in a hurry and I tell him so, so I leave before it can escalate even more.

I'm gone for over an hour in class. I come out of the building and he's around waiting. He waited for over an hour. Now he's addressing me as a gangsta which I have expressed to the few real men around here that I have left that lifestyle even though the concept lives in me.

So now I'm wondering who he's been talking to, and his attitude is firm. "Your going to pay me this much or else." But I'm listening to these words and phrases and they're all rehearsed and he's doing an awful job of being a thug. Since my pride & ego were on my shoulder I let some of my thoroughness escape. I told him he will not get anything from me, and he should be more than happy & satisfied with getting his hat back. He stuck to the script and said it's this or else. I said I'm not going to fight with you, I'm on something else. He wouldn't let it go even though I kept moving along. Then he's addressed by six or seven guys from earlier and they are inquiring about this situation and he's telling them he's going to beat my ass and I'll still owe him or it's another beating.

This was comical to me because I know what I'm capable of and his demeanor is soft as baby shit. "Yeah I'm going to do this and that to him." and I snapped! "I'm going to put my shoes on and I'll be right back."

I come back and he's in a crowd of 6 or 7 and I get to him. 2 to his mouth and then he swung and missed. Now we both danced around each other for 20-30 seconds and the C/Os were there to stop the whole situation and detain us.

I've been given 90 days in the hole and I should be released on the 1<sup>st</sup> of Sept. However, his attitude is that we're coming back if I don't get paid. Which to me is extortion.

Now let me explain my delima. These grown ass boys around here are going home within a year, and they have that I don't give a fuck attitude because I'm still going home on this date. So I'll fight & lose. It don't matter to me cause I'm still going home on this date. And if I lose I'm going to see him on the streets and then I'll win with this pistol. How fuckin stupid!

So back to me. If I pay this \$16 \$17 it makes me look like easy prey to others. If I don't then I know I have to beat his ass, not win the fight so we can leave this situation alone. Once I beat his ass, then security can and will say 70-80% of the time, "Based on your sentence structure and the violent behavior you have displayed, we no longer think you should be kept as medium custody!" I'll be sent to Boscoe bil or back to max. I'll see parole from max and they'll say, "Well we gave you a chance at medium and you screwed it up by being violent. You also have a violent case so we're going to deny you parole and give you a 36-48 month recall." Which should take me to 2014-15. No I can't go for that!

Now on the other side I come clean, tell the truth about the entire situation to security. And now its broadcasted by them and him that I'm a snitch! Plus he's got proof of it in Black & White. Now I got to be on the defensive for the remainder of my time.

So I ask you what to do?

I am so tired of prison! I want to go home! Not now, but right now!

Before I came to the hole P.R.C. told me that they wanted to send me to minimum but because of the violent nature of my case and the recent escapes at minimum from violent offenders they have to deny it and would approve if parole endorsed me.

Now, parole won't see me until 2011 and I do expect some sort of positive treatment regardless of this current situation. But I still would like to try to make my situation easier and come home A.S.A.P.

An analysis of this letter shows several important points. In one sense, this story is an example of a no-win situation. On one side is the man who insists on getting into a fight over a used hat which has already been returned (a definite example of Gilligan's "trivial matter") and on the other is the prison system, specifically its rule for staying out of trouble in order to avoid further punishment or to be able to advance toward parole. Geppetto has to make a choice about which battle to win. Within an instant he compares the situation to those he has experienced in the past and uses his gut feelings to make his decision. Research by Damasio, a neurologist, has demonstrated that decisions cannot be made without the use of emotion (or the emotional parts of the brain) (cited in Wrangham and Peterson 1996: 188-190). Rosaldo has written that "feelings are not substances to be discovered in our blood, but social practices

organized by stories that we both enact and tell. They are structured by our forms of understanding” (1984 cited in Markus and Kitayama 1991: 235). Geppetto knows rationally that if he wants to be successfully paroled he cannot get into more trouble in prison, but he has been raised in a culture of honor and, emotionally, he feels that he must fight to preserve his honor. He cannot go to the authorities to explain (and become a “snitch”) because, as Ayers wrote (above), “to go to law for redress is to confess publically that you have been wronged and the demonstration of your vulnerability places your honor in jeopardy.” Geppetto does what he believes he has to do, and so behaves with honor, saving his self-respect, as well as his respect in front of his peers.

Analyzing Geppetto’s account another way, using positioning theory, brings to light a few more salient features of the story. To begin with, he illustrates a number of points about himself which he contrasts to points about the other man which definitively demonstrates that he is a good, moral agent, and the other person is doing wrong. He shows that the other man is immature, by saying that he is “older,” even though it is usually younger men who want to get in fights. (Geppetto also defines himself as “older” – he would have been about thirty when this occurred – which he takes to mean mature and sensible when referring to himself.) He reinforces the other man’s immaturity by calling him (and others) “grown ass boys.” Also, by comparing the man to “baby shit,” he is subtly being positioned as infantile in his behavior. By using the terminology that he does, Geppetto positions himself as a man and the other individual as a child. This is reinforced by his reference to “the few real men around here,” a

category into which Geppetto puts himself by implication. This entire account could be compared to the idiomatic expression, “separating the men from the boys,” and Geppetto is a man.

Second, Geppetto demonstrates his prudence by maintaining the awareness that the object in question is a second-hand hat<sup>41</sup>, and says that he “humbles” himself to explain his possession of it and return it. The other man responds with unwarranted “bravado” since “he should be more than happy & satisfied with getting his hat back.” At the point of which the other man attempts threats for extortion of money Geppetto says that his “pride and ego” took over and he decides to fight. Since Geppetto uses both the terms “humble” and “pride” about himself, it should be noted that while pride is generally associated with self-esteem, humility does not necessarily mean self-abasement, but can be a non-defensive willingness to see the self accurately (Zell 2007: 3), or in this case, to see the situation accurately – it is just a hat. The other man’s “bravado” and escalation of the situation positions him as irrational while Geppetto seems level-headed and reasonable, although certainly not willing to take on the role of a victim – which then *would* be self-abasement – or becoming “easy prey.” Geppetto has shown exactly the right balance in his self-assessment while the other man overvalues himself.

Third, these are black men and Geppetto positions them on a scale according to their behavior. The man who gave him the hat was a “brother.” The man who wants the hat back is addressing Geppetto “as a gangsta,” except that his “words and phrases are all

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<sup>41</sup> According to a current catalog that sells baseball hats to Wisconsin prisons, the most expensive hat would cost \$4.20. I am not sure why the other man would be asking \$16 or \$17, except to try to gain more status from the interaction.

rehearsed” which proves that he is not a real gangsta, but is putting on an act.

Geppetto, on the other hand, knows what a gangsta is because he used to be one in his youth, although he has come to the conclusion that the “lifestyle” got him into trouble.

Geppetto, like other men in this study, accepts that there is a specific moral code of beliefs and behaviors to being a gangsta and this man does not fall into that category because “his demeanor is soft as baby shit.” This proves that he is an imposter and a fraud. While this is humorous (“comical”), it is also dangerous because Geppetto must maintain his own reputation whenever it is threatened by anyone because any loss of face would make him vulnerable (“easy prey”) to even more challenges. Geppetto is (or was once) a genuine gangsta and the challenger is a wannabe.

The issue of respect has been widely covered in the literature on African American street life, but one question that remains contested and open is whether imprisonment itself adds to or subtracts from the amount of respect accrued to black street men by those who are part of their own subculture. Since the mid-1990s, a great deal has been written about the idea that incarceration has become a “rite of passage” into manhood in the inner cities of America. According to Whitehead (in May and Pitts 2000: 84-86), incarceration has become incorporated into the “cultural legends” that inner city African Americans use for interpreting the entire history of race relations in America. He compares this idea to his research on the buccra massa (buck the master) complex in the West Indies in which slaves were admired by their peers for taking the risk of being defiant to planters. Currently this has evolved into creating a situation in which members of the lower-class (little people) are respected for being bold and

insubordinate to the upper classes. In the contemporary urban context in the United States, this same mythology is attached to returning from prison, as defiant as ever, having “taken the white man’s best shot” (86). Whitehead writes, “Cultural legends consist of beliefs and stories that are passed down from generation to generation, providing lessons of survival, strength, and the nature of the world around us. Children also enculturate these lessons by modeling others, both within and outside their communities, whom they see or hear acting out aspects of the legends.”

This character portrayal is very similar to Bryant’s description of the “bad nigger” archetype “whose lineage goes back well into slavery and continues today in the imagery of the ‘gangsta’ rapper” (2003: 4-5). Bryant traces the use of the badman through ballads of the nineteenth century, toasts of the early twentieth century, the Harlem Renaissance, and continuing up through contemporary African American verbal, musical, and visual art. He is “one of the central mythic elements in the African American experience” ... and “is nearly as prevalent as the trickster and in many cases shares features with that universal being” (2003: 4-5). As mentioned above, the power of the archetype is to be insubordinate to people in power – to demonstrate that their power is not recognized as legitimate.

This bad man character complex is no doubt true and can easily be accessed through examining the lyrics of rap songs (or looking at the photographs on compact disc covers), watching music videos or gangsta movies, reading urban novels or paging through popular music magazines. Yet, not all anthropologists agree that the *bad* black hero is universally admired and put on a pedestal in low-income black communities for

his valiant defiance of middle-class cultural models. Braman, who did his ethnography in Washington D. C., which has one of the highest rates of African American incarceration in the country, disagrees that incarceration has been reversed from a stigmatizing experience for African American males to one of inverted racial pride and defiance.

Over the last five to ten years, legal scholars and policy analysts have rediscovered social science and, more specifically social norms. It is a rediscovery that has had significant impact on discussions about criminal law in general and about shame and criminal sanctions in particular. Politicians, academics, and prominent critics on TV and radio shows have discussed how we must restore the criminal justice system's ability to stigmatize and induce shame. Because many perceive contemporary urban culture as outside or resistant to the moral system of social norms they would like to promote, these discussions have gained considerable traction (2007: 166).

Braman instead found that, despite the fact that over half of the black men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five in the District of Columbia were under some form of correctional supervision, the prisoners' families (particularly their adult female relatives and their young children) were deeply distressed and ashamed by the incarcerations of their sons, grandsons, brothers, husbands, boyfriends and fathers. They hid the fact of the incarcerations from co-workers, fellow church members, other children at school, and even extended family members. Frequently they isolated themselves socially rather than face the embarrassment of explaining the whereabouts of and circumstances behind the missing family members. Braman asks the question, "If incarceration in the District and other urban areas is the statistical norm, why isn't it socially normative as well?" (165).

While the criminal justice system attempts to consider offenders in isolation from their families and social connections, this is completely unreasonable and unrealistic.



Even if the men have internalized the “bad nigger” archetype as part of their conceptions of themselves as males, they also have to experience and express their affectionate bonds to their families and communities, and this cannot be done with posturing, bravado, fists, and guns. If the people who care most about them – and who they care most about - are suffering from many forms of distress related to the offender’s incarceration, this is part of a feedback loop of anguish that passes back and forth between the offender and his social connections. This is another application of Du Bois’ “double consciousness.” Not only do African American street men have an awareness of how they are viewed by the white middle-class world and, quite differently, how they view themselves, they also have an awareness of how their own families and communities view them, compared to how they view themselves. These equally true layers of meaning can also be compared to Cohen’s ideas about how humans can be in denial to both be aware of something and not be aware of it at the same time- especially when the issue is painful. As was quoted above:

These illusions do not necessarily negate known facts (literal denial), but they manifestly slant these facts (interpretive denial) to enhance self-esteem and confirm our map of the world. Paradoxically, these positive misinterpretations (poor information processing) are adaptive, especially under adversity. Far from indicating mental illness, these modes of ‘being out of touch with reality’ are necessary for healthy functioning (2001: 49).

So, in the case of African American offender narrative, the men are telling stories about themselves as being hard and oppositional to construct and maintain their masculinity in the face of both racism from wider society and before other males in their own subculture – which is an absolutely necessary aspect of their self-concept. On the other hand, however, they also obtain a great deal of their selfhood from (mostly) non-

violent and benevolent relationships with friends and relatives. The fact that these two aspects of their identity may contradict each other does not mean that the men are necessarily duplicitous, but that both perspectives are equally valid and equally able to exist within the same person at the same time. The next part of this study will explore the importance of close relationships for the selfhood of the prisoners and discuss how the criminal justice system has warped and interfered with the normal forms of relationships – and the effect this has had on not only the offenders, but on the communities from which they have come.

## Attachment and the Vulnerable Self

### **Introduction: Offenders and Their Communities**

When people tell their life stories, they are the main characters, but few stories can exist without supporting characters. People come into the world as part of a family which is embedded in a neighborhood which is then embedded within larger social units such as cities or countries. Humans are social beings and no person can really talk about themselves without including others in most of their stories. In considering offender narrative, there are several categories of persons who enter the stories, but one of the most meaningful are those with whom the offender shares enduring attachments. One of the most basic ways that people define themselves is through kin and fictive-kin relationships, and through friendships, or who we are in connection with others. In fact, a fundamental building block of society is when individuals establish and sustain trusting bonds that endure through both good and bad times.

Despite this, the criminal justice system does everything possible to consider the offender in complete isolation from any of his social ties. Imprisonment has a devastating effect on relationships with close companions, and the shrinking of their social worlds constricts the self-concepts of the prisoners and the stories they can then tell. The prison system as it exists in the United States today is designed to reduce dialogue between itself and the rest of society, (thereby diminishing criticism of its practices and principles), as well as to reduce dialogue between prisoners and the outside world. In reviewing the history of punishment in Western societies, Foucault describes going from a “representative, scenic, signifying, public, collective model” (such

as torture as a civic spectacle, public hangings, the pillory, and work gangs) to the “coercive, corporal, solitary, secret model” of imprisonment out of sight from the eyes of the community (1995: 131). The contemporary endeavor of the penal complex is to separate itself, and anyone confined within it, from association with the public outside.

Prison is based on mathematical principles that reduce human behavior (the offense) to something that can be measured as causing a specific amount of harm followed by a corresponding amount of time-based punishment. This system removes the human element, the story and its flesh and blood reality, from the consideration in favor of simply quantifying complex reality ostensibly in the name of fairness.

This ‘self evident’ character of the prison, which we find so difficult to abandon, is based first of all on the simple form of ‘deprivation of liberty.’ How could prison not be a penalty *par excellence* in a society in which liberty is a good that belongs to all in the same way and to which each individual is attached, as DuPort put it, by a ‘universal and constant’ feeling? Its loss has therefore the same value for all; unlike the fine, it is an ‘egalitarian’ punishment. The prison is the clearest, simplest, most equitable of penalties. Moreover, it makes possible to quantify the penalty exactly according to the variable of time. There is a wages-form of imprisonment that constitutes, in industrial societies, its economic ‘self evidence’ – and enables it to appear as a reparation. By levying on the time of the prisoner, the prison seems to express in concrete terms the idea that the offense has injured, beyond the victim, society as a whole. There is an economico-moral self-evidence of a penalty that metes out punishment in days, months and years and draws up quantitative equivalences between offences and durations. Hence the expression, so frequently heard, so consistent with the functioning of punishments, though contrary to the strict theory of penal law, that one is in prison in order to ‘pay ones debt.’ The prison is ‘natural,’ just as the use of time to measure exchanges is ‘natural’ in our society. (Foucault 1975: 232-233).

The idea behind imprisonment of offenders, as Foucault has correctly explained, is that “the offense has injured, beyond the victim, society as a whole.” On the other hand, recent research has demonstrated that imprisonment of African American offenders from low-income neighborhoods *punishes* not only the offender, but his family, his

friends, and even his entire neighborhood, which is at least a part of “society as a whole.”

Foucault’s “deprivation of liberty” is theoretically just the loss of freedom or the inability to do ordinary things that free people take for granted. This comes with other, perhaps unintended punishments, such as health issues from the diseases that spread in overcrowded conditions, inadequate food, lack of fresh air, and the perpetual light and sound that make sleeping difficult. The worst punishments, however, are those associated with the prisoners’ interactions with other people. Some of these are added such as forced association with disliked inmates and forced subordination to correctional officers which is actually a series of status degradation ceremonies such as nudity in front of guards, body cavity searches, handcuffs, leg chains, and arbitrary loss of or restrictions on property that poses no danger to the inmate or others (such as family photographs). On the other hand, some important aspects of relationships are subtracted such as severely restricting voluntary associations with friends and family, particularly when, where, and how the prisoners can see, speak to or physically touch those they care about. This change in the character or even loss of caring relationships spreads the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes 1958) to people who have not committed any crime. Not only does incarceration cause pain to the prisoner, but it also deeply affects many people *outside* of the prison as well.

Those family and kinship ties that have helped define the identity and sense of self of these people, and have served as a source of social support, have abruptly ended with an inmate’s incarceration. While through visitation, correspondence, and phone calls, the inmate and his family can maintain contact, it is those relationships that bind us together in a cyclical pattern of both support and dependency that, in a very real sense, ends during a period of incarceration. The inmate is isolated and separated from his parents, siblings, grandparents, and significant other. While theoretically reserved for the most serious offenders, imprisonment in our nation’s

jails and prisons drives a wedge between inmates and their kinship web. By denying the various liberties of the inmate, our correctional system also deprives a parent of a child, a sibling of a sibling, a grandparent of a grandchild, a child of a parent and a partner of a mate..." (Browning, Miller, and Spruance 2001: 87-88).

Just as Bucholtz and Hall referred to "identity as a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction" (2005: 585-586), this quotation refers to "the identity and sense of self" that comes from "relationships that bind us together in a cyclical pattern of both support and dependency." A large aspect of human selfhood comes into being through contact with meaningful others – and going to prison breaks down that contact, not only for the prisoner, but for his whole social network.

Recent criminal justice studies (Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, and Zack 2001; Balthazar and King 2001) have shown the cost to those on the outside, in both finances and time, of attempting to maintain some semblance of those prior connections. Incarceration causes an important shift in those relationships because almost all sense of reciprocity has been destroyed. Anything the inmate had been providing to his family and friends in terms of assistance has ended. (Examples include physical protection, financial support, child care, home maintenance, and transportation). After an incarceration, the burdens of effort, time, and money are all shifted toward the persons on the outside who are called upon to supply financial support in terms of canteen money (for in-prison medical care, hygiene supplies, clothing, supplemental food, and stamps), payment for collect telephone calls, and transportation to the prison if visiting is to occur. Studies have consistently shown that family members, especially prisoners' children, mothers, wives and girlfriends, feel as though the entire family is being

punished – not just the inmate (Morris 1965, Fishman 1981, and Dallao, 1997, cited in Miller, Browning, & Spruance 2001).

The deep underlying reason for this distress related to the loss of reciprocity is the fact that “as Marcel Mauss and so many others have since pointed out, our identities and relationships are intermingled with the exchanges we have with one another” (Braman 2007: 94). Anthropologists have demonstrated that all around the world, across cultural and class differences, the bonds of reciprocal exchange are a basic building block of society (Mauss 1923, Gouldner 1960, Graeber 2001; cited in Braman 2007). People see reciprocity as a fundamental moral behavior. In fact, in examining the above quote from Foucault, the notion that imprisonment “pays one’s debt” to society and that the amount of time sentenced is an economic trade to balance the severity of the offense is a concept related to exchange and reciprocity. It is an attempt to equalize the two sides of an equation. This is why the idea seems “natural,” as Foucault put it.

Yet, while the prisoner is “paying his debt” to society, he is being prevented from paying his debts to his supporters and participating in the bonds of exchange in his individual social circle. Prison shifts all the economic obligations to the prisoner’s family and friends and makes it impossible for him to pay them back. This creates guilt on the part of the prisoner and, subsequently, resentment and frustration on the part of the people who feel obligated to sustain him. While some of their anger is directed toward the system itself – which punishes the family as much as the offender – some of the



resentment is directed toward the prisoner and this breaks down the intimate social bonds between people who were once close.

Each of the prisoners in my sample suffered greatly from the inability to interact with family and friends. All of them felt abandoned by certain people and were desperately lonely. Some also felt as though they were urgently needed by people on the outside which caused a great deal of distress to the prisoners. All of the possible forms of contact between prisoners and those on the outside are circumscribed in some way that makes communication difficult. Visiting can be complicated because many convicted prisoners are sent far away from the cities where their family and friends live. In Wisconsin and Illinois, where all of my consultants resided, most of the African American prisoners come from Chicago, Milwaukee, or the cities in between (Racine and Kenosha). Almost all prisons are located in small towns or semi-rural areas where they are used as sources of jobs for Caucasians now that well-paying factory jobs have mostly been out-sourced to other countries. Small towns compete to have prisons built nearby because prison jobs are relatively well-paying government employment, and politicians comply, disregarding the difficulties that the families of prisoners have in trying to get to distant places for visits that are often significantly shorter than their travel time.

For the prison visitor, a visit can mean time off work and transportation costs which can be especially problematic since many low-income people do not have cars, or have old cars that frequently do not work well. In addition, visitors to Wisconsin state prisons must fill out forms that ask personal questions which are then followed by criminal background checks, so friends and relatives with criminal records or even minor

warrants for tickets do not fill out the forms because they know they will be denied visiting privileges. County jails do not require pre-filled visiting forms, but persons with warrants can be arrested when showing their identification while attempting to visit prisoners (and I have seen that happen). Landline telephone calls can be made from inside jails and prisons under most circumstances, but they are made collect to the recipient and can be prohibitive in cost. Charges for calls can vary greatly from institution to institution. (I have paid anywhere from \$2 to over \$30 for a fifteen-minute call from Wisconsin institutions.). Telephone calls are short, and automatically disconnect after exactly fifteen minutes, which can be a problem if the prisoner wants to speak to several people in a household. Finally, prison phone calls are monitored and recorded which means that there is no such thing as a private conversation.

The cheapest form of communication with family and friends is the letter, except that prisoners are usually expected to buy their own stamped envelopes and many have no funds to purchase anything. Some institutions give the prisoner one envelope per week without charge. Incoming letters are usually slit open in front of the prisoner, examined to determine that nothing prohibited is being sent<sup>42</sup>, and then given to the prisoner. Incoming and outgoing letters also can be read, and that is standard practice at Wisconsin's super maximum security prison (the SuperMax). Many institutions allow the prisoner to have a limited number of letters and photographs in their cells, so they

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<sup>42</sup> The only things that can be directly sent are letters and photographs. I tried sending newspaper clippings and they were seized as "contraband." It is possible to send books from bookstores or from the Internet, and to buy a few things like clothing, televisions, fans or stamped envelopes from a few authorized companies that ship into the prison system. The televisions and radios are made from clear plastic so that nothing can be hid inside.

have to mail some back or discard some when new ones come in. Prisoners all enjoy receiving mail, but many receive letters very infrequently or not at all. Low literacy levels, both of senders, and recipients, contribute to this as well as the fact that our society has simply lost the tradition of mailing hand-written letters with the current preponderance of telephone calls, text messages, and email usage. Wisconsin prisoners, however, cannot use cell phones or the Internet.

The financial and emotional costs to prisoners' families cannot be overstated. People who have studied the families of offenders have demonstrated that the loss of the prisoner's domestic labor and financial assistance (either through work or crime) puts a tremendous burden on families which cannot be ameliorated. But the subsequent outlay of increasingly scarce cash to pay for the prisoner's food, clothing, medical care, televisions, collect telephone calls, and visiting expenses result in substantial financial hardship to low-income households (mostly women) who feel obligated to honor the bonds of family to help their sons, grandsons, brothers, husbands, or boyfriends. The two possible consequences that result from these costs are that the women do not pay essential bills, rent, mortgages, or to acquire necessary things for the prisoners' young children. This creates extreme stress at home. The other possible consequence is that the women can cut off ties to the prisoner because they simply cannot afford to prioritize his needs over that of other family members (Morris 1965, Fishman 1981, and Dallao 1997 cited in Miller, Browning, and Spruance 2001; Braman 2007; Clear 2007; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002).

Furthermore, considering the tremendous racial and economic segregation of low-income African Americans, and the fact that extremely high percentages of working age males are sent to prison from the same geographic areas at the same time, the financial and emotional stress on significant numbers of families in one place actually breaks down the propensity of inner city environments to function as real neighborhoods and this creates even more crime. Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory (1932 cited in Clear 2007) postulated that poverty and ethnic heterogeneity had the potential to create new (criminal) norms in socially isolated enclaves, and that high mobility meant that people feel less attached to their neighbors. Clear added to this theory the fact that movement of massive amounts of males to (and from) prisons creates a form of "coercive mobility" that destabilizes places with men (and increasingly women) constantly coming and going from the area. In addition, financial hardship due to prison-related costs can force people to move to less expensive dwellings, and often relocates children in different households which disrupts their schooling as well. Furthermore, Braman found that people emotionally withdraw from potential relationships at work, at church, and at school because they are reluctant to discuss family members who are in prison (2007). These issues reduce the social networks that usually form in neighborhoods and workplaces which could be resources that help people either through direct favors or information exchange. The reduced sense of trust and obligation in social networks make it difficult for families of prisoners, and ex-prisoners themselves, to create cohesive neighborhoods in which people look out for each other. The term for this is collective efficacy which "is the capacity of a group of

people who live in the same vicinity to come together to solve problems or otherwise take action that affects their collective circumstances” (Clear 2007: 82). Without collective efficacy, inner city regions are not communities in the best sense of the term, but become places of fear and distrust which at the worst create predatory behavior, and make it possible, even for good people, to look the other way and not get involved when dangerous behavior threatens others (Miller 2008).

Furthermore, another way that the reduction in social bonds between prisoners and families affects the crime rate in communities is through the prisoners’ subsequent behavior. Studies have shown that having contact with, and support from, loved ones outside the prison cuts down on the amount of disciplinary infractions committed by prisoners during the time of their imprisonment (Bennett 1987 cited in Clark 2001) and, subsequently, reduces recidivism:

Holt and Miller (1972) found that those who consistently received visits from relatives tended to have a more favorable parole outcomes. Prisoners with no visitors during their time of incarceration were six times more likely to violate their parole and return to prison during their first year of parole. This is a finding that has been repeated throughout the research (Adams and Fisher, 1976; Holt and Miller, 1972; Hostetter and Jinnah, 1993; Howser and McDonald, 1972; Leclair, 1978) (Browning, Miller, and Spruance 2001).

Prisoners who cause more trouble inside a prison, and who commit new crimes or significant parole violations after release, are those who impose the most costs on the public, both in terms of finances and in pain and suffering, since many crimes have victims. Many aspects of the current form of the prison as punishment for all offenses are actually punishing other members of society, including the family of the victim, and possibly creating new victims by making the punishment so severe as to affect the

prisoner's psychological state so that when he is released he commits even more crimes (Gilligan 1996).

While some promising alternatives to incarceration, such as restorative justice, have been written about and successfully tried in some places, the default punishment is always to lock the offender up behind bars and make it difficult for him to have contact with persons on the outside. It is questionable whether incapacitation (incarceration as a form of protection for the public from the offender) is necessary for nonviolent criminals, who are the majority of all offenders. To reiterate: while the offense may have been originally conceptualized by the legal system as injuring society as a whole, the *punishment* sometimes also has repercussions that can injure society as a whole because the prisoner does not exist in isolation, but is part of increasingly larger circles of persons from family and friends, to neighborhoods, to concentric regions of impact since criminal victimization will affect the families and friends of the person being victimized. The social acceptance of increasingly harsh punishments for significant percentages of males coming from low-income African American districts is part of a feedback loop that increases criminal behavior in those neighborhoods and has repercussions that may not be immediately obvious but which are, nevertheless, real. The courtroom story of the offender as an individual deviant - or monster in the mythic sense - who transgresses against an entire society by breaking a law, and then is punished by a representative of the blameless collective, is an illusion. John Donne's great poetic statement that "no man is an island" is perfectly appropriate to explain the fallacy of the criminal justice system's current policies toward low-income African

American males. Without something like restorative justice (which is based on the theory that crime is an offense against an individual or a *community*, instead of the state) and its attempt to integrate the offender back into the collective through apologies, restitution, and community service, the logical conclusion of the present policy of isolating the offender is creating more community breakdown and which subsequently leads to more crime in a downward spiral of falling dominoes.

### **Offenders claim to be *Devoted to Family***

Since all people begin life as children, everyone has a set of stories about his or her childhood, and most of those stories will reflect the dynamics and shared meaning-making of the families in which the person was raised. Even though people are individuals they have a common history with those who have shared their experiences and, in childhood, helped them interpret events that they have lived through together. “Because personal narratives move beyond simple memory of what happened, to include evaluations and perspectives on self and others, narratives are the way through which we create meaning of our personal and shared past and are linked to understanding of self as an individual and in relation to others” (Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, and Duke 2006: 40). To understand the stories told by African American prisoners, it is important to consider how their families of origin constructed narratives of their shared history. According to Hagedorn’s (1998) study of Milwaukee gangs,

While gangs are often thought of as replacing family ties, the deteriorating economic conditions seemed to make family values quite important to the founders. Asked what about their family they were most proud, half answered ‘how the family sticks together.’ Though in their early twenties, many of the gang founders still lived at home with their parent(s) on an irregular basis.

Half of the male founders reported that they had already fathered children, but none were married and very few living with the mother of their children (117).

Anthropologists have traditionally focused on kinship studies as an important area of research, so an examination of kinship patterns for low-income African Americans has important ramifications for understanding cultural behavior related to crime as a social phenomenon.

Understanding kinship classification systems is not just an interesting anthropological game. Kinship classification is one of the important regulators of behavior in most societies, outlining each person's rights and obligations and specifying the ways in which a person must act toward others and they toward him or her. Kinship classification systems are also related to other aspects of culture: the types of social groups that are formed, the systems of marriage and inheritance, and even deeper and broader cultural values. (Nanda and Warms 2004: 222)

Kinship studies show three kinds of relationships: those that come from "blood" or genetic ties, those that are contracted by marriage, and those that are "fictive" in which unrelated individuals are regarded and treated as relatives. The concept of fictive kinship frequently comes up in reference to gangs, but it is also very important when discussing other aspects of the unique history of African American life

The expansion of kin networks to incorporate friends into family is not new to African Americans. Since enslavement, African Americans, out of necessity and by choice have constructed family broadly with more flexible, inclusive boundaries than the traditional nuclear or even extended family. Networks of kin, some related by blood, or marriage, some 'fictive,' were extended to mobilize and maximize the limited material resources and social power of the individual members. (Ferguson 2001: 120-121).

While this has been true historically, contemporary networks have been documented to be shrinking:

One of the great puzzles of recent studies of urban life has been the attenuation of extended open-ended networks of exchange over the last three decades, particularly in poor and minority urban communities. Regular and significant social exchange was widely documented among the urban poor in the 1960s and 1970s but with far less regularity during the 1980s and 1990s. One recent national study found that, by the late 1990s, these networks of friends and family were far



less extensive among low-income, urban, and minority families than had previously been observed. (Braman 2007: 161)

Each of the prisoners in my sample told stories about growing up in their families and compared those stories to their beliefs about what should be normal in a family. Those ideas about what “should” exist or what “should” happen were comparisons between cultural models and reality. One of the most significant aspects of assessing their own families was actually defining the term “family” itself, and placing within its boundaries those who belonged in the category. One of the most central images of family that came into their stories was the fact that every prisoner had the idea that nuclear families<sup>43</sup> are proper families, although none of their own families actually fit that model. In addition, each of the prisoners had ideas about cohesiveness and emotional support that were seldom realized in the forms they wished for or expected.

When we were discussing reasons why people commit crimes, Fanatic told me that black men commit crimes because they are poor. During the process of talking about poverty, I mentioned to Fanatic that I grew up in a rural area and my parents did not have very much money either. He replied:

I didn't mean to offend you or imply that your poverty is different from mine. But your environment is contrasted to mine, like black is to white (no pun intended). In spite of your poverty you still had an intact family i.e. mother, father living under the same roof.

So for me growing up with no father in this society and my examples (at least the ones I could see) for making money and being successful were rappers and drug dealers. Being without that father figure I turned to the streets, and after my subsequent incarcerations I see now that making money or being successful can be done without being a street thug.

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<sup>43</sup> I am defining nuclear family here as married parents who still live together and have children only with each other.

As quoted above, he had written in a previous letter:

But anyway I have six sisters and one brother, all of us have different fathers. The crazy thing is sometimes I feel like an outsider. I never met my dad he stop coming around before I was born so all I had was my mother in my life. But when I was 14 my mom kicked me out because I went to jail. I had no one to turn to and nowhere to go.

In his letters the family story that Fanatic is telling involves events, and interpretations of those events, which compare real behavior to ideal standards he has internalized as cultural models. He refers to a mother and father living under the same roof as an “intact family.” Intact means complete or together or whole, so the opposite would be incomplete, apart, or broken. This idea is reinforced by saying “all I had was my mother” which also implies that something is missing. By saying “growing up with no father,” and commenting on how each of his mother’s eight children had different fathers, Fanatic is assuming that nuclear families are the standard family form because he feels compelled to comment on how his family does not fit into that pattern. Fanatic attributes his choice to sell drugs directly to his lack of paternal role model, and his belief that other black men with money (rappers and drug dealers) were then the successful models of manhood he should follow. In this instance, Fanatic is blaming his behavior on situational factors and minimizing the amount of agency he accepts for his choice to become a drug dealer. His father was missing and there seemed to be no acceptable substitute, so Fanatic is saying that since he had no control over his family’s circumstances, then he had no control over the choices he subsequently made as a result of those circumstances.

Another complicated domestic arrangement was that of Plato who came from a family in which his mother (Amethyst) had thirteen children with nine different fathers. After giving birth to her first five children, she legally married Plato's father (Big Poppa) and had four children with him (one of whom died as baby), then she had four more children with four more different men – even though she was still legally married to Big Poppa. From what I understand, Big Poppa has children from other women who live in Chicago, although Plato's full brother (Slam Dunk) said that he has never met them. Big Poppa has been in and out of the criminal justice system on various charges his entire adult life and is on the sex offender registry. Amethyst told me that she left Big Poppa because he cheated on her.

Amethyst's youngest child is a six-year-old girl that Plato has never seen due to being incarcerated before she was born. When I mentioned his baby sister, he wrote:

I love all my brothers and sisters a lot, but I love my daddies children more you dig. My dad married my mom he's her husband the other dudes are all boyfriends.

On other occasions he wrote:

I told you how shit goes with love in the hood, it's what you choose to except. ... My mom knows a lot about relationships she's had every kind you can imagine.

I must tell you that life is short in the ghetto or just remind you. So, relationships lasting more than 4 months is consider long-term. I think you might have notice that for a relationship lasting longer than a few months is uncommon in the ghetto or inner cities of this country. I'm not proud or ashamed of our bed jumping ways, but that's the way it is!

My moma and pops's are still married, but black people have some unspoken law of sex and breaking up half way. My mom has like 4 kids from other man while she's still married to my dad, but it dosen't seem out of place in the ghetto!

Plato, more than any of my other consultants, seemed to have the most cynical view of conjugal relationships and the possibility of a long-term bond between a man and a woman. While he describes his parents' legal marriage and his two living full siblings as

having primacy over his half-siblings and his various stepfathers who have come and gone, he simultaneously cites an “unspoken law” which indicates his belief that his parents’ situation is just a common subcultural practice. Being neither proud or “ashame” of the promiscuity that he shares with his parents, and the rest of what he perceives as his culture (using both the terms “black people” and “ghetto”), indicates that he refuses to make a value judgment on what he sees as a widespread phenomena.

In addition, Plato gett very few letters or money orders from family members, which he rationalizes in different ways, such as the fact that his family has many difficulties, or that he is an independent person who does not need that much support anyway.

It’s not uncommon to think my family would be supportive, but I know what I want from them and it’s money, anything else is undesirable. I know the question of happiness us the absolute confrontation of reality. Where they are there is no happiness, just unwanted problems and broken promises of loyalty.

In another letter he wrote, “My people ceck in and out when they want to, but its always good to do your own thing while in prison.”

Probably the most erratic family story is that of Capo who was the fourth child of a mother who became addicted to crack. As a baby Capo went to live with his mother’s sister and her children. Each of his older siblings went to live in separate households with their paternal relatives since they all had different fathers. At some point during his childhood his mother got off crack and wanted to reunite with her children, but subsequently found out that she had AIDS, and then relapsed into drug addiction. She died when Capo was eighteen. Capo never knew his father. When Capo was arrested the last time, he had been seeing a woman who told him that she was pregnant with his

child (which later turned out to be a lie). While he still believed that she was pregnant, he wrote to me:

I got to come down not for me but for this baby cuz he going to need a daddy in his life. I am not going to be like my dad but in order to do that I got to stop coming to jail.

The implication here is that since the baby will “need a daddy,” then Capo himself needed a daddy at one point, but did not have one.

Before the shooting Capo wrote to me from prison:

Me I hurt cause I know I could do way better than this. U know what my own family told me I am going to be a feller, so far I guess there right for now. But one day I’m going to be a person that everybody looks up to. Tell them I am going to put 100% in everything I do. I made a lot of foolish mistakes but I am going to look at all the stuff I did in the past and every time I think about going back to my old self I will remember this place.

Although he did not say who in his family told him that he was going to be a failure (which is what he means by “feller”), it was a prediction he did not forget. In addition, he suggests that he had an old self which may have been a failure, but (by implication) he now has a new self which is not.

Man O’War grew up in another type of unstable situation. He has a black mother, a Vietnamese father, and one sister. His parents are no longer together, and several times he described his father as asking him for some of the money he earned selling drugs. When he himself needed help he said about his father, “But with dude it’s a 70/30 chance he won’t do anything.” He also described his mother as not being very supportive (except in caring for his oldest son<sup>44</sup>) and also appropriating his drug money:

I received a letter or a card for my birthday from 4 people. U, my roommate, my girl & her family, and a girl I haven’t heard from in months. No letter card nothing from my mom or my family. When my mom B-Day came I was up here I made a card and send some money 2 her. It

<sup>44</sup> At the time he wrote this letter, he only had one child

took a lot to just get that approved. They had me fill out a disbursement sheet and it took 2 weeks to get it approved. So I worked hard 2 do something 2 not even receive a letter saying Happy Birthday. My girl ma signed a card.

My mom is weird she doesn't support me in any way while out or in jail. She does 4 my son a lot that's why I respect her. My family doesn't like the things she does. She accepts my money ask 4 my financial help but when I need support I can't go 2 her. When it's problem and her or my aunts want someone to back em up or fight intimidate someone I get called cuz I'm STREET. I do wat need 2 be done illegal or not. I do anything 4 family.

I told my mom she did the best she can. I love her 2 death. She sacrificed so much she didn't use to eat all the time cuz we didn't have enough. She made sure we would eat so she wouldn't eat. She tried to make sure we had. That's the only reason I give her the upmost respect.

Parents accepting drug money is described by Anderson (as noted above), but he only discussed mothers. Man O' War's financial support of his father is unusual, although his father is not African American. Man O' War, like Fanatic, felt that his mother did not express enough appreciation for the fact that he put himself in danger of both physical injury and arrest to protect and support her.

One of the soft spots in Man O' War's heart was for his sister and he was dedicated to their family bond. Despite the fact that he and his sister loved each other, and he tried to help her, there were conflicts.

Yeah it's crazy how people are around when times are good, but disappear when things get hard. I receive a letter from my sis, and she was telling me about how her husband just might loose his job because of the company relocating and she can't work a lot because of pregnancy. So I feel bad I'm not able 2 help her. That's my heart no matter wat. She and her husband jumped me when they stayed wit me in "05" and "06" It was in "06" Me and my sis got into an argument and he tried to push me. So I slammed him and hit him. My sister picked a top 2 our glass coffee table up and hit me, and bit me on my back. & tried 2 call the police, but I left and I said fuck it and came back talked 2 the police they asked me if I wanted 2 press charges cuz the bite mark on my back. I said no. but was hurt. My sis jump me and called the police. But that's still my heart.

Like most prisoners, Man O' War felt that blood was thicker than water and family conflicts had to be worked through to maintain the family. He was delighted when his mother, sister, and nephew came to visit him.

I'm gone switch up from that. I haven't seen my nephew in 19 months. He's 20 months. He is mean, fat, and so so cute. I love him even though he won't let me keep him.<sup>45</sup> They told me he don't mess with nobody like that. He gave me five, a kiss, hug. So I'm happy.

Most of the prisoners I spoke to had very positive assessments of their mothers and described their parenting efforts as being nearly heroic. Geppetto never discussed his father, although he did mention two half-siblings on his "father's side." But he spoke glowingly of his mother:

Thank god for single mothers. My mom was a single mom and did a hell-of-a-job. You're a single mom right? Congrats!

As a child I was taught that family is the most important thing a person can have. More important than silver and gold, power & money, and any other monetary values one can think of. Cousins in my age group weren't cousins they were considered brothers or sisters. Birthdays were a family celebration. Entire family was there, and everyone brought something as a present, if they couldn't afford anything they brought food or cooked at the party.

There were friends of family that were considered family. Though there was a difference. Some were closer than others. The ones that were closer were called Auntie or Uncle and the ones that were "alright" were Mr. & Mrs.

... Since respect was a big thing in my family. Being polite and courteous was a big part of respect. To show the outsiders that my mom ran a tight ship and we were good kids we (my brothers & I) were paraded around in the same outfits and attitudes to match.

There is a striking contrast between this description of his well-behaved childhood and Geppetto's subsequent teenage behavior that sent him to prison. On the other hand, Geppetto is a male and his description of his mother, like that of other prisoners, is specifically gendered. He frequently described behavior that is appropriate for males and other behavior that is appropriate for females.

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<sup>45</sup> His nephew would not sit on Man O' War's lap during the prison visit.

A good woman to me is a woman who takes care of herself in every aspect of her life. Takes care of her kids if she has them. And devotes herself whole heartedly to her man.

That's a sign of a "good woman," if she has her priorities in order.

On the other hand, according to Geppetto, males should take on a role of protector and provider for their female relatives and younger siblings. (This is similar to what Man O' War did when he fought for his mother and aunts, and paid their bills, or as Fanatic did when he paid his mother's bills.) In another letter Geppetto wrote about how he considered himself to be a man who was responsible for his family:

I don't know if I mentioned it before but one of my little brothers got shot in the neck. He is or was also charged with attempted homicide charges. I don't know if he still is or what but I wrote to the county jail and never heard back from him. Actually, the letter came back "return to sender." I wrote his mothers house and still no reply there either. It has put some chinks in my armor but still I must rise.

I'm the oldest and have always had tremendous responsibility. So I'm hard on myself when loved ones make bad decisions. Because I feel that I should have been there to stop them from making bad choices and shelter them from the harshness of this cruel world.

In another letter he wrote:

I'm stress now, like I am usually for things I can't control. I was raised very family oriented and to see my family going through trials and tribulations and not being able to assist really weighs down on me. Even though they're not there for me, I'm still overwhelmed with grief to hear that they're in shitty situations.

Not only do I have one cousin who's my favorite and like my twin brother who is getting shot at and his house along with family getting shot up several times in a matter of days.

Another cousin on my father's side has been out of prison for 1-2 years and has just got locked up for drugs and pistols. His mother is an addict and is now locked up too in the raid. Neither of them have done anything mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually or financially for me. But I still care tremendously for their well being.

While incarcerated, (as also described by the other prisoners), Geppetto considered his natal kin network to be more of a source of stress than support. For all the prisoners, news from home was almost always bad news, especially in relationship to male friends and relatives who were frequently getting shot (sometimes fatally) or arrested.



The person in my sample whose family came the closest to a nuclear family was

Doctor See who wrote:

On [date] I was born to a loving mother [Lourdes Ramirez] and a loving father [Harvey Washington] Sr. I'm of mix culture African American (father) and Puerto Rican (mother). Although my parents have been separated since I was 9 years old I still had a positive upbringing. My dad has always been in my life and taught me right from wrong. He's never been to prison and worked hard all his life. Where did I go wrong? I went wrong by belittling myself to so call fit in with "friends." I've always been a scholar and a gentleman but blind to my father's advice. My mother never been to prison and supports me no matter the situation. She disagrees with some of the decisions I've made but she never leaves my side. Both parents write me and support me financially. My grandma on my dad's side is the one who answers my collect calls. The people on my mom's side are literally crazy! It's only a few of them who actually want to see me succeed. The aunt (mom's sister) I called my favorite called the cops on me which is why I'm on probation now. All of them seem to focus on bringing family down instead of being unified.

My brother is the twinkle of my eye. For him to witness all the foul things I've done and learn from my mistakes makes living worthwhile. There are all types of temptation where we live. He has prove to me that he is stronger than me, and many other tempted individuals. He shows his support for me by staying out of trouble and focusing on school. He'll be a senior this coming school year. I'm praying this new bill passes that releases non-violent offenders so I can make it to his graduation.

Here Doctor See uses situational attributions for his offenses, although they are not related to his family. He "belittle[ed] [him]self to so call fit in with 'friends'" and lived in an area with "all types of temptation." Doctor See blames his peer group, not his biological family, for his decision to sell drugs, although some members of his peer group actually were male relatives (cousins like Man O' War) around his own age. Yet, he also referred to some members of his crime crew network as his "family" in the (above cited) quotation in which he conflates "everyone I thought was my family" with "true friends":

I feel so lonely cause everyone I thought was my family and cared about me showed they really don't give a damn. As long as you're partying and making money they smile in your face and give you fake love. Once the partying ends and you're sitting in a cell, they can't take 15 minutes out of their day to send you a piece of mail. The other day I wrote [Man O' War] and my god brother letting them know how I feel. When I do get out the only people I'm going to look out for are the ones who've looked out for me. People tend to take my kindness for my weakness and I refuse

to be used. This current situation has been helpful and a learning experience about “TRUE FRIENDS.”

In addition, his comment referring to his aunt calling the police about him is somewhat ambiguous in this context because he seems to be expressing that he would have preferred that his aunt ignore his criminal behavior (thus demonstrating family solidarity), even though he is also trying to simultaneously express that his criminal behavior was a mistake. According to Milwaukee’s newspaper, Wisconsin has one of the most liberal “harboring felons” laws in the country (which means that relatives of offenders cannot be prosecuted for helping them after they commit a crime) and bills periodically come before the state legislature about changing the laws to exclude more relatives and situations, although they have not yet passed<sup>46</sup>. So it is unclear whether his aunt called the police because she thought that other family members might get into trouble for his behavior (such as having drugs in the house).

Doctor See, however, does have a fairly close relationship with both of his parents (who were cohabiting through his early childhood), so family structure is obviously not the only factor in offenders assessing their own risk for criminal behavior. Even so, he feels compelled to comment on the fact that his parents are no longer together which indicates that he is operating from the model of a unified nuclear family. Furthermore, despite his parents’ hard work, they are economically fragile which may have contributed to his decision to go after “fast money.”

We’re all having money problems. My dad was supposed to send me some money but his truck broke down on him. Now he has to buy a new vehicle so he can go back and forth to work. My mom just became unemployed so no cash from her either.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.jsonline.com/watchdog/watchdogreports/122993563.html>

None of my other primary consultants, and almost none of the African American prisoners I came to know on a more casual basis, came from a traditional nuclear family.

There is no doubt that each of the prisoners compared their families of origin to the cultural model of the nuclear family and tried to understand or analyze the household compositions of their natal families within that context. No one accepted the deviations from the model without question, or thought of their family situations as being optimal exactly the way they were. While they definitely loved the members of their families, they were also confused about why their family forms had so much instability.

According to Braman, "The pull of 'normal' family life is powerfully attractive. What surprised me in my interviews was the degree to which that dream, against all odds, remained intact among families of prisoners ... numerous studies tell us that those who live in poor and minority communities are firmly committed to marriage and family life but have low expectations of attaining what they hope for" (2007: 50-51). The prisoners I know were constantly making comparisons between the ideal cultural model of the nuclear (and extended) family and the realities of their own families. All of them were raised with a narrative about the importance of family cohesiveness, but who observed conflicts, divisions, and disillusionments. As Braman said, the offenders want to believe that the family is the basic building block both of society and of their own social worlds, but the tension between what they hoped for and what they observed and experienced was a constant source of confusion and anguish.

**Offenders claim to be *Confused by Mating Games with No Rules***

Dodge all the bullshit and play the game for what it's worth,  
and be aware that love can be a curse.

From a rap written by Man O' War

I've searched high and low for a good woman, but only found those who played games.

Geppetto

African American offenders, like everyone else, have two generations of family models to consider – the family they were born into as children, and the family or families they have either created or hope to create as adults with female partners. A great deal of research has been done on low-income African American families ever since the 1965 Moynihan Report (“The Negro Family: The Case For National Action”). Chief among its assertions was that “at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family.” In the nearly fifty years since the Moynihan Report was published, that variation in family form has snowballed. According to a recent Wall Street Journal article:

In recent decades there has been progress of course; the black middle class has grown substantially. But inter-generational poverty continues in many inner-city communities. As for out-of-wedlock births, the problem has worsened and widened. In 2008, the black out-of-wedlock birth rate stood at 72.3%, more than three times the rate when Mr. Moynihan compiled his report. The white out-of-wedlock birth rate in 2008 was 28.6%, higher than the 1965 rate for blacks that had so alarmed Mr. Moynihan. (Cannato 2010).

Romantic liaisons in inner cities have been addressed by a variety of scholars who frequently agree that “relations between the sexes, which were already antagonistic and mutually exploitive in the ghetto world of the 1960s, had by the 1980s lost all connections to conventional family values” (Massey and Denton 1993: 174). Wilson

discusses ethnographic data from the University of Chicago's Urban Poverty and Family Life Study that indicated that "the relationships between inner city black men and women, whether in a marital or nonmarital situation are often fractious and antagonistic" (1996: 98). Interactions between poverty-stricken black males and females often degenerate into distrust, anger, and mutual blame for lack of emotional, social, and financial support.

Some scholarship on male/female relationships in the ghetto describes the male worldview as misogynist and devaluing of anything regarded as feminine (Miller 2008: 135). The primary point of contact with females is the male pursuit of casual sex: "being a 'playa' (player) – using girls for sex and having multiple sexual conquests without emotional attachment – was described as a prominent model for male behavior that offered the potential for status and prestige within male peer groups" (Miller: 154). According to Anderson, "To the young man the woman becomes, in the most profound sense, a sexual object. Her body and mind are the object of a sexual game, to be won for his personal aggrandizement. Status goes to the winner and sex is prized as a testament not of love, but of control over another human being" (1999: 150). While Miller (who was examining violence toward African American girls in the Saint Louis ghetto), and Anderson both see this conduct (and correctly so) as being extremely painful when women experience it on the receiving end, the behaviors can also be conceptualized as coming from distressed places in the male psyche. According to hooks "Sex becomes the ultimate playing field, where the quest for freedom can be pursued in a world that denies black males access to other forms of liberating power"

(2004: 74). This type of sexual behavior, like the formation of gangs and the commission of street crimes, is another way that black urban males perform gender and assert that they are men.

In reality, many of their close personal associations are experienced by low-income black males as painful – even as they perpetuate the same life patterns that have caused their suffering. Almost all forms of ghetto relationships have aspects of approach-avoidance behavior – the men fear the closeness that they desire because other people might be “playing games” (a classic ghetto trope) and eventually hurt them, so they keep their distance and feel isolated. In the words of Capo, “It’s always the one who close to you that always hurt you so its time for me to worry about me, an me only, cuz it’s a every man an woman for they self world.”

hooks quotes Real, a therapist, about all males, and then explains the unique experience of black men:

“One frequently hears that men are frightened of intimacy. I don’t believe that is true. I think that many men don’t know what intimacy is. The one-up, one-down world of masculinity leaves little space for tenderness. One is either controlled or controlling, dominator or dominated. When men speak of fearing intimacy what they really mean is that they fear subjugation. In a visceral way, most men in our culture experience vulnerability as opening themselves up to be overrun.” Given the long history of enforced subordination that black males have endured as a consequence of racist exploitation and oppression, added to patriarchy’s equation of vulnerability with castration, the fear of being subjugated is intensified for black men (2004: 130)

Like hooks, other scholars conceptualize these male behaviors as defensive against the racism of wider society, but ultimately self-destructive. Majors and Billson (1992) write that for black men, “Keeping their guard up with white people make it next to impossible to let their guard down for people they care about and who care about them” (Majors and Billson 1992: 41).

For black women who wish to develop intimate relationships with black men who act and look cool, it is the cool pose that attracts them. Ultimately these cool behaviors may prevent couples from establishing strong, committed, and authentic relationships. The games and masks, the highly stylized expression of self that makes the cool male attractive, are the very same artifices that inhibit intimacy and genuine companionship” (Majors and Billson 1992: 43).

Scholars attribute the low rates of inner city marriage to two factors. First, this state of affairs has been exacerbated by the massive loss of manufacturing jobs that had originally brought black families north. Wilson makes the case that economic restructuring and loss of manufacturing jobs in northern cities are deeply interconnected with low rates of marriage in underprivileged black families:

The adverse effects of unemployment and other economic problems of family stability are well established in the literature. Studies of family life during the Great Depression document the deterioration of marriage and family life following unemployment.

... the increasing rates of joblessness among black men merits serious consideration as a major underlying factor in the rise of black single mother and female-headed households. Moreover, when the factor of joblessness is combined with high black-male mortality and incarceration rates, the proportion of black men in stable economic situations is even lower than that conveyed in the current unemployment and labor-force figures (1987: 82 -83).

Second, as mentioned above, it should be noted that many other scholars have also commented on how incarceration (and violent death) have skewed sex ratios toward dramatically higher numbers of women in ghetto areas which then lowers the incentive for men to commit to any one woman when they have so many potential choices. In addition, Braman cites research that shows that father absence increases the risk of early sexual activity for girls.

Authors of one recent longitudinal study found that father absence is ‘so fundamentally linked’ to teenage pregnancy that its effects are largely undiminished by such factors as whether girls were ‘rich or poor, black or white, ...cooperative or defiant in temperament, born to adult or teenage mothers, raised in safe or violent neighborhoods, subjected to few or many stressful life events, reared by supportive or rejecting parents, exposed to functional or dysfunctional marriages, or closely or loosely monitored by parents.’

This is not to say that these other factors do not influence early sexual activity: income, in particular, is also strongly and independently related to teenage sexual activity. But this raises

troubling questions about the role that incarceration plays in the cycle of teenage pregnancy, single motherhood, and economic hardship (2007: 118-119).

Teenage pregnancy has been associated with lower wages and long-term single parenthood for the mothers and “an increased likelihood that those children will be arrested for delinquency and violent crime” (Clear 2007: 105). In other words, increased rates of incarceration of fathers lead to destabilizing family life in neighborhoods to the point where another generation of criminals is created by the policy decisions that affected their parents.

Another significant related issue is the fact that low-income families of all races tend toward “rapid repartnering” or a “string of uncommitted parent figures” (Ledger 2009: 51). Frequently young children in these situations suffer from the presence – not the absence - of an adult male in the home who may precipitate domestic violence or appropriate resources away from the woman’s children from former partners. These secondary situations can have huge consequences on the current and future behavior of children, as well as on their lifelong belief systems about gender and family relationships (Anderson 1999, Bourgois 2003, Nightingale 1993, Stack 1974).

Despite all of the bleak information available about relationships between men and women in the ghetto, every one of my consultants expressed (at some point) a wistful aspiration for monogamy as a goal, although one that seemed difficult to reach. As was quoted in the previous section on the prisoners’ natal families, Braman wrote that “The pull of ‘normal’ family life is powerfully attractive.” The most likely reason for this is that while many adults of other ethnic groups can frequently depend on the members



of the opposite sex as loyal partners, according to one scholar, African Americans are “the most unpartnered and isolated group of people in America and quite possibly in the world” (Patterson cited in Hymowitz 2006: 106). Banks (in Rogers) refers to this as “the fracturing of black intimacy.” In an interview about his book, (Is Marriage for White People?), he said, “In every civilization we know of, there has been a relationship that was something like marriage, so I get a bit impatient when people talk about marriage as though this is a social construction that is oppressing people and we should just cast it off — because the issue is not formal marriage, the issue is that people want a partner.”

Following through on the previously mentioned circumstance that inner-city African American males enjoy the popularity with women that comes from having illegally acquired money, as well as the conflicting fact that they also hope for a “normal” family, the most complex and contradictory information present in letters from prisoners is the way that they write about female partners. In my opinion, the most precise way to explain the situations they have experienced and still aspire to attain is through the concept of game theory. Certainly the game metaphor has been used frequently in describing black males such as calling them playas or in describing how they “play” somebody. In addition, on the street, the term “having game” means having “intelligence, hustle, and common sense” (Nasheed 2004: xxi). But the situations between men and women in the ghetto could also be explained through the academic (mathematical and biological) concept of game theory as explained by Barash, “There are many circumstances in which the interests of individuals are interdependent and yet

in conflict.” The outcome of a game is “determined by the combined actions of two or more players, whether their interests are shared, opposed, or - most commonly- a little bit of each.” In addition, “the outcome to each party depends on the other’s actions, and second, it is often the case that neither can change the other’s behavior. It is one of life’s crucial constraints” (2003: 2). The main problem in the ghetto is that concept of trust has so completely broken down between men and women that the individual players are perpetually in the process of trying to win through competition without ever first trying to cooperate as partners in the game (even though game theory has proven that cooperators *working together* are more likely to prevail over completely selfish competitors.)

In analyzing the prisoner’s letters, there were five issues present in their discussions of female partners. One was the tension between the esteemed ideal of monogamy in a nuclear family arrangement which was contrasted with the excitement of being a “playa” and just using multiple women for sex, money, and prestige. The second issue was the way the men expressed the virtues of the two poles (loyal partner in opposition to playa) differently in gendered contexts. My consultants extolled and reaffirmed the “bad nigga” stereotype when talking to their male friends on the telephone or in letters to each other from prison, demonstrating that males “[become] masculine in groups” (Pascoe 2007: 107). On the other hand, they showed a completely different – and more sensitive - side when they spoke about wives and girlfriends to me (who they perceived as a middle-class white woman with conventional values). The third issue was that the prisoners emphasized that they could not be condemned for being selfish or defective

partners because so many women acted just as bad as they did –if not worse. The fourth important issue was the way that relationships with women were different when they were in the “free world” versus the “lock world.” Relationships had one dynamic when they were on the street, but changed completely when they were incarcerated. On the outside, in the ghetto, there are significantly more women than men, putting men in the position of strength in terms of negotiating the features of relationships. In prison, there are only men (with the exception of a few female prison employees, who are not legitimately available as partners<sup>47</sup>), and this completely changes the nature of how men and women relate to each other, disempowering the men almost completely. The last significant issue with women had to do with the fact that children are sometimes produced during these unions, however brief, and this creates a whole new cycle of potential relationships – between children and their fathers.

#### *Monogamy versus Being a Playa*

First of all, the ideal relationship that most of my consultants discussed *was* monogamy, although it was easy to see that they were not living up to the ideal. Fanatic was the only one of my consultants who was legally married. When he was twenty-one, he told me that he and his wife had been a couple for seven years, which would put the

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<sup>47</sup> While prisoners and employees sometimes do become involved, it is strictly against the rules in all correctional facilities. When I volunteered at Ethan Allen School, I was given a list of all the rules governing how prisoners and employees could and could not relate to one another, including after the prisoner was released.

beginning of their relationship back to the time when they were in middle school. He talked about his wife in every letter and discussed how much he loves her.

But even though you might have heard this a million times, I'm different from the others. People assume that I'm no good because of my name, but I feel every person has a soft side to them. Mine is my wife. I love her so much that sometimes it hurts. I feel that she don't appreciate me the way she should. I want to work on our relationship because I couldn't see myself with anyone else. But sometimes I feel like it would never work out. I try to put myself in her shoes to understand her point of view, but it still doesn't add up. I think it's because we're still young, but at the same time I know my feeling for her is real. It's just she doesn't give me the support I need while I'm in here. And it's not just about the money situation, it's about supporting me mentally. I get a letter from her every blue moon and that drives me crazy, not knowing if she's doing okay out there because I'm not out to protect her in this crazy world. I know that she misses me, and so do I, but sometimes a man needs to hear that from time to time. What's crazy is women fail to realize that men have emotional feelings also.

The situation that most disturbed Fanatic was that he discovered that his wife had been unfaithful to him during the time he was incarcerated. Following are excerpts from four different letters:

I feel like I'm alone, like I'm by myself because I am. Me and my wife got into an argument when I was in [name of prison] because I found out she was cheating on me. Now that I'm in here I haven't heard from her or anything. I've wrote her lots of times but never received a letter back. Her phone isn't on anymore so I'm really stressing about this situation. I still love her and want to be with her but I don't know if she feels the same. I really need to talk to her to see what's going on.

To answer your question about black females, I don't know why they cheat on their men. Sometimes they feel one isn't enough, I guess. I ask my wife [if] she was cheating on me and she told me no. But my celly<sup>48</sup> in [prison name] knew my wife. When I showed him a picture he told me his brother used to have a relationship with my wife. So I asked him to call his brother, he told me he was in a relationship with her when I was in jail the last time. So I call my wife and ask her about the situation and she hang up on me.

Sometimes I wonder why women are so cold-hearted. Most of all the females I've been with either cheats on me or is just too childish. Now I've been with my wife for almost seven years and I thought she was the one for me. But females only want a person when they have something they want , or have a reputation. They want to be the center of attention and feel like they have you. Like for example I've been with my wife for so long that I know her very well. But once you think you know a person as good as possible that's when you realize that you don't know a thing about that person that it was all acted. Females are with you when your on top and are doing good, but as soon as your in situations like I am they break bad. Which means they

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<sup>48</sup> Cell mate.

stop writing, sending money, basically handling business. They find someone else who could complete your place and move on with their life. I've been hurt so many times by females but they were all just puppy love. Now this is serious and to be in love with a person so deep you wonder what that person is doing every step of the way is painful when that person hurts you, cheat on you, or break bad. I'm experiencing it now and this is what make a person like me treat females like nothing. All because of one person because of being in love and being hurt.

Every black male doesn't have that "bitches ain't shit" attitude like you say. I think it's just certain females that treats their men without respect and commitment that forces that mentality into his mind. But some men "LIKE ME" is so good-hearted that no matter how someone treats him, he will only separate himself from that someone and continue being the good-hearted person he was. But no I don't want to divorce my wife because I'm still in love with her and there is a difference from being in love and just loving someone. Being in love makes a person like myself, do whatever you have to do to keep your relationship going. Communication is the key to a successful relationship. And although my wife has hurt me and misused me, I love her so much that I could only forgive her. See in my eyes love makes you weak because when your really in love with someone although you don't want to get hurt, or mistreated, love overpowers your body. Why? Because the thought of being hurt is so painful and you don't want to experience this feeling. But the thought of you not being with the one you love, and not sharing your life with that partner that means so much to you is even more painful.

Several important issues are being raised here. First of all, Fanatic, like many other African American prisoners, is trying to position himself in two contradictory places at once. He wants to be seen as a good, faithful husband who loves his wife. He is a sensitive male who has tender feelings. He is trying to communicate and to understand her point of view, but she is withdrawing and withholding parts of herself. Since his wife cheated on him, then he is the injured *victim*, and she is the villain. He is committed and she is breaking their wedding vows.

On the other hand, he cannot refrain from indicating that he made a lot of money selling drugs and that made him irresistibly attractive to many women. This issue of multiple women was raised in this (previously cited) quote:

When me as a black man in an urban environment grows up seeing nothing but poverty then the only recourse is to go after fast money, fast women, and when I don't have money I get no respect, I get no women, and have no hope. So I sell drugs, I get money, I get cars, I get women, and how am I supposed to respect a woman when I have no money wouldn't even acknowledge my existence, and now that I roll up in a nice car with a fat stack then she's all over me. So I can't have respect unless I buy it when poverty is the umbrella factor in my life.

In the above selections, Fanatic refers to several relationships with women which made me wonder whether *he* had always been faithful to his wife: “I’ve been hurt so many times by females but they were all just puppy love.” (How many relationships could he have had before he was in middle school?)

Doctor See echoed what his friend said about women and money:

I understand how [you] feel about the way “we” treat women. Believe me I was faithful to my lady when I was out and I gave her the world. I’ve come to the conclusion that she was just with me because of what I did for her instead of how I cared for her. While I was at [name of prison] I talked to her a couple times, thanks to you, but she never came to visit. I received one letter from her since I’ve been locked up. She told me that she wasn’t able to support me at all and all I have is 18 months to do. I was totally heartbroken because we were inseparable when I was out. I understand it’s only my fault that I’m here but I thought the feelings we shared were mutual. I am a real person and I don’t fabricate anything. When I say I’m going to do something, I do it. That’s what hurts me the most, me being loyal to an unloyal female. I told her that I’m not worried about her seeing other guys, all I wanted was for her to be there. I am consumed of heartbreak but I’m strong so I’ll get over her.

The reason why I was somewhat skeptical of all the details of this account was because I did three-way calls for Doctor See. In one of them, his male friend told him that a “little white bitch named [Megan]” was asking about him. Doctor See got very excited about [Megan] and made several attempts to get her phone number from his friends. He was not being loyal to the woman he was referring to in the above letter (who is black) when he was attempting to contact [Megan] at exactly the same time. Second, in his first three-way conversation with the woman he refers to in the above letter, he gave her his real name since she only knew his street name. If they were as close as he said, she should have known his legal name. He did however admit to “flirting” with others. When he cheated, though, it was his girlfriend’s fault.

I was the one taking care of my lady and asked for nothing in return but her love, honesty, trust, companionship. I know I wasn’t perfect, but I was loyal to my lady. I did flirt with other girls but my lady always came first. I cheated before only cause my lady and I had fallen out. Actually she initiated it by sleeping with my cousin. Another thing she did was get an abortion knowing I

wanted her to have my baby. I forgave her many times, but I ended up letting her go. ... I pray for the day to find someone like you. Upon finding her, I'll cherish her like the queen she is. I'll give it 1000% with no limit to what I'll do to keep her happy.

Furthermore, in another letter, he reversed the common argument that men only use women for sex, and admitted that he had multiple young women in his life.

All the women I was involved with were using me for my sexual pleasures and once I got locked up numbers changed or they told me it was fun while it lasted so my money machines are out of order.

Both Fanatic and Doctor See claimed to be supporting their women financially when they were out selling drugs, but as soon as the roles were reversed and they needed help, the women disappeared: "Females are with you when your on top and are doing good, but as soon as your in situations like I am they break bad." This leaves the men "stressed," "hurt," and "heartbroken" while the women are "cold-hearted" and "unloyal." The social contract of reciprocity has been broken because the men gave, but did not receive anything in return at the time when they most needed support.

The longer Doctor See was incarcerated the more he wrote about rethinking his strategies in his search for the one right woman, and continued to reaffirm his integrity as a partner:

Yes, I wish I did have a beautiful lady by my side to call my own. I guess I've been looking for her in all the wrong places. To find woman of my standards, I'm going to have to go to school. Going to the club and sitting on the block will only bring temp fancies. School is where I'll find a lady to secure a relationship with and hopefully someday marry w/kids. In time it shall come just like my release date.

The problem with most young guys we're looking for a Bitch to love us instead of finding a woman to love, care, and honor us! I'm not going to rush into any intimate relationship. I'm going to take my time and wait on a WOMAN! My focus is going to be praise'n Allah, working, going to school, and doing my music. As long as I remain positive and continue upliftment of self, the universe will send me a beautiful, caring, honest, loveable, woman.

When I'm with a woman I commit to her and stay faithful to our bond. As a single man I commit to the friendships I have with my lady friends & cross no boundaries without consent from them. I'm a honest loyal, true 2 love individual. I treat my lady with respect, honor, and care.

Despite this assertion of “respect, honor, and care,” and a reference to the future possibility of marriage and children - which follows the cultural model of the nuclear family, Doctor See has M.O.B. tattooed on his forearm. Its meaning is “Money Over Bitches,” a popular ghetto philosophy that in a man’s quest for power, he must pursue money above pursuing women. The underlying meaning of the aphorism is that if a man focuses on chasing women, they will only stay with him until someone with more money comes along, but if he puts money first, he will get all the women he wants, making him both rich and powerful, as well as being respected for obtaining abundant sex without any emotional commitment – another primary tenet of the code of the street. This M.O.B. philosophy is also an overlay of a bold masculine facade of remaining aloof and avoiding emotional attachments. This concept is particularly gendered, and goes back to what Fanatic said above: “how am I supposed to respect a woman when I have no money wouldn’t even acknowledge my existence, and now that I roll up in a nice car with a fat stack then she’s all over me.”

Another issue related to the fact that many prisoners waver between the imagined ideal of monogamy and the amusement of being a playa is that African American prisoners may put women into the same two categories that have been discussed in very different contexts by other scholars. Some women are put into the potentially respected-and-loved category and some go into the potential sex- partner-and-that-is-all category, in a street form of the Madonna-whore complex. Man O’ War wrote:



For females street is a hoodrat, a hoe. She is known by street dudes, having sex wit a lot of street dudes, known by the street, live by the street, don't have 2 much going 4 her.

U call a girl street she's nothing, 2 me. She's a hoe, that wanz be in the eyes of the drug dealers. She like the money the fast life.

Geppetto (as cited above) wrote about how his mother demanded respect from him and his siblings and expected other children to address her with the title of Ms. "... my mom ran a tight ship and we were good kids we (my brothers & I) were paraded around in the same outfits and attitudes to match." Yet, his teenage rebellion stage included not only the criminal behavior that got him arrested, but fathering two children with two different women by the time he was incarcerated at the age of seventeen. He described his teenage relationships with girls like this:

I had plenty women all the time and even if I had the "wifey" I had the others for something else. First it was Ego, Secondly it was new pussy. Third use her for whatever she got. So even if my "wifey" is giving me money like I want I'll still cheat and use other females for money and whatever else I can get. That was how I was and how most men like that think.

I've had many women in my lifetime. But not many who had the right mind. Real pretty girls with all the right features, and hoodrats that only wear cellphones and beepers and know how to treat they man. But all in all these classes of women all failed me. I more than likely failed them also.

In terms of discussing women, there is a sharp dichotomy in these two descriptions of Geppetto's wonderful mother as opposed to the way he treated his girlfriends. For all of the men, there were "wives," "girlfriends," "ladies," "girls," "women," "females," "baby-mamas," "bitches," "ho(e)s," and "hoodrats," a long list of descriptions that had some subtly different meaning, depending on the situation.

While the men all (on some level) admitted to promiscuity themselves, the prisoners also recognized and admitted to a double standard for men and women. Geppetto

wrote: “Men are ‘players’ when they are ‘hoe’s’ and women are ‘hoe’s’ whenever they meet whatever preconceived number of men people have.” In reference to their own promiscuity, most of the men tried to minimize it in terms of numbers of women, or explain that the women were only having sex with them to get the money the men acquired from crime (so their feelings did not really matter). Also, the women cheated on them first so the men had to pay back the women by cheating too, (or find different/better women to replace the previous ones). Other times the prisoners engaged in reform narrative (Presser 2008) which indicated that they have now changed and become better people who would not cheat or lie to women again.

Geppetto, for example, says that he has changed his attitudes a great deal now that he is in his thirties and has spent nearly half of his life behind bars:

I’ve been gone a very long time and I’ve matured where I know how I need to treat my woman. And I know how it is I want to be treated.

But being able to grow up and mature in here, in the void of having a good woman on ones side made me want to do right by a woman and not be a stupid mu-tha-fucka.

I’m in search of a good woman who can love me now when I’m at my lowest point. Dirt broke and fucked up in the darkest hours of my existence. If I can find this woman Atlas will be free forevermore because I’ll give her the world which I’ll gladly place on my shoulders...

While both Plato and Geppetto claimed to have grown up as the years passed in prison, they were not equally committed to the idea of change. Geppetto wrote:

I’d like to have functional relationship but it’ll have to be with a good woman. A female who’s shown me she’s a good woman. I got no time for games. There isn’t enough hours in the day for me to catch back up once I get out, let alone to play games.

Being in prison I've matured so much and it was easy for me to come to the conclusion that I don't want to cause pain and suffering to a world that already has more than it needs. I want to be a source of inspiration and joy to all those that cross my path.

Plato, on the other hand, was the prisoner who harbored the fewest fantasies about monogamy and nuclear families, possibly because of growing up in a home with so many siblings with different fathers. (Contrary to that hypothesis, however, Fanatic had a similar upbringing with multiple siblings with different fathers and he was legally married.) Plato was very promiscuous before he went to prison, had to take multiple paternity tests while in prison (all of which came out negative), and wrote to a number of different women from prison, some of whom he knew before he was incarcerated and some of whom he found while behind bars. On several different occasions he wrote:

I've been with many, many women so many I don't remember most of their faces or names. You can say or define my actions as those of a player, but I know what I want and if I'm not getting it then there is no need for wasting time. I say what I want from the start and I compromise only when I want to.

To be honest I've not always been nice to women when it comes to being more than friends. I don't do the hitting thing, but I've never learn to stay in one place. Shit, I should just go to "Salt Lake city" maybe join one of those many wives and god loving people! I wonder if they have a ghetto there?

I got a letter from my childhood sweetheart and she's going home soon. She goes both ways and she wants to do some fricky shit with me and her girlfriend. The crazy thing is I'm not all that worked up about this little adventure. I'm not boasting but I've had every sexual experience besides the gay shit. That's my biggest problem with women, they can see right away I'm a "whore." I always go beyond where they've been, I guess you have to be a porn star to keep up.

And I've had lots of healthy relationships with many women like yourself. It's hard to satisfy a wandering soul, I had good things to where there was no need to sell drugs, robbe, or run around having sex. I know what I need now from what I want, so life goes on and I'm just trying to hope back on.

Now that he is older and has been behind bars for eight years, he is starting to be more self-reflective and analyze his past behavior:

I use to be this person who didn't have a lot out in the open emotion, and I hurt a lot of people by playing games and everything that came my way I slept with.

I want to say that in the past I've not always been the most honest and trusting when involved with women, but at the present day I've become considerate of the heart. In my life I've not had much room for trust or feeling influenced by the heart. ... I have the problem of holding key parts of myself back!

Well I'm not beyond reapproach, but its silly to touch on the fact that I don't do well in long-term relationships. I mean get a woman is the easy part for me, its just on my new path of nice guy and asking to be friends put me mostly at loss. If I were to stop being honest and go back to womanizing I would lose the little change I've made.

I know I'm guilty of some not so nice womanizing, but I think sex helped me escape the thoughts of not being what you might call loved or maybe the climax of someone giving their self to me made me feel special. Look I want to change a lot of things about myself and I know we both know that doesn't happen over night. I want to be happy one day with someone I care and love, it doesn't matter if its only for one moment I'll take what life hands out. The ghetto means a lot to me because that's where my journey begin, but what you do for love – remember love comes in many different shells.

Being attractive to women had been a very large part of Plato's identity in the past and he could not resist talking about how women found him irresistible, so this memory of past glory competed with the idea of (potential or future) monogamy.

I'm beautiful and women love the thought of having me for them self.

I just want a chance to show you why I've been so successful with other women. It's true what they say about black men, we make love to the soul and really large in some areas. I'm, how do you say it, the most magnificent experience on this earth.

I think that flirting is one of my better parts, don't you. Making women feel good is a gift.

I don't know what they told you about me, but I want you to know women find their self falling for my looks and personality. I am as they say a true ladies man. I try to be as honest as possible, why lie most women comprehend men are dogs or too much like monkey they many loves. I want what makes me happy and indulge myself when free in the divine gift of God, Eve.: I confess at times I've been satisfade with just one woman, she has to know the needs of a man and be willing in her wants and mine. Being French has made me in some way a romantic. Sexual

passion is a basic ability in my family on my father's side. We have complete sureness of are ability to bring a woman unimaginable pleasure. (laugh) Serious, its hard to escape a Frenchman's bed and not wander back.

I told Plato that I was not interested in him in a sexual or romantic sense, but he persisted in telling me that absolutely *no woman* could resist him – not even me.

You say you can't be turned to the dark side? Even with you knowing so much about me, and with the long dialogue we've had, it would take me no more than two weeks to have you out of your pants. I'm very, very good when it comes to getting women to have sex. I have an unbelievable count of virgins and women of all ages and colors or sizes that's fallen to my ... (LOL) 😊😊 I don't want you saying you would never, I can believe you would hold out but you'll run out of reason and try something new. I used to say "I was god's gift to women." Plus my listen skills are always what puts me in place that makes women say he understands and dosen't judge "why not"?

During many discussions with Plato about promiscuity, I thought about how Plato's mother, Amethyst, told me (in front of Slam Dunk and some of her younger male children), "Black men are good at sex – but not much else." This seemed to be a fairly constant theme in her conversations, even though she has eight sons. Plato must have heard this from her when he was growing up, and it could have given him the idea that he must relate to all women in a sexual way in order to relate to them at all. Despite the fact that each of my consultants were black and grew up in the ghetto, they were also individuals who grew up in particular families, and I could see how the unique circumstances of their home lives possibly could have affected them. The way that families talk about past events, and give meaning to them, teaches children "not only how to become storytellers but also theory builders" (Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph and Smith, cited in Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, and Duke 2006).

Another possible cultural reason for promiscuity comes from a longstanding (white) American stereotype about out-of-control black sexuality. West has written "White fear

of black sexuality is the basic ingredient of white racism” (cited in Collins 2004: 86). According to the myth, black males are oversexed brutes with unusually large penises and black women are lascivious by nature. These racist stereotypes go back to slavery and portray African Americans as mostly body, very little mind. They cannot control their sexual urges and do not think ahead past the sex act itself to the consequences of actually producing a child. This idea, combined with the puritan concept that sex outside of legal marriage is immoral, is what many African American intellectuals point out is the deep unspoken implication that middle-class white people do not verbalize, at least not in public print.

Some Black men’s bodies may be admired, as is the case for athletes, but other Black male bodies symbolize fear. Historical representations of Black men as beasts have spawned a second set of images that center on Black male bodies, namely, black men as inherently violent, hyper-heterosexual, and in need of discipline (Collins 2004: 158).

As was mentioned above, there are many low-income black males who have attempted to co-opt the Brute stereotype and make it their own. One aspect of doing so means incorporating the myth of superior sexual prowess into the “bad nigga” archetype. Being considered virile and hypersexual in a culture in which varieties of pornography have entered the mainstream, and that now has a component that admires braggadocio in all forms, may increase a black man’s masculine cachet in some circles. Street men are promiscuous to prove that they do not need a woman’s love, only her body, and only for a brief period of time. Furthermore, to “bad niggas,” sex is about control, not love, and women are just bitches and hos anyway (Bryant 2003: 128-131). For many low-income African American men the ethos is “Love equals softness”

(Miller 2008: 156), or a less masculine position than demonstrating that they have the strong upper hand and could never be hurt by women, the inferior gender.

### *Partner versus Playa in Gendered Contexts*

Capo also had contradictory and ambivalent feelings about women. Capo is always talking about finding a woman so they could “be a family.” Many times he wrote “I want a woman that I could have babies with and I could marry but it’s hard to find a good woman.” In reference to his future children he said, “I promise myself that I’ll be a good father to them.” Of all my consultants, he was the most focused (in his writing, at least) on the traditional aspects of family life: marriage, children, and taking responsibility. “But I am all about my money now I got to come up, then think about a family. Cause without money how could I take care of them?” Despite his avowed commitment to the idea of a monogamous relationship and a nuclear family, Capo not only had two different primary girlfriends during the time that I have known him, but I also found out about three other women he was involved with because he gave me the password to his Facebook page.

Alexa is from a neighboring state and is of Native American and Italian heritage, although she speaks street slang. On her Facebook page she calls herself a “boss bitch” and says that she likes “boss niggas.” The relationship between Capo and Alexa was very stormy, and he was constantly going back and forth between telling me how much he loved her, and why he was breaking up with her for various reasons. The three reasons for their break-ups were that first of all, he believed that she cheated on him

(and during a three-way call to her, I heard her tell him she also had been dating someone else for a time). Second, she did not support him enough with money, letters, and telephone calls. When I paid for three-way calls to her, she would tell him that she was going to the mall or going to get her nails done, but then she would say she could not send him any money because she was broke, or did promise to send money, but did not follow through. (I heard her tell him that she likes to keep herself “fresh” and no other bitch keeps herself as fresh as she does. Then Capo asked her “Who are you trying to look good for?”) Capo did appreciate Alexa’s appearance and said: “She a real beautiful girl and I know she could have anyone she wants but she want me.” The third reason for their frequent breakups was that Capo said that Alexa is “not trying to do shit with herself. She don’t want a real job.” (After Capo was incarcerated for the last time, Alexa was indicted in another state on charges of selling heroin and prescription painkillers along with a large group of other people, one of whom was her other boyfriend. Before she was caught, her Facebook page indicated that she was “self-employed.”) Capo said, “She stay in trouble but I know she can stay out of trouble” and “that girl ain’t nothing. She just wants one thing out of life and that’s to fuck and to get high.” When he was angry at her, his letters looked like this:

I got a letter from [Alexa]. She still on the same shit nothing at all. It’s time for me to move on. I don’t want her, I don’t need her. She just too much for me. One day she love me and the next day she forget about me. But how could you love somebody and then just forget about them? If you love that person you think about them all the time even when you’re not trying to you know. I’m done with her, no more hurt for my little heart. I just can’t take it. I just got to find that girl. I’m not going to look for her, hopefully she come to me. ...

Capo’s letters are peppered with clichés such as “[Alexa] told me before that pain is love and she told me if you let someone go and they come back you know that person



love you but if they don't come back they really don't love you." Despite the histrionics, I believe that Capo's constant obsession with finding a steady girlfriend and starting a family was sincere. Like all prisoners he was lonely, and wanted to be remembered by someone special while he was behind bars.

Well I give up I really don't know why females treat me like shit and all I want to do is love them or all I do is show them love. I found out if you act like a jackass to some females they treat you better, but when you show them love, man, they just turn their back on you.

... I really need somebody who going to keep me on the right track and keep me away from jail. ... I really need somebody to talk to, to write to for my days could go by fast ...I am looking for somebody who's going to bring me up and not down. I don't want to go back down to sell drugs or robin people. I want to live a good life with a good woman not with somebody who don't want nothing out of life...

I just need somebody I could tell how my day went and how much I love them and how much they love me. It just make me feel more better. It make me think that I really have more in life to get back to.

How would you handle this, say you love a person so much that you can't let them go and it hurt you so much to see this person walk out of your life. Why do love hurt so much I thought it post to make you feel good inside?

But I do have bad taste in females, I don't know what it is. I always find a hood rat but this time I got to take my time and I'll find somebody.

On the other hand, when I forwarded Capo's letters to his male prisoner friends, the rhetoric was completely different. Women suddenly became "hoes." These are lines from three letters he wrote to other male prisoners.

I need some hoes on line you dig.

What up with the hoes I know you got some on deck.

My two lil hoes broke bad but that shit don't stop me, it just makes me stronger

Capo's letters to me said that he is a "loving, caring person that know how to treat a man like a man and woman like a queen because females are the most unique and lovely people that God ever made. ..." To his male friends he said, "But fuck hoes and get money and stay away from fake ass nigga and always stay 100%." This goes back to Pascoe's observation that "gendered and sexed dominance practices" are part of group interactions with other males (2007: 107). In front of other men, there was a performance of one kind of masculinity and in front of women there was another performance. That is not to say that both could not be "keeping it real," but only that both were a matter of managing his image in particular gendered contexts.

The issue of how men in the ghetto treat women is clearly multifaceted, and related to their perceptions of how women treat them. As described above, many scholars have concluded that minority men are oppressed by dominant society and may attempt to gain power for themselves through sexual conquest. At the same time I believe that the men are experiencing genuine pain or deep insecurity in the situations with their female companions, so the exaggerated hyperbole about "bitches" and "hos" is a good way to pretend that they are not hurt and the situation does not really matter to them. As a point of comparison, in Bourgois' ethnography of crack dealers in Harlem, there is a conversation between his two primary consultants:

*Primo:* We used to talk between each other, that these women are living fucked up, because they want to hang out with us.

And what the fuck we got to offer? Nothing! We used to wonder.

*Caesar:* We don't be doing nothing! Bitch be stupid to go with a nigga' like us. (2003: 212)

Bourgois refers to this as "their own sense of internalized worthlessness." This quoted passage from In Search of Respect follows a section on the pervasiveness of gang rape

and precedes a section on domestic violence. Bourgois calls this the “misogyny of street culture and the violence of everyday life” (213). He says, of his Puerto Rican informants, “the male head of household who, in the worst case scenario, has become an impotent, economic failure experiences these rapid historic structural transformations [i.e. unemployment or low-wage labor] as a dramatic assault on his sense of masculine dignity” (215). The men’s response to their inability to earn enough money to support a family is to take out their frustrations on the women in their environment who they feel do not respect them as men. This is another reason why street men must deflect their pain by insisting that attachments to women are of little value. Analyzing the relationships between men and women in these contexts is difficult because there is a large degree of mutual anger and disrespect, but males are larger and physically stronger so they can abuse women in ways that women cannot return the hurt: physically and sexually.

None of my consultants admitted to hitting woman, and only one admitted to anything that could be conceptualized as rape, (although he interpreted the situation differently). Nevertheless, my consultants acknowledged these violent behaviors in other people they knew. On two occasions Man O’ War wrote:

I’m different from my guys. Like I’m against abortions. I don’t hit females don’t get me wrong I’m not going to let a female just beat me up, but I’ll just push her or try to restrain her or run away laughing. I’ve been stabbed not bad cut plenty times but a few time (once by a guy). Funny but I don’t punch or kick females at all.

I hate how guys try to talk to females. I think they’re just insecure of themselves so they try to put someone down. Since they know that a female is in love already they know she’s not just gone leave. That’s why they don’t show that side in the beginning, so they don’t scare them away. When they have em they do it and I think that breaks the females spirit, and makes her insecure, so she won’t leave him.

Man O' War generally seemed empathetic toward women (which he attributed to growing up in a house with just his mother and sister). Plato, on the other hand, like many of the men in the prison system, had trouble understanding that not everyone sees social life as free-for-all with its main goal being competition. Some of what he describes in the following passages is very similar to Bourgois' and Miller's descriptions of gang rape (Bourgois 2003: 205-212 and Miller 2008: 134-143). Miller points out that while groups of young men may experience relative powerlessness due to their race or age, they are still more powerful than females. "Anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday argues that what makes such settings ripe for group sexual misconduct is the emphasis on 'exaggerated male bonding, dominance behaviors, rejection of dependency, devaluation of things feminine, and repression of female input.' " (135). Plato wrote:

... gullible is the old way of viewing nice girls! I mean you already know some of the ghetto rules. Where I grew up people are always looking for someone else to play the victim, ... people in the ghetto have relationships just to see who wins or lose's. I'm very good at ghetto games, and to be honest I almost never lose! So, don't give me any ideas about going back, because catching fish (nice girls) is what I'm most adapt at doing.

... girls from the suburbs don't stand a chance. Trust me, I've talked a lot of girls out of their V's, ... they fall for the ghetto act easily. ... When I was little, girls from those schools were the easiest victims we could find. Best line was join our gang, but you have to do us all – showing love for your new family! ... The boy she like will talk her to dead until she does his friends, then go get with her friend who next in line to ride the train<sup>49</sup>.

Here Plato actually uses the word "victim," but associates it with the word "gullible," not necessarily an injured person, but just a loser in a "ghetto game." The description here includes not only Plato himself, but a group of males, which calls into question any

<sup>49</sup> Running trains is a term for gang rape.

voluntary participation on the part of the girls from the suburban schools. A girl may have been in the ghetto because of “the boy she like” (singular), not expecting to be coerced or intimidated into being used for sex by groups of predatory males (Bourgois 2003, Miller 2008). Plato does not suggest the use of physical force here, but “talking” and using “lines” about gang membership and showing love, but drugs, alcohol, and fear are frequently described as other coercive tactics in interviews with young women who have experienced situations like these (Miller 2008). This description by Plato perfectly illustrates what Anderson said about “games”

To the young man the woman becomes, in the most profound sense, a sexual object. Her body and mind are the object of a sexual game, to be won for his personal aggrandizement. Status goes to the winner and sex is prized as a testament not of love, but of control over another human being (1999: 150).

Treating women like objects and calling them hoes is one way that males both connect to each other as men, as well as a way to compete with other males about who has obtained the greatest number of women as notches in their belts. In doing this ethnography, this type of information, however, was some of the most difficult to obtain due to the fact of my social location as an educated white woman. Discussion of any type of violence or disrespect toward women (along with the previously mentioned information about sexually transmitted diseases), usually made the men become suddenly reticent and highly conventional in their professed attitudes toward women. Most of the direct information I gathered on this subject was through eavesdropping on males speaking to each other either in the prison system or on the street. The very fact that the men were trying to conceal this type of information from me demonstrates

that, on some level, they conceptualize what they are doing as morally wrong. Even the fact that Plato used the word “victim” supports this point.

In early 2009, while I was volunteering at Ethan Allen School, I had a conversation with a prisoner about the publicity regarding the singer, Chris Brown, beating up the singer, Rihanna. The prisoner spent a very long time talking about how that situation was terrible. With no prompting or commentary from me whatsoever, he kept insisting that hitting women is wrong and something that he would never *ever* do. After he returned to his cell, one of the guards who had overheard the conversation came up to me and said that this prisoner had been on parole, but recently had been returned to custody for beating up the mother of his child (a definite parole violation). The prisoner was clearly trying to “play” me by attempting to convince me that he was such a kind and gentle person, even though I also knew from how he had been categorized into the housing units that he was originally a sex offender. I think that violence against women is often judged as wrong as an abstract moral principle (especially when *someone else* does it), although the extreme misogyny of many popular rap songs cheerfully repeated to me by most of the black men I encountered in the system does not reflect much respect for women. Whether black male prisoners judge women to be “the most unique and lovely people that God ever made. ...” or bitches, hos, and hoodrats is completely context-dependent, and that context is usually whether they are talking to a man or a woman.

*Women Act Just as Bad – if not Worse*

All of my consultants wrote about the treachery of women and the pain they experienced when women lied to them or were unfaithful. The general consensus seemed to be that the men were reacting to the women's bad behavior and then felt justified in being less than stellar partners themselves. This was articulated by Fanatic (above):

Females are with you when your on top and are doing good, but as soon as your in situations like I am they break bad. Which means they stop writing, sending money, basically handling business. They find someone else who could complete your place and move on with their life. I've been hurt so many times by females but they were all just puppy love. Now this is serious and to be in love with a person so deep you wonder what that person is doing every step of the way is painful when that person hurts you, cheat on you, or break bad. I'm experiencing it now and this is what make a person like me treat females like nothing. All because of one person because of being in love and being hurt.

Like his friend, Man O' War framed himself as a person who was faithful, but who was the victim of bad women. When I first met him, he told me that he had been in four relationships and the women cheated on him every single time.

Well I used 2 be a person that loved sex and had enough of it in my day, but when it came to relationships and I agreed 2 go steady wit 1 person I was committed 2 wot I said. I didn't cheat on that person, and I didn't in any way I wouldn't have sex , or even talk 2 people I've had sex with in the past.

So I just don't understand. Why? People say men cheat I notice women cheat just as much if not more.

People are weird they aren't ever content wit just a honest person or relationship. I think they want 2 see how much they can get away wit, Or test the waters, probably like a lil drama in they life. U might be right they probably feel they are "god's gift." So they can do this or that. But I had a Ego and I thought I was "god's gift" but I was never the cheatin type. So its probably part the answer but it also has to do wit the person. If the person has values and beliefs against cheatin then he or she's not gone cheat.

Like Fanatic, Man O' War insisted that he had high moral values, but the women did not.

To get another view of the situation, the following is an examination of some correspondence from a few women who were in prison. Plato frequently writes to

women at other jails and prisons, some of whom he knew before he was incarcerated and some that he has never met in person. He sent me some correspondence from some of the women who wrote to him. One example of a correspondent is LaToya who was one of Plato's old girlfriends. She was one of the women who had him ordered to take a paternity test for one of her children. Her charges on the circuit court website were for prostitution, child abuse, substantial battery, and hit & run. She wrote, "If you are mad at me about the baby situation I'm very sorry but [Plato] it was a possibility that you was and I just want to say I'm very sorry again, for putting that pressure on you. So could you please forgive me?" Plato wrote to me,

I got another letter from that girl LaToya, she wants another chance with me. She's a big disappointment, I was her first. I put my hand out and she chose something else, now here it comes again. She's in the same place as [Shari], and I know what she is on for that reason I'm good. See I can turn women away but this is not a good example. "I've been in that pussy down that road." I was playing in the first part Ok.

An excerpt from LaToya's letter said,

I'm doing good and staying solo. Your letter has really opened my eyes to some real live shit. Since being locked up has made me a better person and I'm so serious [Plato]. I want a better life for my children and for myself. I do love you and I've made a lot of bad mistakes that I truly regret. I've started school and is trying very hard to get myself together. Your mail has made me think a lot about life itself. I have goals and plans [Plato], I want to be happy and I'm so serious about changing for the better. It's time that I grow the fuck up and I believe that. [Plato] I really see now how prison is and please know that I'm very sorry for lying to you. I never knew this situation could be so horrible. But I do know this, I'm not a bad person, I've just made bad mistakes. I will keep shit real with you from here on out and that's my word. Speaking from my heart I really do care and I do have a heart and I know I will never lie and do you wrong again. I really enjoyed the poem and it brought tears to my eyes. No Body has ever kept shit so really do appreciate you keeping shit gutta and not sugarcoating anything. If we don't ever be together again, I would love to remain your friend and I will do my best by keeping in contact with you because I really do need you by my side.

Even though she said that she would not lie to him, another part of LaToya's letter said

"Being with females isn't on my mind, and I'm just doing me and worried about my



babies” (despite the fact that one of her charges was child abuse). Plato’s female cousin, Moonbeam, was incarcerated with LaToya and she wrote “[LaToya] think we cool & be telling muthafuckas we family (NOT.) Fuck her she up here dykin.” LaToya promised Plato that she would send him money when she got out.

I got you 100% through thick and thin. I plan on stacking some money up and owning my own house one day soon, getting my babies back, finishing school, Buying me car, and also getting my cosmetology licenses. That’s what I really want to do with myself. Eventually having my own shop.

Plato told me “I’m going to have [LaToya] doing a lot of shit for me once she gets settled. She’s always coming running my way when she loses herself in this hard world, so I just take her hand when I can.” Unfortunately, she did not help him after her release from prison (which is common in situations like this one).

For a while Plato was writing to a white women named Shari who was charged with possession of THC, theft of movable property and armed robberies. Like LaToya she tried to emphasize her femininity, not her criminality. Plato said:

I found someone, but she’s in jail for 4 more months. I know she’s my kind of woman, she wants to be a housewife. I told her about you, and my respect as well as fondness of your education. You might get to see how my other side works in a relationship that’s more than friendly.

I [sent] some poems to the girl I’m writing and all she keeps saying is that their beautiful and I’m very good with my pen.

Well I’ll tell you more, but I don’t think she’s as great as you are as of now. She wants to be my little housewife, but I first have to come from this place of dying dreams. She is white and loves music, reading, poetry and wants to be a drug counselor when she comes home. So far she’s been very honest about her past, and you know I had somebody check for me. I always keep a spy on things I want or have in my possession. She’s small about 5’4” with bluish green eyes and two kids.

Meanwhile, however, Moonbeam was also checking on her cousin’s selection:

Man that dopefeen you fucking with [Shari Jones], she is 2 doors down from me. Hell nawh, she ugly as a bitch man. Pale & bummie, she nasty & you know I’m callin it as I see it. When she found out we was family, she make it her B.I. to talk to me & basically asking me to lie to you. I’m like fuck you Bitch, you is not my cuz type☺. These hoez be lyin about how they look & shit.

I'm telling she is Bad Business. I told her you sexy like me. She like "yeah [Moonbeam] you is very pretty. Why did you cut your hair? Grow it back you look good with it okay!"

Plato, despite his loneliness, kept a cool head while both LaToya and Shari were writing to him. He said to me, "For now things are only words, and words blow sometimes abandoned on the wind." Several months passed, the women were released from prison, and Plato did not mention them again.

These letters from women show that some of the conventions of prison correspondence are not gendered, but endemic to the situation. In the letters from the women, the same themes of truth and honesty are very powerful and frequently repeated. LaToya engages in reform narrative when she admits that she lied to Plato, but now she is sorry and will "keep shit real with you from here on out and that's my word. Speaking from my heart I really do care and I do have a heart and I know I will never lie and do you wrong again." At the same time, her assertion that she is worried about her children after being charged with child abuse, as well as the fact that she did not send him any money after she was released show that her sincerity could legitimately be questioned. Whether or not she engaged in lesbian relationships with other women while in prison is clearly a question that cannot be answered through examining this correspondence because her denial of the possibility is set against that of Moonbeam who wrote that LaToya was "dykin'." Moonbeam, however, obviously does not like LaToya, and was also caught in a lie because she too promised to send Plato money after she was released, but did not do so. Moonbeam's promises to her cousin looked like this:

[Plato}, I love you & I'm family to the end, I don't ever, never put shit on my kids, But on my shorties, I will do any and everything for your time to be as comfortable as possible. This is not a

place for us, One thing I've learned is to cherish family. I'm totally different from the rest. This place has opened up my eyes to some shit & especially my freedom away from my Angels. I breath for them each & everyday. They is my life & that's my word. I know how it is in this Bitch & if you don't believe in anything else know that I'm here. I've been down for two years and this is not me. Once I'm out, Believe me, you will be okay. Don't nobody know what it's like beeing in this situation. Like I said I don't put shit on my shorties unless that's my word. I got you & that's real. 48 more dayz in this Bitch. I miss you man, and even though our life was fucked up, Believe me it's time to make shit happen.

By saying that, once released, she would do "any and everything for your time to be as comfortable as possible" and "I got you," she was promising to send him money as soon as she got out of prison. This is what Plato wrote to me a few months after his cousin's release:

It was crazy that day on the phone you asked me if I was going to write my cousin. She has only disappointed me in not backing her word with actions. I don't care if no one wrote or sent me things to help with the time, because I'm the holder of my own soul. I ask for very little when I ask of anything, but if you offer you put yourself in a position to either become a good friend or a war. Words at certain times mean nothing to me, but actions show the true place of your soul in my life and the life of those around you.

Several years have gone by since these letters were written and Moonbeam has never sent Plato any money, even though they are "family to the end".

Another story about women acting just as bad as men, if not worse, comes from Plato who told about women in his family using lying as a weapon against other women in order to try to spoil their reputation -- which is another strategy for damage in addition to a physical confrontation. From two different letters:

Listen, my family is very two faced and if you get on their shit list, they might do lots of evil shit to you. I think [Genesis] understand by now she's dealing with some crazy-ass-people.

You asked what I mean by shit list? Well, let's say you piss [Pearl] off. First they'll start talking behind your back calling you name, and tell lies about you. They'll tell everyone who will listen how you like to fuck every black dude you meet. Then they'll say they heard this and that mostly how you, be getting trains ran on you (meaning fucking five or more guys at once). Calling your house and hanging up or just to tell you how they're going to beat your ass when they see you. I could go on but being smart you get the point. If you were a guy I or someone else would shoot

you on sight. There's a DVD called "ghetto fights" it would give you a mild taste of how a ass whipping in hood goes. If [you] ever need help go get [Pearl] and my other sister's, they cut and hit bitches with locks and keys. Ask to look at their key-chains, they don't have locks for most of those keys.

In this instance, Plato is proud of his creative and self-reliant sisters and is offering me their help in case I need to have someone beat up. In addition, the term "very two faced" is interesting because it implies using deception as deliberate strategy to manage social interaction to one's advantage.

Furthermore, this passage also demonstrates the sexual double standard. Plato (above) said about himself:

I'm not boasting but I've had every sexual experience besides the gay shit. That's my biggest problem with women, they can see right away I'm a "whore." I always go beyond where they've been, I guess you have to be a porn star to keep up.

"I'm not boasting" implies that he is proud of himself for his virility and wide sexual experience, while this passage about the kinds of lies his sisters tell about other women implies that women who "fuck every black dude [they] meet" and "getting trains ran on [them]" are being insulted for their implied promiscuity. This idea is what Geppetto meant when said (above) "Men are 'players' when they are 'hoe's' and women are 'hoe's' whenever they meet whatever preconceived number of men people have." Even the passages from LaToya about "Being with females isn't on my mind", which was countered by Moonbeam as "Fuck her she up here dykin" demonstrate that women can insult each other by using their sexual reputations as a weapon against people they do not like.

Associations between people in the ghetto frequently involve a vicious circle of someone getting back at someone else who feels compelled to get back at the first

person even worse. Plato did not give an exact example of “let’s say you piss [Pearl] off,” but the implication is that the person being lied about has done something unacceptable first. This same impulse was described by Fanatic in terms of male/female relationships: “this is what make a person like me treat females like nothing. All because of one person because of being in love and being hurt.” The general consensus among the prisoners throughout their letters was that black women in the ghetto can be, and often are, just as deceptive and dangerous as men. Plato wrote:

Black women are disloyal from my experience with them, I’ve had my share of every class. There was some who were loyal, but those are the ones with no personality at all. I’m beautiful and women love the thought of having me for them self. I’ve seen the good one’s and bad one’s, there’s only one way to go and that’s to change colors.

This particular excerpt reinforces the implication that the relationship games that Plato so frequently refers to are actually more entertaining and enjoyable for him if the women know they are in a contest. As he wrote above, “people in the ghetto have relationships just to see who wins or lose’s. I’m very good at ghetto games, and to be honest I almost never lose!” If the women are not playing games, then they have “no personality at all.” This was also implied by Doctor See when he wrote “The problem with most young guys we’re looking for a Bitch to love us instead of finding a woman to love, care, and honor us!” From an examination of the prisoners’ letters, it appears that playing games with women is fun when the men win, but miserable when they lose.

#### *Relationships with Women on the Street versus When the Men are Incarcerated*

As mentioned above, the relationships between men and women are very different when the men are free from when they are behind bars. The difference comes from the

fact that there are significantly more women in the ghetto because so many African American men are incarcerated or have died young. The other factor that gives men the upper hand when free is that they are amassing illegal money which they can use to attract women. When men are incarcerated, they go into an all-male environment, and become supplicants who ask women for money instead of providing it.

When he was free and on the streets, Man O' War sometimes tested women to see what their true motives were. He wanted to know whether the women really liked him as a person or whether they were gold diggers.

the chick I was wit she was wit me when I was not saling drugs. I was acting like I didn't have any money. She gave me money when I ain't need it. That showed me she wasn't in it 4 the money. She was wit me when I got locked up 4 some cases that would have sent me 2 prison 4 lyfe! Yeah she helped me wen police wanted me. She helped me wen my P.O. sweated me. She did a lot. An she's cool goofy ain't no dumb bitch! I tell her she can do something if she don't waste time like the other hoes I know.

When he was in a relationship he was also committed to mutual openness and honesty because he did not want any lies to come back to haunt him later.

I always heard u can't have or b in a relationship wit yo best friend. But I think u can b friend and have a successful relationship. I agree wit u though I told my girlfriend (ex) I'm not sure, but I've told her everything she knew it all. I kept it so I didn't hide things that could jeopardize the relationship. So I put it on the table.

I do it loosens up, I mean no strings attached so u don't have 2 put ur feelings into worrying bout this o that. It puts less on u. I'd rather have no strings if a person can't commit 2 me or just me! I rather know the truth, instead of the person feel they are obligated 2 lie 2 keep me, or hide this o that because they like wat we got. It happens.

When Man O' War was locked up, he assumed that a girlfriend would not be faithful to him, so he suggested that they end the relationship. This happened with two different women during two incarcerations. The first time he was in a relationship with the

mother of his first child. He was fourteen and she was twenty. The relationship lasted nine months until he was arrested.

I can't wait 2 see my son. He should b on my list this month. My mom is slow at things I want. And my baby mama has 2 fill out 2 put him on the list. So that might b tricky. She doesn't like my mom b-cuz my mom and her didn't get along. She gets mad b-cuz me and her stopped talking, boyfriend-girlfriend when I got locked up in "2002." First time in Wales. She was pregnant. I was young I had 3 to 5 ... ("I could do 3 years in Wales so it was no point in having a relationship. I know ur not going 2 b faithful 3 years so u do u.") She didn't like that. So when I get out she has her relationships and expects 2 just go back where we left off 2-1/2 years ago. B-cuz I didn't see her 6 months after I got out. I did 2 years.

No ur in ur relationship so u do u. then she say its my age I'm too young so I messed up. I feel I was thinkin realistic and I didn't want the problems with her new relationship. It would've been some.

The second time he was imprisoned, he was talking to his (different) girlfriend on the phone from prison and he realized that something was wrong. Then she confessed to cheating on him because she was "so lonely":

Recently I found out my chick I had now cheated. So I always try 2 do good but I get cheated on. The 2 times I was locked up, I've been cheated on. Both times I told the female 2 let us go. "let it go if it comes back 2 u its meant 2 b" They insist on keepin the relationship and cheat, then promise not 2 do it again. I tell them since I'm locked up we should break up and then see wat happens or how they feel when I get out.

I don't like forgivin cheatin, but I did I gave her a chance. She got my name tattooed but 2 me that don't mean shit. I just don't get it. I try but I don't know. If I was out I know I wouldn't have forgiven her. but I understand but I rather it was done how I said, me by myself. But I realized " 2 live is to suffer, 2 survive, well that's 2 find meaning into suffering."

Clearly Man O' War understands that it is difficult for women to sustain relationships with incarcerated men who cannot fully participate as partners from a distance. At the same time, however, many women do try to continue to be involved with men who are behind bars. Whenever I visited prisoners, there were long lines of women waiting to be admitted on visiting days. While some of them were obviously mothers and

grandmother (which I could tell from conversations I overheard), many of them were young women, sometimes pregnant or carrying babies.

As mentioned above, I met Geppetto when he wrote to me after obtaining my address from another prisoner who probably stole it from Plato's cell while he was in disciplinary segregation. The issue with the women's addresses is noteworthy because there actually are a number of women who write to prisoners, some of whom they did not have relationships with when the prisoners were free. Geppetto described it to me like this:

My mom and I talk as much as possible and she too is fascinated at how many women associate with prisoners. I explained to her that at the present crime rate & incarceration rate everyone from the main 5 counties (Racine, Kenosha, Beloit, Madison, & Milwaukee) will at least know somebody that knows somebody who is locked up or has been locked up. It's saying we have in the ghetto "It's a fiend in every family." Well that goes for "prisoner" too. If not everyone at least majority.

Also you have to keep in mind that just because we're locked up doesn't mean we're evil people. Everyone needs someone. Some say women are tired of the lame guys and are looking for good men. There are some here.

I asked Geppetto whether he got letters from any of the other women whose addresses he had been given by the man who stole my address from Plato. He said:

Have I heard from any other females? The answer is yes. However it wasn't roses. The first female I wrote was only on some sexual pen-pal type of stuff. I don't have a problem writing or expressing my sexual desires but that shouldn't be the only thing we discuss. My dick size? Do I enjoy oral sex? Have I done anal sex? Did she like it? etc. etc. I would have been ok with these questions if it wasn't in like the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> letter. Then I asked or inquired more of a mental stimulation relationship and she questioned that. "You don't like me," and a bunch of other things that weren't on point. But in the end I told her that's not what I wanted in a friend.

The other female was married. I sent a photo with the letter and asked that she return it, if for whatever reason she didn't want to correspond. Well she sent the photo back with a short letter describing herself and wishing me well. She gave a few compliments and that's that.



Plato also mentioned to me that some women wrote to him only about sex and he too found this to be both silly and boring. Both men found “sexual pen-pal type of stuff” to be an insult to their intelligence, especially if the women were not capable of carrying on a conversation about anything else. In several letters, Plato wrote:

A good relationship is defined mostly by the needs that are met, if the other person can't meet my needs then I walk away. You have the hypothesis that I'm happy with letters, but that guess is wrong and I took no offense. I have a list of women I no longer write, because the conversation was not on the same level as my own. I don't like crumbs I'm more into cakes and pies. I've got needs there not sexual but if someone's not taking care of their business I can't urge success into someone [who] only wants failure. I need money, emotional support and many other things. My circumstances only stop the physical needs from being met. Every woman knows the position I'm in, but for some reason they have the illusion that my words does not come from my heart, mind, and soul.

In the past I used to write a lot of girls, but they only wanted to talk about sex and here about my bad boy life. I can correspond that way until I get frustrated, but if they send money I will try and because pleasant. I'm so much like you, it hurts to say so. I have my times when I'm controlling and arrogant, but I have a right to be. I'm a “boss.”

I know you have some lonely friends who look OK, so just give them my name and address. I write some females her in there, I need money for a lawyer so I don't waste my time or words. I want help and a strong intelligent woman who take care of business. Honesty about what she does in the streets, devotion on some level is all I ask.

I'm going to really look for a one woman thing because it hurts my hands writing too many letters.

The advantage to women who get involved with prisoners is that prisoners are not able to meet many other women while behind bars and can become intensely focused on their relationships with their girlfriends when incarcerated. The men can speak rapturously of love, which the women can believe is sincere, and then the women will often send them money or help them in other ways from the outside. One problem with this arrangement is that the men can actually “cheat” emotionally while behind bars by having more than one girlfriend (or a wife and a girlfriend) just like they can on

the outside (Fleisher 1995: 169-171). The other problem is that the men will not be nearly as focused on the women once they are released and often break every promise they made while incarcerated. When men are behind bars they can paint a rosy picture of their future together and reality does not intrude on the fantasy. After they return to the streets, it is easy to relapse into former behavior, especially when the gender ratios are once again reversed.

In examining the letters from male prisoners that make references to female partners, there are several ideas that reoccur between the different men. As well as positioning themselves as honest and sincere, they also each insist in some way that they are different from other men. Pascoe (2007) wrote about this, as well, and said that young males behave differently in public and in private. When they are being observed by other men, they feel the need to posture, be sexist, and manage their public presentation of self to be highly masculine and dominant. When they are in one-on-one interactions, especially with women, they try to appear sensitive, gentle, and emotional. Most of the prisoners wrote to me at some point about getting in fist fights with other men in prison, and about carrying and firing guns on the street. Yet, they also wanted to be seen as perceptive and (sometimes) vulnerable in intimate relationships.

Furthermore, each of the men indicated strong preferences for women who are intelligent, sometimes using that word and sometimes by expressing distaste for its opposite such as “dumb bitch” (Man O’ War) or saying that the woman was “not on the same level” (Plato) or not providing “mental stimulation” (Geppetto). In addition, the

men all indicated that they wanted a woman who was working at legitimate employment and responsible. While some of them did write to women who were also incarcerated, it was because they perceived those women as available. None of them, at any time, indicated a preference for a woman who engaged in criminal behavior, i.e. partners in crime.

While incarcerated, each of my consultants spoke wistfully of looking for something like a soul mate. Fanatic wrote constantly of the wife he loved above any other. Capo wrote, "I just want to meet a girl that's going to stay by my side no matter what." Doctor See wrote of looking for one "beautiful lady" and someone to "cherish like the queen she is." Geppetto wrote, "If I can find this woman, Atlas will be free forevermore because I'll give her the world which I'll gladly place on my shoulders...". In his letter to a website that finds pen-pals for prisoners Plato wrote, "Are you a goddess looking for love in its deepest form?" All the stereotypes about the hypermasculinity of ghetto males or the profane, phallogocentric street spaces are, in some ways, true, but so is their quest for the purity of true and everlasting love. In a sense, one of their fantasy stories is that of Beauty and the Beast, or their potential redemption through the love of a good woman. Just because they have not found her yet, it does not mean that she does not exist. As Cohen (quoted above) said about denial, "mental health depends largely on our ability to sustain what are really *illusions* ... Far from indicating mental illness, these modes of 'being out of touch with reality' are necessary for healthy functioning" ( 2001: 49). Prisoners, who are down and out, financially and emotionally, are more interested

in “true love” than any inveterate reader of Harlequin Romance novels. It is too painful to believe that love is not possible, or that what they imagine could not come true.

Women who lie, cheat, go to prison, beat people up with locks and keys, and cause numerous other problems may be a reality, but while in prison, the men hope that those women are anomalies and somewhere out there are their true soul mates who will love them unconditionally. While in prison the men believe themselves to be in a suspended state, almost like the Roman Catholic idea of purgatory. They are separated from real life and this increases the importance of fantasy about the beautiful fairy-like queens who will finally see and bring out the true goodness that exists within them. As Shakespeare said, “The course of true love never did run smooth<sup>50</sup>,” and that is a central truth when a man is incarcerated.

### **Offenders claim to be (or want to become) *Conscientious Fathers***

Along with the huge issues of whether women were cheating on them and whether they were sending money and mail when the men were imprisoned, another major issue occupied the prisoners’ thoughts about women. Linked to the volatile relationships with the sexual partners in their lives is the possibility of fatherhood. The term that some of the men used for the tension between themselves and the mothers of their children was “baby-mama drama.”

Plato’s opinion of both his attractiveness and of the thought that women are as interested in promiscuity (as men are) only works as an idea if one (unrealistically)

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<sup>50</sup> A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act 1, Scene 1

separates sex from reproduction. Before I began to write to Plato, his brother Slam Dunk told me that Plato had twelve children. Slam Dunk said that women were always coming to his mother's house with babies and saying that they belonged to Plato. While it is true that Plato has taken numerous paternity tests, none of the babies actually turned out to be his.

While it is fortunate that Plato did not actually father any children before being incarcerated, he was not disturbed by the long parade of young women appearing at his mother's doorstep with babies they claimed were his or the multiple women who requested paternity tests for several years after he was imprisoned. Man O' War, despite his intelligence, seemed pleased and flattered that four different women wanted to have children with him. Many of the men had viewpoints about sex that did not take into consideration any long-term effects of their actions. I could not help but contrast their attitudes about sex against the stories of the many young African American teenagers I met while volunteering in juvenile corrections. A very large percentage of them expressed hurt and bitterness about not growing up with a supportive father - and often with no father at all - and who always said, "I would never do a kid like my dad did me." In fact, Capo wrote almost exactly the same thing: "I got to come down not for me but for this baby cuz he going to need a daddy in his life. I am not going to be like my dad but in order to do that I got to stop coming to jail." Yet, so many of the teen males who have been adjudicated delinquent have already fathered children that there are programs for teaching parenting skills in juvenile correctional facilities in Wisconsin. Somehow many of the males I met in the correction system were

able to separate the hurt of being an abandoned son from the experience of being a father themselves. The disconnect usually had to do with their feelings about the mothers and potential mothers of their children. Plato wrote:

My moma has lots of kids and even sometimes runs a home daycare. I like kids a lot but the women now adays can't be trusted with the responsibility to be honest about who their sleeping with. I've seen a lot of bullshit go on with women, and I think women today have reach their past goals to become more like man for the good and bad.

Despite this, most of the men I met in the prison system and on the streets were extremely attached to their children, or looked forward to the possibility of being a father. According to Ledger:

There is no doubt entire families suffer the consequences of prison sentences. Far more men than women go to jail. Once they're released, men tend not to marry, so they don't get the stabilizing benefits of family networks. They become less likely to find jobs and to keep them. At the same time, they tend to have children at the same rate as non-incarcerated men. Regrettably, 'men behind bars cannot fully play the role of father and husband' ... (Ledger 2009: 51).

Unfortunately, maintaining close relationships with their own young children, the one genuinely bright spot in their lives, is dependent on a responsible adult bringing the child to the prison or taking phone calls to allow the child to speak to the prisoner. Usually the only two possibilities for this role are either their baby-mamas or their own mothers.

As mentioned above, Man O' War has four sons with four different women, but six years went by between the birth of his first and second children. The connection with his oldest son was affected by the fact that the relationship with the child's mother did not last very long which made it difficult to get visits during the times he was incarcerated. He worried about his son, Little Man, a great deal while he was imprisoned.

I got a letter sayin something bout my son they say it can't be discussed or they ain't wana tell me everything in writing. When I called it's a problem wit the phone. I couldn't get through and u only get 1 call a week so waste.

I don't think its too serious but I hate not knowing. It's harder not knowing than 2 knowin cuz its many possibilities wit not knowin but if u know then u already thought the worst and now its just dealing wit it.

Later he found out what the problem was with his son (who was just acting like the four-year-old that he was at that time.)

Well my son told me he ain't wana live wit his mom he wana live wit me or granny (my mom). Now my BM (baby mama) is mad cuz he brought the idea 2 her. She wana talk 2 me, she say I must have brain washed him. I haven't seen him in 9 months I talked 2 him though. She don't know I'm locked up. So she won't let my mom get him until I talk 2 her. I don't know how I'm going 2 work it out, but it's not as bad as I thought bcuz the letter made it seem like something happened 2 him. I wanted 2 damn near cry, out of anger, and who knows wat else is going on. They won't tell me 2 much cuz how I am.

When Man O' War was depressed (which is a frequent condition for all prisoners), he thought of Little Man who he believed was the one good thing he had in his life. He saw his son's innocence as contrasting with what he had to do to survive on the streets.

I like trying to think of things, those sayings. I plan on getting 2 good ones tattooed. I like tattoos. I plan on having a theme on each arm. Good & Evil. Good my son an angel 4 guidance hands holdin my son 4 Lords hands. Evil. Me, things that symbolized me , my struggles, Demon. Suffer, hate, pain, struggle, things like that. I'm ready 2 give up. Not suicide but just I don't give a fuck. do wat I got to 4 my son and fuck the world. Wat ever happens happens. F T W I want too. But it feels like I don't got shit 2 liv 4 but my son. So F T W.

Man O' War missed the simple everyday joys of watching his son grow up.

They say my son say he miss me and wanted to show me he can tie his shoe and write good.

Geppotto has been in prison for fourteen years and has a son and a daughter who are just two months apart (age fifteen) with two different women. He has been faced with trying as much as he can to parent his children from behind prison walls, most of the

time from a city over one hundred miles from the places where his children were living. He told me “Thanks for inquiring about my kids they are everything to me.” He is not alone in his plight: “black children are nine times more likely than white to have an incarcerated parent. Nearly one in eight African American children has a parent behind bars today” (Bernstein 2005: 61). As discussed above, families, as well as prisoners, suffer from the punishment of imprisonment:

“The heart of locking somebody up is the deprivation of love and touch,” Denise Johnston observed. “The way you disempower people is to strip away all human contact.” Intended for prisoners, this aspect of punishment fall heavily on children. In many facilities, physical contact – a small child’s primary source of comfort and reassurance – is jealously rationed. Some facilities place an age limit on sitting on a parent’s lap, so that a birthday celebration includes breaking the news that dad’s lap is now off limits. In some, a “brief embrace and kiss” at the beginning and end of a visit may be all that is permitted. Parents are required to enforce this regulation – which is to say, push their children away (Bernstein 2005: 83).

Geppetto’s relationships with his children’s mothers have been over for a long time (which is not surprising since the children were born when he was only sixteen), so he does not get to see his children very often. Along with taking classes, Geppetto has tried to work as much as he can while in prison, even though the jobs do not pay well. (At one point he told me that he was making \$22 a month.) By working, he was trying to support himself and even tried to help his children:

I’ve been flat broke for like 3-4 weeks. I spent my last red cent on my kids for the holidays. We don’t celebrate Christmas but it was necessary for me to do it. They were doing great at school and I hadn’t sent any money home since summer.

His son’s mother went into the Navy four years ago, and the boy was left with her mother in Milwaukee, who Geppetto referred to as his son’s “addict or ex addict grandmother.” Then the boy was suspended from public school and was sent to a Muslim charter school. Geppetto asked me to get the school’s address so he could write to his son’s teachers. Some time later he wrote:



My son had come to see me ... He has been living with my brother since before Father's Day. He has been working for my brother cleaning the barber shop and getting tips from people I used to consider friends. He has been enjoying himself being back in [name of city] and being able to afford things he wants. (Certain clothes, shoes, etc.) He and I had great conversations and I assured him that I am trying to stay out of trouble in order to get home to those I love sooner.

Geppetto tries hard to be a good parent and dispense wise advice:

My son and I have talked several times this year and we discuss everything. I've had the sex talk with him several times this last year. I just told him last week to keep it in his pants because you sleep with the wrong girl your dick can turn green and fall off. It was not to be taken literally but it was completely truthful. He said, "dad don't trip I ain't on nothing." I told him not to think he's fooling me cause I know what I was doing at his age. ... He told me not to worry and he isn't having sex. But he and my daughter [D'Asia] are both turning 14 this summer and I was already sexually active at that age. So I try to stay at him about that and I'll do the same for my lil girl when I see her.

The family situation with his daughter is somewhat more stable, but that still does not translate into frequent visits for Geppetto. These are excerpts from several different letters:

My daughter is in [name of city] and stays with her mom. She is a sweet smart young woman. My son is a delight and smart also. My daughters mother is a great woman. She soothes my conscience and spirit because I know my daughter is well taken care of and is learning how to be a lady from a dignified woman.

My son had a "step-dad." My daughter never said anything about it but I know her mom is in and has been in a long term relationship. I know her mind and respect her decision so I know she'd never have my daughter in any questionable environment.

As for my kids they are doing well. My daughter and I have lost touch for 2 years and it saddens me but I hope to see her soon. My family sees her but never really gets to bring her this way.

My daughter is one year younger than Geppetto's children. When and he and I were talking about sex education, he was willing to give me advice from his experience:

I feel you on the sex talk with kids. As you know I talked with my son [little Geppetto] but I had a heart to heart with my daughter this summer. Girls are I guess more mature but they definitely still are girly, and I suppose squeamish when it comes to talking about it. We had a short conversation because she let me know she clearly understands everything I explained but sex is not in her immediate future. It doesn't fall into her plans-goals. She knows, the pros, cons, and consequences. Smart girl! So, there really is no need to proceed with caution. Have a grown-up conversation with a child and you'll see one or two things. She'll either mature instantly before

your eyes which will let you know she's a young woman or she'll be squeamish and that will tell you she's still child like and sex is the furthest thing from her mind.

Geppetto is very proud of his children and wants to be an important part of their lives. In a recent letter he wrote:

My kids are well. My daughter was in the paper the other day. Her and her high school classmates boycotted for the teachers and against the new budget that Scott Walker passed. I spoke to her all about it and she had specific and valid reasons for why she wanted to be apart of the boycott. She asked permission and I gave it.

Like many incarcerated fathers, Geppetto cares deeply for his children and wants to spend time with them and protect them. He, like many men, has internalized the cultural model of a man's job as being the provider and is extremely upset about not being able to play that role in his children's lives. He said: "Tomorrows not promised and every day in here is one too many and another day that I'm not out there taking care of my kids, living life to the fullest, enjoying my loved ones, and raising our standard of living."

On the other hand, another situation that happens for prisoners is that they are frequently deceived by women who tell them that they have fathered children, but that is not true. The last time that Capo was actually out of prison, during one of his frequent break-ups from Alexa, he got involved with Makala. After he was arrested, he called me and told me that he had a new girlfriend and she was pregnant with their child, a son. He was very excited and happy about the pregnancy. But soon things were going wrong. Makala was not writing or sending money.

My baby mama name is [Makala] but she on some other shit right now. I don't know what she's going to name the baby. I want her to name it after me but me and her are not getting along right now.

Over the next few months, Capo became more and more concerned about what was going on with Makala.

This girl driving me crazy cuz I don't know if she still want to be with me or I don't know if she really pregnant. She haven't sent me no type of picture or letter lately. She sent me one letter in [name of prison]. That's crazy ain't it. I told her I need some money for I could buy hygiene but she never wrote back. So I guess she said fuck me right, but it's cool. I got 6 months left you know but it would be nice to hear from her. I sent her a visiting list she never sent it back. I guess she don't love me no more, that's crazy ain't it? I wish she would write me back or let me know what's going on with her but she don't care about me. That's cool. But if she is pregnant I want to know if that's my baby or not. I want you to call her and tell her she's bogus for making me worry about her but that's cool. And let her know I am still here and I do want her to visit me. But let her know I need some money but let me know what's going on with her. But if she on some bullshit then forget about her. I'm going to write her number down for you at the end of this letter. But let her know I still love her.

Finally, I asked him how long he knew her and how well he knew her.

And yeah I only know her for two months then I get locked back up. I met her from a friend of mine he hook us up. Then I started to talk to her then we hook up. I really don't know a lot about her. I know her birthday is [date]. I know she has 4 sisters and two brother. And I know she lie too much. She lie to me about her age. She was 17 when we had sex. I could of went to jail for that you know but her mother was cool about the whole thing. She 18 now and she got a baby already I think the baby is 1 year or about to be, but that's all I really know about her.

Then the bombshell dropped:

I got a letter from [Makala] yesterday. She lied about being pregnant. I know she was she lie so much. I don't want to be with her no more. I still got love for her but I can't be with a person that lie about almost everything. She cheated on me I know that for a fact I read it on her Facebook thanks to you. But I'm glad I really know what the truth is. But me and her can't be I won't let myself get hurt by her again. I cried so hard when I read her letter. I told everybody I had a baby on the way but I guess not. I should of just kept my mouth closed right. You just don't know how much she hurt me I think she hurt me more than [Alexa] did, but both of them are old news. I need somebody that's trying to do something in their life. I can't understand why I always fall for the ones who always do me wrong. I am so tired of being hurt, but I am trying to get over her. But it's hard why do females play with people's feelings like it ain't shit? I hurt so bad but when I try not to it still don't work. I don't know what is wrong with me. I just want to meet a girl that's going to stay by my side no matter what.

The main reason why Makala's lie worked for so long (7-8 months) was because Capo was in prison so he was unable to see that her body was not changing due to pregnancy.

When Capo wrote to Shake Down soon after this he said, "I see you got a baby now Joe that's what up. I thought I had one on the way but bitches lie and men lie, ya dig."

For Plato, the honesty of women was also called into question because LaToya was not the only woman who told him that he was the father of her baby. In addition to the numerous paternity tests he had to take, there was a woman who had almost convinced him that he really was the father of one of her children. When I first started writing to him, he thought he had a daughter with someone named Destiny.

I only have one child and I'm not sure she's mine. Women try so hard to find fathers for their children, so who knows with women today. Their thinking is, he's a good father, but a bad lover. It's yours so you have to be with me frame of mind. There are many reasons why black children don't have fathers, but black women are disloyal.

Then his family saw another baby that they thought looked like him.

I just learned that I have a son, you were right. I talked to my family and they said he's mine 99.9% ... I'm having problems with both of my kids right now.

He found out almost right away that the boy was not his, but he accepted Destiny's daughter for several years before he discovered through DNA testing that she did not belong to him. Destiny also had an older child, and then she had another child with Plato's cousin after giving birth to the child who was supposedly Plato's daughter. This was very upsetting to Plato:

this fuck nigga still thinks we're blood. I told you he's my cousin and now he has a baby by the same woman I do. That's nasty and shows he's like fuck me, so I'm like fuck him. My ears and hand is close to fuck boys like him.

On the other hand, his anger at his cousin contradicted what he said on another occasion:

I had sex with a few of my brother and family members old girlfriends. I had them do it to me, but the idea is that people have sex with who they want to. When relationship is over, its no longer my business who's doing what with who! These things might seem crazy to you, but its

just hood life 101 for my family. Humans were not meant to mate with one partner for life, so no big deal!☺

Destiny, obviously, had not mated with one partner for life so Plato did not trust her, but he was trying to do right for his “maybe child.”

I can't truly say what has come over me, but impulse tells me it must stop soon. I have a small situation with my baby mama. I'm trying to avoid any problems with my cousin, and for its becoming harder because she won't stop writing after being asked to stop. Again she's trying to use the kids to make a reason for why she is writing. I don't want my maybe child to hate me when she grows old enough to understand this world. I've been sending birthday gifts, but now looking back on that decision I consider [it] a mistake. I want to send the pictures back, but I don't have the address with me this moment. I fear my non-response will be taken as a positive sign of being in agreement on things and offers introduced in the letter. This is my struggle and I have the right to say who comes into my life. I don't need anyone and loneliness has been very good to me in a crazy way. I'm going to turn back into my old self because it's in my best interest. ... I want you to bring my daughter to see me, maybe in the summer if you have time. That's how I plan to stop my baby-mama from trying to use the kids on the little emotion I have left.

Plato sent me some letters he got from Destiny while she still thought the little girl belonged to him. She wrote:

Don't be upset if [Lavita] doesn't want to come to you. I'm almost certain she won't want to come to you. Instead of being mad you should have sent that paper<sup>51</sup> a long time ago that way she would have still been familiar with you. Who knows, she probably hasn't forgotten who you are. I prayed that you would send one out and my prayer was answered.

Anyway, that's basically what's new, besides I'm starting college soon to be a Medical Administrative assistant. I decided to do that because I want a better life for the kids. Well I'm pretty sure you're not really concerned about what I'm doing, so enough about me. [Lavita] is getting bigger, badder, and smarter. You'll see that when I bring her though.

From another letter

Hope you're doing fine. I'm pretty sure I'm probably the last person you want to hear from. I had seen that you had been reading up on your word when you sent [Lavita] her bracelet for her birthday. She really liked it. I just wanted you to know that I'm training [Lavita] up in the way she should go, so that when she is old she will not depart from it Proverbs 22:6. [Lavita] loves church she sings in the kids choir, she prays, she praises god, and she is almost always going up in the prayer line for my pastor to pray for her. I'm saved and I desire for my children to be saved. [Letisha] loves church too, but I knew you would be wanting to hear more about [Lavita]. Now

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<sup>51</sup> Prison visiting form.

she will be four this year, and she is already very smart colors, letters, scriptures from the bible, you name it. You may also want to reconsider and put aside any grudge you may have for me. Because I may be in [city where prison is located] over the summer if you would like to see [Lavita] in person... I am not the same person you knew before. I am a new creature 2 Corinthians 5:17. Please forgive me for any wrong I may have done or that you may have thought I did to you. ...

After the paternity test on four-year-old Lavita came out negative, Plato wrote, "I finally stopped getting those crazy letters from Miss Crazy 'I have your baby.' Completely happy for no more hate mail." Even though Plato has been incarcerated for eight years the paternity tests continue with different women.

Plato has never acknowledged that women like LaToya and Destiny would not be accusing him of fathering their children if he had not been promiscuous (or at least either used a condom or had spoken to the women about birth control). One of the strangest things that Plato ever said to me was this:

I like kids to and I have nieces and nephews that I haven't ever seen. Hey, you must know black people have lots of kids, it goes back to slavery times when negro women were at times freed for having their master as many as 13 or 15 children they would sale. I'm trying now to find why whites don't have lots of kids like other races. It's really cold where most whites lived back in the days man started to really walk the earth. I assume it has to be the climate that lead the white men's body to develop low birth rates.

I told him that many people use birth control because they do not want to have more children than they can support, although I was surprised that we had to have the conversation. Except for Geppetto's sex education talk with his children, none of the men seemed concerned about birth control (or even sexually transmitted diseases). In fact, Doctor See wrote:

I did flirt with other girls but my lady always came first. I cheated before only cause my lady and I had fallen out. Actually she initiated it by sleeping with my cousin. Another thing she did was get an abortion knowing I wanted her to have my baby. I forgave her many times, but I ended up letting her go.

Man O' War wrote "I'm different from my guys. Like I'm against abortions." When I was talking to him about the births of his third and fourth sons (with his third and fourth baby-mamas) I asked him about using birth control methods and he said (as quoted above): "They told me they *were* using birth control. They just wanted to have my baby, I guess."

While I frequently heard Plato's mother, Amethyst, admonish her sons to use condoms so they did not get AIDS, the issue of unplanned pregnancy was never discussed by any of the men (or female family members) in my presence. Terms like family planning or birth control were completely absent from any discussions about sex – mostly because concepts like "planning" and "control" imply a mindset of taking responsibility in the present for the future. Plato's comment about the "white men's body... develop[ing] low birth rates," illustrates a complete lack of exposure to the idea that control over reproduction is even possible. Most of the prisoners accepted, without question, short-term relationships, multiple-partner fertility, and the capriciousness of babies arriving by chance or luck (whether good luck or bad luck). Yet, many of the prisoners with children expressed the idea that their children are their main reason for happiness. Doctor See was upset when his girlfriend had an abortion and Capo was upset when his girlfriend lied about being pregnant. Geppetto said that his children are "everything to me," and Man O' War wrote "But it feels like I don't got shit 2 liv 4 but my son."

Also, as mentioned above, children can become a situational reason for committing crimes which reduces the prisoner's culpability for illegal activities. Latrell, a sixteen-

year-old student at Ethan Allen who had a three-year-old daughter with one girl and who was expecting his second child with a different girl wrote to me about this. First he said that he wanted to get out of prison because “I don’t want my kids to come see their daddy in a visiting room any more.” Then, in another letter he wrote,

I know I made a stupid decision by having unprotected sex but I got to take care of my responsibilities. I knew I couldn’t get a job at my age so I started ‘hustling’ because I wanted my princess to have it all. Then when I got to the age when I can get a job I didn’t want one because I was so immune to selling drugs I didn’t want to quit. My daughter is what motivate me to get out and to be a better person. Everytime I look at her picture on my wall I feel like I disappointed her. I want to show her the right way in life. I want to get her on track right now before it get too late. For my unborn child I want him to know who daddy is. I want him/her to meet his sister. Most of all I want to be a whole family. Kids learn better when they have parents in the house. I just want my children to be better than I was.

### **Offenders claim to be *Lonely and Abandoned***

Among my consultants, there were many types of relationships with family and friends (other than girlfriends) that were important to the prisoners, but which were also tenuous and frustrating. The prison system exacerbated the fragility of those bonds by making contact difficult to sustain. The men often told me that people that they had helped or been close to on the street abandoned them as soon as they got locked up. When they needed money, wanted someone to take their collect telephone calls, visit them, or write them letters (which represented emotional support), many of their friends and family did not come through with anything at all. Each of the men had specific people that they expected to help them (and even sometimes had promised to help them), but the prisoners were then frequently disappointed or angry when those people did not do what the men wanted or expected them to do.



There are several ways to look at the situation. First of all, most of their friends and family (especially those who did not sell drugs) did not have very much money and would have been facing severe economic hardship if they sent large sums of money or took many collect calls. The task of visiting could be somewhere along varying degrees of difficulty, depending on the institution and how far it was from where people lived, whether or not they had a vehicle, whether or not they had small children, and the specific visiting policies of the institution. On the other hand, written letters are fairly inexpensive to send and could be completed from one's own home. But writing can be difficult for persons with learning disabilities or who do not have very much education which are categories into which many prisoners and their associates fall.

My personal experience as an ethnographer was that prisoners sometimes had unreasonable expectations of what I could do for them. For example, Doctor See asked me to pay the \$250 DNA analysis surcharge that all Wisconsin prisoners convicted of felonies are required to pay. (I did not pay it.) Also, most prisoners asked for favors that required time and/or research, such as finding them a lawyer or law student to help them appeal their cases, find them pen-pals, look for a variety of information on the Internet, send them books, magazines, and catalogs, and contact their families to tell them things or ask them to send money to the prisoners. I tried to do as much as I could, but I frequently got letters asking me why a particular favor had not been completed yet. The prisoners had a completely unrealistic view of ordinary life. In prison, time seems to go very slowly. Prisoners are bored and, in many institutions, do not have much to do except watch television. Some institutions have educational or

vocational programs, but Geppetto was the only prisoner in my sample who really spent a great deal of time on programming (although, depending on the institution, this was not always the prisoners' fault). During the entire time I was in contact with these prisoners I was employed at two or three part-time jobs, taking care of my children as a single mother, and working on this dissertation (including a significant amount of reading). I felt like the prisoners had no idea how much time it takes to work or attend college, do the ordinary tasks of parenting, or had even forgotten how long it takes to do commonplace tasks such as grocery shopping and cooking (because their food just came on a tray). Most of them had little or no work experience in legitimate employment. None of them had any education past high school. Those who had children had left most of the day-to-day parenting to the children's mothers, or other female relatives (in particular, their own mothers). The street culture from which they came is notoriously lacking in discipline, planning for the future, or taking any kind of personal responsibility (Wright and Decker 1997, Fleisher 1995, Anderson 1999). Many prisoners did not even attend school on a regular basis since the early grades of elementary school, so time and industrious activity are amorphous concepts in the street world in which no one has to be anywhere on any kind of schedule and most activity is unplanned and impulsive.

So, to put the situation in perspective, I think that the prisoners sometimes had unreasonable expectations of what their own family members could be expected to do, considering the individual circumstances in their lives. On the other hand, I did sometimes agree that some people, especially girlfriends and male friends their own

age, were reneging on promises or not fulfilling the common expectations of reciprocity. It is hard to say, however, since I had only the prisoners' perspectives (usually) and very infrequently those of their friends and family. I do know, however, that from the prisoners' points-of-view they felt ignored or abandoned by many people who they cared about, and who they had believed cared about them. In the words of Man O'

War:

Well yeah but I'm still depressed, tired and sick of this institution. ... I think a lot of us feel abandoned by family, and friends. On the outside I am always in the center of attention. I get called 4 money, ride, help 4 this, and 4 my pharmaceutical connections, but in here I barely get letters.

When prisoners move from being social assets to social liabilities, they begin to question the authenticity of their ties to other persons who suddenly find them significantly less interesting in the market of cooperative exchange.

At one time Doctor See, Man O' War, and Fanatic were all part of the same clique (Man O' War's term, "click"), but they do not always get along with each other. In this case, a clique is a group of street associates who sell drugs together, although the Milwaukee Police Department and the District Attorney's office call them "crime crews." According to recent articles in *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* "Big gangs have a shadow of their former influence here, but they have been replaced by small, loosely organized bands of young men" called "crime crews" whose organization is "unpredictable" and "spontaneous" (Nunnally 2007). In addition, both Doctor See and Man O' War told me that they are "cousins," so I believe Man O' War's mother and Doctor See's father must be siblings.

When incarcerated and they no longer have money or a presence on the street, the prisoner often becomes to invisible to his former friends and family members – and that really hurts. Even without a great deal of financial support, knowing that people are “in their corner” (a common term used by my consultants), makes a big difference. Also, as mentioned above, emotional support is critical to post-release success. Doctor See discussed this in several letters.

A few people write me beside you, my mom and dad. Friends that are locked up write sometimes and my cousin in [another prison] also writes. Crazy you asked have I heard from any of my male friends? Only one of my friends who's like family wrote me twice and also sent me \$50. The rest of them feel like this: out of sight out of mind, [Fanatic] and [Man O' War] included. When [Fanatic] was still locked up he stopped writing. Do I care? Truthfully I'm hurt by their actions. All I give is love to my friends and family. To be treated like some peon/nobody upsets me. There was many times I gave my last or half of what I had when somebody had nothing. As I grow as a man I've learned to appreciate their actions. My current situation has proved to me who really loves and cares about me.

Prior to being locked up I used to give people the benefit of the doubt and just give them my trust. What did they do, spit in my face. From this day forward my trust will be locked away until you inherit the key. When I got out last summer I helped my godbrother while he was in jail. I sent money, took care of his babymomma and accepted phone calls (\$15) a call. When [Fanatic] got sanctioned last summer for a week I accepted about \$100 in calls from the county jail, probably more. Both individuals showed no type of appreciation towards me for looking out. I live and I learn. I didn't look out for them expecting something in return. I did it out of the love I have for them. Another deaf ear to my father's advice. “People take your kindness for your weakness.” No more, I'm growing as a person, thus learning from past mistakes. The people I care about the most are those who care for me.

[Terrell's] brother is another individual who is dead to me. When I was out I took care of his baby momma the whole time I was out and he didn't send me a fucking crumb. Shows what type of friends you have when one is condemned to these walls.

You can't even depend on someone when you really need them. That's why people being released from prison have that fuck the world attitude. They feel that everyone they ever trusted has forsake them.

Here Doctor See says that he gave without expecting anything in return, although he has a fairly clear idea of exactly how much money he spent on each person and what

else he did to help them. His underlying belief is that reciprocity and exchange are basic moral behaviors. He supported other people and now he expects that they should support him. In addition, some of these obligations are specifically gendered. He helped his godbrother's and Terrell's baby mamas, but it's the men who owe him -- not the women. Here, once again, it is the presumption that men are the providers who take on the dangerous jobs to support the women. This discussion may be in opposition to the "bitches and hoers" talk that frequently comes from the men, although perhaps it is the friends' children who are being supported.

Fanatic was released from prison before Doctor See and he came to visit me three times at my home. He gave me a phone number and told me to tell Doctor See to call him from prison. Between the past resentment and issues with the telephone possibly belonging to one of Fanatic's friends or relatives, they never did get to speak. Later I kept hearing rumors back from Man O' War about things that Fanatic had done that got him into trouble with street associates, eventually resulting in him being pistol-whipped by someone. I talked to Doctor See about this and he said:

I hope [Fanatic] isn't letting anyone treat him wrong. Of course, people are going to try him cause he has no one to ride with him. His best bet is to chill out and not be in the streets. Whenever I call home I'll try and get in contact with him. Do you have his number? I lost a lot of numbers due to the fact that I had to throw a lot of my mail away. I don't even have your number any more and I had to get my mom's number from my aunt.

On the other hand, Doctor See and Man O' War worked out their differences. Doctor See said:

Thanks for sending me that address so I could write [Man O' War]. He's my family and I'm a forgiving person. I believe in second chances but cross me again, consider me deceased.

In reply, Man O' War wrote about Doctor See:

... if he needed me [when] I'm out here I did wat ever. He expects me to do to much. I want a normal life. As u said I called. More than once. But didn't get an answer. & I was also getting in trouble going back and forth to jail. The last time I talked to you I was in [name of prison]. I went for violating a curfew and my name was put in a shooting on [name] street. I got into it with [Doctor See's] cousins. I was doing a lot. At that point a lot was going on.

While incarcerated, it can be very difficult to negotiate shifting alliances and complicated friendships with members of one's crime crew, especially when they are also getting arrested and moving around to different jails and prisons.

In addition, when Doctor See was behind bars he also was reunited with other people he knew from the streets. While some other prisoners were happy to see their old friends in prison, Doctor See had a different take on the situation.

This will be one experience I'll never forget. Since arriving here my heart has been broken by the amount of people I know in here. It's not only sad, but it's tragic how we (young black men) continue to make the DOC the most profitable business in Wisconsin. What would it take for us to change that? Change in thoughts, feelings, and behavior is what it'll take to make this monopoly of a business crumble. I've ran across a lot of intelligent individuals. I only converse with people I can gain knowledge from.

As well as associations with people they knew from the past, prisoners meet new people while behind bars. Doctor See and Fanatic met Capo while they were all incarcerated together, and they became friends. These are excerpts from two letters that Capo wrote to Doctor See:

Man we really got to stay out of jail cuz this shit ain't what's up, but we know that already. I feel the same way you feel about it, if a person ain't around when you down, but show up when you're up that mean they only love you for other shit and not for you. But shit is good I don't need them or want them around you dig. That's what's up for now and I'll treat them like they treat me. But it's good my nigga you know it's love this way, but let me know how shit going for you. Me I got to get my HSED now cuz I got to better my life but fuck with me my nigga.

Love Brother

But when you get out send me some flicks of some hoes and you make sure you party for both of us. I know you going back to the Mil but where you going to be at [gang area]. Let me know for I could pop at you in the world. And we could get up you dig. Yeah I'm done with this shit too.

Jail for the birds real nigga ain't post to be here. So we got to stay out and stay away from this bitch. A bro that make sure you keep in contact with me and update me on the world. And some hoes, don't forget about the hoes. Stay focused and keep your head up out there. Shit could get crazy out there in the Mil. And make your goals your first and only thing to be worry about. But you know its love this way and I'm going to fuck with you when I get out this bitch. But do you, and stay sucker free, and away from blow pop land. Oh, yeah, I got some hot shit too I got way colder on that rap shit. But fuck hoes and get money and stay away from fake ass nigga and always stay 100%. But I'm about to end this. Stay up my nigga and lay low.

Doctor See (who was being released first) wrote back to Capo and did what the young men call "trying to sell him a dream."

What's poppin brotha?

I pray all is well considering these walls got a hold on you. Brotha I'm peaceful just awaiting my departure from lock world 2 free world. So I see you still ain't got yo finances which are entitled to you.<sup>52</sup> Don't worry we gon get them on my word, on my word we will get you duckets.<sup>53</sup> How you been holdin up God. Julie has kept me posted with your whereabouts. She is such a beautiful person. One whose friendship I cherish. When I was out '08 me and [Fanatic] got into all types of BS. I ain't w/ that brotha like that when I touch. I gotta get me right Bro, fuck the bullshit. If one's ain't tryna help me get right, then fuck em. Ay what you got left for time? Let me know cause soon as I touch I can get yo finances together. On my word brotha soon as I get out and get right you 100. You already know the signs we draw. Conscious mind again I refuse to blind!!! ... I'll slowly piece all yo essentials together. First I'll start with yo clothes then I'll work on yo electronics. I gotta get my godbrother right too. This ain't no talk! I speak bro & I practice my established speech. Take it for face value gold weighted in! ... Never, I mean never let them control yo mind. You may be on physical lock, but you are the master of yo mind!!! Get at me bro. Keep it smooth.

Doctor See was released over a year ago and has not sent any money to Capo. Yet, these types of promises seem to be common among the men, and most of the recipients are aware that the writers will not really come through. It is just talk, (even though Doctor See said, "this ain't no talk"), and wishful thinking. The encouragements and commiserations are a form of prison theater in which the stage acts include sure-to-

<sup>52</sup> A reference to the work release money that state appropriated from Capo.

<sup>53</sup> Duckets is money.

be-broken pledges of generosity coming from the men's fantasies of future riches that overflow enough to spread the wealth around.

Capo, like many incarcerated men, came from chaotic families who were so complex and immersed in their own individual problems, they could not help him. Since he did not know his father, his crack-addicted mother had died from AIDS when he was eighteen, and he grew up in different homes from each of his siblings, he often turned to his aunt who had raised him to try to get help. During his frequent incarcerations, Capo often asked me to call his aunt to ask for assistance, but I was never able to get in contact with her because no one ever answered the phone at the number he gave me. Capo's sister said that their aunt had two mild heart attacks recently, so her poor health was probably a factor in not being able or willing to help Capo, although it was unclear whether he knew that since no one was communicating with him.

Could you please try to call my aunt and tell her I need to know what's going on with them or if she got the same address. Tell her to write me or let me know something and tell her I need some money please. Oh yeah tell her I love her to.

So how did it go with my aunt, did you get ahold of her or what? And yeah black people are weird as hell to me. We never stick together for shit. We got too much pride and we don't know how to push it to the side. Yeah everybody is selfish that the truth for real.

Capo also tried to get support from his three older siblings and especially wanted to be close to his brother, who is eight years older, but there were problems in that relationship, possibly because they did not grow up in the same household. His brother and his baby mama live in a neighboring state. When Capo was in prison the first time I did a three-way call to their number.

You know what I talked to my brother and he gave the phone to somebody else. That's crazy he didn't want to talk to me.



Then his brother was convicted of drug conspiracy charges and sent to a federal prison half way across the country. Capo was still angry at his brother for things that he had done, but he adhered to the maxim that blood is thicker than water and insisted that he was a better person than his brother.

I was really disappointed in my brother cause he let me down and he try to hurt me in all type of ways but it cool. Now he's just like me locked up but he might be going for a long time. But when I get out I won't do him the way he did me I'll send him money cause he's my blood even though he played me.

It was difficult to communicate with his brother, however, because the federal prison did not allow him to mail letters to another correctional institution. Capo then tried to find out news from his brother's baby mama. He would write, but she would not write back, and when I tried to call her, I seldom got through because she changed her phone number frequently.

Capo has a sister who is four years older than he is who also is difficult to reach and not very involved with his life. He feels close to his cousins (the children of the aunt who raised him) and tries to contact them as well. The one person who does help him is his oldest sister who was fifteen when he was born. She remembers a normal life before their mother got addicted to drugs and was diagnosed with AIDS. Yet, she said that she spent a lot of money on Capo (for clothes) the last time he was out of prison, but then he got arrested again. She said, "Both of my brothers love jail." Like many female family members of prisoners, she is exasperated with them because the men are so entrenched in the lifestyle and do not seem to want to change. The women feel that the men are a bad financial and emotional investment. In more introspective moments,

Capo understood that some of his problems with other people were caused by the decisions he made that resulted in his arrests.

I guess this shows me to stay out of jail cuz I hate depending on people. Cuz all they do is lie to try to make you feel better, but I guess that's how life goes sometimes.

Capo frequently told me that I was the only person who consistently helped him when he was behind bars.

When you in jail you need them letter to keep you up. It make me think that somebody out there care. I just wish people knew how it feels to be locked up. I hate this place so bad. I just need somebody I could tell how my day went and how much I love them and how much they love me. It just make me feel more better. It make me think that I really have more in life to get back to. I should say it makes me happy and it makes my day go by faster and easy. I be stressing so much in here that's crazy, but as soon as I get a letter from somebody that makes my day go more better. It take a lot of stress away from me you know. I just hate when people forget about that makes me feel like I never matter to them in the first place. But now I see where they come from but at the same time you got to feel where I come from. I guess people have to come to jail to feel the way I feel right now. I just want somebody to love me I'm not that bad, am I, but it's cool. I guess I'm on my own right now. Everybody turn their back on me but you. But I got to stop thinking about them and stay in my books right. It's hard not to think about them, but it's easy for them to forget about me. I guess everybody too busy for me right now, but I'll be ok.

Unlike some of the other prisoners, Capo did begin working when he got out of prison the first time. Then he got arrested for selling drugs in Chicago prior to his previous Wisconsin arrest. When I went to visit him in Milwaukee Country Jail (before he was sent back to Chicago), he told me that he had been spending some of the money he earned at his job on his friends. After his arrest, no one came to see him, and no one wrote letters. He released his property to me so I could get his cell phone where he had the numbers of his friends and family, so he could try to contact them. As time went on, he came to the same conclusions as every other prisoner about being used for his money, and then abandoned.

I can't wait to get out of here cuz this place is ending me crazy. Man, why do I keep coming back here? I just got to do right when I get out. I hate this place it's like people always forget about you when you're here, but when your out everybody want to be part of your life. That's why

when I get out this time if you didn't write me or send money or nothing I'm not going to come around you or act like I know you. So if you forgot about me then keep it that way. There for if I ever come back I don't have to worry about you.

The last time Capo was out of prison he created a Facebook page which he asked me to use to entreat all of his friends and family to write to him and to get their street addresses and phone numbers so he could contact them from prison. When Capo was charged with killing another drug dealer, I used his Facebook page to contact his family to let them know what was happening. I also used Facebook to get the telephone number of a witness he wanted for the murder case. Capo was the only prisoner I knew who used Internet social networking. I could see, however, that his friends and family members who used the site were attached to the ease and speed of the medium, and did not want to bother with taking time to write a "snail mail" letter to him. Even though he was in prison and could not use the Internet, nobody bothered to mail him a birthday card; they just said "Happy Birthday" on Facebook.

Let everybody on Facebook know I said merry x-mas and happy new year and to party for me. Man I got another birthday to do in here. I'll be 23 years old. How do the world move so fast? Well some things I'll never know, but stay safe and keep doing you.

Thanks again for the birthday card you were the only one who sent me one. But it's cool. So who all write me on Facebook and tell me Happy birthday?

Tell everybody on Facebook I said thanks for the wishes.

I put Capo's prison address on his Facebook page. Even though he has 140 "friends"<sup>54</sup>, he has not gotten any paper letters at the prison as a result of this strategy.

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<sup>54</sup> One of Capo's Facebook friends was a former prisoner that he met at the drug prison in Illinois. The man tried to contact Capo on Facebook to see "what's up," but Capo had been arrested again. Capo said "That's my guy."

In a letter from prison, (even before he was convicted of homicide), Capo wrote:

I just feel like giving up sometimes and just don't worry about nothing no more but I can't cuz my heart won't let me cuz I care for people too much. I hurt so bad inside I just want to cry but my pride won't let me cuz I'll feel lesser than a man if I do. I don't know what to do or say no more. But I got to stay strong for myself cuz I'm the only one that matters right now. Have you ever felt like the hole world turn its back on you? How sad is that? I am hurting right now I just need somebody to tell me that everything about to be ok, that I'm going to be cool. Man, I'm sorry I just had to let some of that bullshit out of my chest.

Watching Capo get convicted of homicide was very depressing and, in fact, the low point of doing this ethnography. I thought about all the other things he had done and had wanted to do with his life:

I am not a bad guy I just made a mistake. We live and learn from our mistakes. Trust me I am learning right now. I was born in Chicago IL, I also live there my hole life but I be back and ford from Chicago to Milwaukee all the way up to Duluth. I also been to Iowa. But most of all I like to have fun go out to movies, parks, beaches, fancy restaurants. I also love to chill cruise around the city and go to new places. My talents are playing football, B-ball, cards, and I can also rap a lil.

I like to have fun and go places and try new things. I been all around the Midwest. Anyway I am funny and I enjoy watching the sky at night for some reason. I also like to cook, but most of all I could do anything with working with my hands. I used to box at this place in Chicago called the Golden Dome. I made it all the way to the Golden Glove and lost but I always used to put myself down for that. But now that I am older I understand that you can't win every fight cuz somewhere down the line your going to meet your match or find somebody way more better than you. And that's not just in boxing that's everything we do.

What I want out of life is to be somebody that everybody remember in a good way. I don't want to come back in ford to jail. But most of all I am still young and I have a lot of living to do. It's lot of thing that I never had done that I want to do. But I got to stay focus on my goals first cuz with out goal you really don't have nothing right.

Now that Capo will be living through twenty years in prison, reaching his goals will be a long way off. Nearly every letter that one prisoner sends to another has the line "keep your head up." I owe the title of this dissertation to a line from a letter I forwarded from Slam Dunk's best friend, Shake Down, to Capo: "Never put your head down unless you pray." Keeping one's head up means to be strong and not give up, an important

admonition in the face of the despair so frequently experienced in the ghetto, and especially when behind bars, confronting long sentences and little hope for the future.

### **Offenders claim to be *Bereaved and Desensitized to Death***

While offenders feel as though their friends and relatives have forgotten them while they are incarcerated, imprisonment is not the only way that African American prisoners lose important relationships. In the ghetto, death on the street is extremely common and affects every aspect of the way those still living respond to life. This is what Doctor

See wrote:

Those of us who continue to “trap” are doing exactly what that word means, enclosing ourselves. Why would we want to indulge in something that bounds us? We do it because of our attraction to the thrill and got to have it persona. There is another side to “trapping.” We know the “highs” which aren’t “highs” at all if you look at the bigger picture. It’s only an act of stupidity on our part. We choose to portray an image of a man who has no knowledge. We all know what robbing, killing, trapping, and scheming can get us. Let’s be real with ourselves. We all know the consequences of those things. What we’re saying is that we are attracted to prison and an early grave.

Dying on the street is such a common occurrence that all of my consultants discussed many deaths of friends and relatives. Fanatic wrote (above):

Now my friend [Tomas] got out before I did and we was hanging out together all the time. He wasn’t dealing any more either. But a lot of people know us for dealing so one day when he was by his self some guy shot and killed him. That’s not all during my incarceration time I loss five family members.

Gepetto:

There are a million and one legal hustles that one can do in the world, but those from my communities seem to only utilize a few. Sell drugs, rob, steal, and kill.

Capo:

Yeah I’m from the Chi, I grow up on the west side of Chicago. I know you heard story about the hoods in Chicago. It really worser now. That crazy that our city is so big and beautiful and the only thing that’s going on is killing and drug dealing but that’s Chicago for you. ...

Plato saw and heard about so many people that he knew dying, he said:

I've learned to just shrug things off even death. I seen more shit than I would have liked to, so shit hearing is like reading a book or getting one read to you.

Here he compares real life and real death the unreality of fiction, as a way of explaining the process of becoming impervious to pain. He also claimed that violence could be humorous:

Well, I think I might know a little about human violence, and I can tell you up close its really funny. The reasons some of these dudes here have for killing, would make you laugh every time you look at them. It's guys here that have killed over beer, women which is number one then you've got shoes, chains and food or words! You should go look up murder case or shooting if you really want to look into human violence in situations that lead to bad effects.

In addition, he suggested that the ghetto was like a war zone and using black men from the ghetto as government soldiers would be a good idea because they were already trained.

I hear about that July 4<sup>th</sup> shooting before it hit the news. Those guys were "Murder Mob" and their people up here are going to do bad things to the shooters. They just stop a war like two years ago with B.O.S. (Brothers of the Struggle) and they lost a lot of good brothers now they are cool.

I've been in 5 wars where you don't get to go home after killing for your country.

I wish they would start letting us do this time in the military, honestly I don't have a problem with killing or driving through gun fire. If we take all our gang-bangers and all around bad people, dropping them in our war zones with guns, food, water, and rewards for kills and land. I know crime would go down lots and we would save lots of money!☺

While Plato tried to pretend like there was nothing disturbing to him about violence and death, he was not discussing any specific person who had been close to him, but was just talking about violence in general. Man O' War gave a more detailed account of how it feels when a close companion is killed:

Yeah it's crazy when ur locked up & one of urs gets killed. My mom, sister, and nephew came. Even though I told them not 2. But they also told me about one of my best friends. A [name of crime crew] he got shot at [street coordinates] on Monday. Yeah even though I ain't heard from him since October. He did look out a few times & when we were in contact he was here. I know we talked about the streets showing loyalty. In jail it's rare, but when your out its there. "out of sight out of mind." have u heard of that. Anyway when out my presence carries a lil weight.

I'm salty because I don't know how to contact his mom & brothers until I get out. I know he got killed in front of his brother crib. People thought I was salty cuz I'm supposed to get a substantial amount of cash from him. That's no worry one way or another I will find a way. But u can't bring back someone who is gone.

I got to find out who did it? Why? What was it over? What am I going to do about it? I know I have to chill. I am but it might b to where I'm stepping out to 4 a reason I have no clue about. Just because of how close we were or the click we are in.

I will try to defuse the situation if possible but who knows what is going to happen. I'm salty. I know it wouldn't have played out the same way if I was out.

He was in Ethan Allen [dates]. Teachers and staff know who he is. Maybe some inmates. Its crazy. Right when I'm coming home. I don't know. He was the one I least expected to die.

Here, as Man O' War struggles to figure out what happened to his friend, he accepts one of the five storylines identified by Agnew "an unresolved dispute." Man O' War says "What was it over?"

Besides the dispute, another of Agnew's storylines is "a desperate need for money."

As mentioned above, drug dealers are one of the best targets for robbery. Because of the significant potential for either loss or gain, both of financial assets and prestige, sometimes these confrontations between street men can be violent or even fatal.

When Capo attempted to rob another drug dealer, the victim's female friend (who was waiting for him in a car) observed Capo hitting the man in the head with his gun and, when the victim attempted to flee, she saw Capo shoot him. According to Plato's brother, Slam Dunk, the safest thing to do in a robbery is not to resist and give the robber anything he wants, and "I'll see you later." This means that, due to the fact that most criminals operate in a limited area, they are usually recognized by the victim, even

when wearing a mask. Sooner or later the assailant will be observed by the former victim in a vulnerable position and this will result in a violent retaliation. Recent research has shown that in many large cities, including Milwaukee, three-quarters<sup>55</sup> or more of homicide victims had criminal records (Johnson 2007) which shows that street criminals frequently target each other. Robberies are the second largest cause of homicide in Milwaukee.<sup>56</sup>

Despite his family's assertion of his inherent goodness, the man that Capo was convicted of killing had a long list of his own offenses from selling crack to battery to weapons possession. He was clearly targeted by Capo and his accomplice for robbery due to the fact that they thought he would have money or drugs. In the newspaper story about his death, it said that the victim had told friends that he was afraid of being robbed. He knew the dangers inherent in his lifestyle and, like my consultants, took the risks anyway.

In Man O' War's letter about his friend, he says "He was the one I least expected to die." The underlying implication is that he did expect other people to die. As Plato wrote, "Life is short in the ghetto." Being on the street with African American gang members carrying guns is to observe fear. If they are in my car, I usually have to keep the car moving because they are afraid that if I stop, they might get shot. If we do stop at a gas station to buy them cigarettes, I have to park right next to the door so they can

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<sup>55</sup> It was 88% in Milwaukee in 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Argument/fight was listed as the most common cause, and domestic violence was a close third. (Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission report 2010).



get out quickly. If I get out of the car, I need to leave the key in the ignition, so they could drive off in an emergency. Latrell wrote:

Being in a neighborhood where most of my older friends is dying by the day scares me and most of all hurt me because the next bullet can be for me. Already this year two of my older closest friends got killed this year. Last year my older brother and my best friend got killed. I'm not trying to keep the trend going. I want it to stop.

## Conclusions

Like I told you before, the ghetto has a lot of unfair twists to it, it plays a lot of games through the individuals that love it the most. People where I'm from [wear] many different faces, so please be careful when listening to the stories they tell.

- Plato

### How Offenders View their Own Stories

Throughout this ethnographic project I have collected stories related by offenders who were eager to tell me about themselves because they wanted to be understood as reasonable and decent, not condemned as terrible people. While the men sometimes minimized (or did not disclose) certain features of their accounts that might make them look (or perhaps, feel) bad, they all wanted to talk about their lives and explain themselves. Every one of them thought that they had something important to say and seemed pleased about having their stories told to a wider audience through this writing. During all my years of research in the prison system and on the street I did not encounter anyone who did not think they had something significant to tell other people. Some of this arose from the feeling of not being understood or valued, such as when Plato went into juvenile corrections and found out that “white people [think] most black are under educated” or when Fanatic wrote: “people who isn’t from my neighborhood ... just assume that we are dumb.”

In addition, a great deal of the discussion from the men revolved around the idea that their experiences were valuable as cautionary examples to others (especially younger people) who might also consider heading down the wrong road. Doctor See said:

Today as a man I realize my faults and I will learn from them. I want to be a positive role model for all my ghetto children. I know what must be done to save them. It will be a hard journey but it's a journey I'm willing to motivate myself to complete. I plan on volunteering my time to speak to young teens and children of all ages about “street life.” I feel I'm a great candidate with a powerful message that can reach them. I WILL SUCCEED!

This is similar to Shari, the female prisoner to whom Plato was writing at one time, who “wants to be a drug counselor when she comes home” (even though she was in prison for drugs, among other things). These impulses to tell one’s story as a warning or advice to others frequently have been documented in the literature as the desire to take on the role of a “wounded healer” or “professional ex-“ (Maruna 2001: 102-103). This is a way to redeem one’s misdeeds and acquire a pro-social identity that uses stories from the past to salvage a social purpose or meaning for the part of the person’s life that might look as if it had been negative or misused.

Finally, the impulse to tell a story divides the narrator into a separate person from the protagonist. This narrative distance allows the teller of the tale to make moral judgments about the protagonist and give meaning to events and experiences that may not have been introspectively reflected upon during the commission of the acts performed. Telling their stories to me, especially for those in solitary confinement or for those who found that prison was a place where they felt compelled to put on what Man O’ War referred to as a “phasade” (façade) or mask, allowed the prisoners to think about how to positively present their internal selfhoods to an outsider who wanted their stories in their own words, and found the narratives valuable. Telling their stories to me was, in a sense, cathartic. The offenders were able to show that their moral selves were on a heroic journey toward positive change and redemption, and to disown or disavow the negative aspects of the past by showing that they knew right from wrong -- and were the kinds of person who wanted to do right.

### Suggestions for Further Research

As I was coding and categorizing the information in the offenders' narratives, I became very much aware of the fact that very small parts of the collected data could be used as examples of several different important points. There is a great deal of discourse analysis that uses a micro-assessment technique in which just one word or phrase is shown to demonstrate a particular line of reasoning. The data that I collected frequently had several consecutive sentences that were so rich in information that they could have been used to demonstrate multiple ideas, depending on which aspect of the wording on which I chose to focus. This was one reason why I used the same quotations more than once in the writing of this text. Even in doing that, however, I believe that the narratives still have a great deal to be analyzed, including many parts of the offenders' letters which were not used at all in this paper. While considering the letter fragments that were included, the "meaning" of the texts depended on the lens through which I chose to examine them. Further research could easily be done on the collected letters. In addition, I am still corresponding with most of the offenders, so it would be interesting to see how their life stories and perceptions continue to evolve should I wish to add the perspective of time-depth to this research in the future.

In addition, if I were to propose future directions for research (either for myself or others) I would suggest that someone examine the narratives of female offenders. I found the few letters that Plato sent me from women in prison to be very interesting and somewhat different from the letters written by the males. A study of female

offenders could either be examined as narratives of women of a particular race or using gender alone as a criterion, although I would suggest both since the male offenders in this study constructed their selfhoods using both race and gender. I also think that offender narrative should be examined in terms of other cultural groups, such as Mexicans or Puerto Ricans since they have very strong gang presences, especially in larger cities. Obviously, this must be done by someone who can speak Spanish. Furthermore, a study should be done with offenders do not appear have group affiliations as a part of their criminal motivations. When I worked at Ethan Allen School I met many white sex offenders who committed crimes seemingly without ethnic cultural narratives, although they may have been operating from wider American cultural models about male privilege and the position of women (or children) in society although I cannot say this with any certainty.

I would also suggest looking at African Americans in different cities. Much of what I personally have read about gangs has been about Los Angeles, (and often about the Crips and the Bloods), but that milieu is certainly not the case in Milwaukee. The men I encountered in Milwaukee are much less concerned about gang memberships as performance (such as wearing specific colors or using hat position or shoelaces to demonstrate gang affiliation). They infrequently used hand signs and hardly mentioned graffiti. While they often joked about what they should or should not eat (since some gangs have dietary restrictions) or what they should or should not wear, it never seemed like a matter of life and death the way I have read about Los Angeles.

Furthermore, many offenders from Milwaukee are not in formal gangs, but crime crews

like Man O' War, Doctor See, and Fanatic. Man O' War wrote about how Venkatesh's discussion of the way that upper echelons of Chicago gangs took most of the drug money from the street level dealers was a situation specific only to that place and not correct in terms of his own experience in Milwaukee. Fleisher's work about mixed-race gangs (black and white people working together) in Kansas City is much more similar to what I saw in Milwaukee, although not exactly the same. I believe that any one of these suggested projects would be promising and achievable areas for research because, as Presser said, "stories are excellent vehicles for explaining oneself" and "we are especially inclined to explain ourselves when we have been sanctioned" (2010). As I experienced and mentioned above, offenders *want to* tell their stories.

### **Multiple Concluding Perspectives**

To complete this project, I chose several perspectives through which to draw my final conclusions. My first perspective was to look at the prisoners' stories through the lens of cognitive schemas which the prisoners themselves were holding up as models of how the world *should* be or how they *should* think or behave. While they did use the wider cultural model of the American Dream, it took on a specific subcultural focus in the offenders' environments of the ghetto and prison. Second, I examined the stories of the offenders through the lens of agency. The structure versus agency debate is very significant, not only in academia, but in the criminal justice system itself, especially when attorneys, judges, and juries determine the exact charge and sentence that an offender is finally given by first making an attempt to assess motivation and mitigating

circumstances. By choosing one charge from multiple possible charges, and determining a sentence, the criminal justice system is weighing dispositional and situational factors that may have led this person to have committed this crime. Third, and related to those questions as well, is my choice to look through the lens of morality. Under which circumstances is a person considered “bad” or wrong, and (conversely implied) is the question of which circumstances can be used to label a person as “good” or righteous. Finally, one of my original purposes was to consider the lens of culture since I did not find any other academic literature specifically about African American offender narrative (or, in particular, using their *written* words). In considering culture, I had to consider three layers of experience: not only the offenders’ culture and the concept of honor, but my own culture and how that affected the way I viewed my consultants, and, finally, the culture of the United States as a whole, particularly the cultural model of the American Dream.

In general, throughout the project, I was fascinated by Cohen’s work on denial because he discussed how not only individuals, but whole societies, can push awareness of what-we-don’t-want-to-think-about out of the forefront of their consciousness. Segregation of low-income African Americans means that “we” do not have to look at their poverty or the suffering caused by the country’s still pervasive racism. Building prisons out of public view means that “we” do not have to look at how they operate or whether they actually do anything for rehabilitation or whether the punishment that they mete out makes offenders worse when they walk out than when they walked in. Finally, from an individual perspective, the offenders themselves operate in a perpetual



state of denial about their own criminal behavior. As all of them have asserted to me, they know they are doing something wrong – but they do it anyway.

### **Offender Narrative through the Lens of Unrealized Models**

During the course of this ethnographic project, the young men expressed a great deal of confusion, frustration, and disappointment. They had ideals in mind of how the world was supposed to be, and how they were supposed to be, but neither they, other people, nor circumstances lived up to the perfect models they had in their minds.

Plato's nostalgia for a time that never existed is the accurate expression of the disillusionment about life never living up to the model: "I fill like I should have lived in a different time, it seems like no one wants to be the true essence of what our concepts mean and to me with this falling down the body and soul dies together with that lost of meaning." When creating pseudonyms, I gave him the name " Plato" because he enjoys reading Greek philosophers, especially Plato. In fact, (the real) Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" with the illusory shadows seen by prisoners could be a metaphoric description of these genuine African American prisoners. According to the philosopher, most people are viewing shadows that they perceive as reality.

For Plato (the prisoner), the ideal of what the ghetto had to offer was his older cousin, Weasel, who is an upper level drug supplier and gang leader. A person attaining Weasel's stature and power is a source of both admiration (for his friends) and anxiety (for his enemies).

I guess it takes seeing to believe how dude act when someone comes along with direction. I got a cousin no one's told you about name [Weasel] ask [Pearl] about [Weasel] and just look at her

face, this dude is who everyone even “[Capo]” and whoever else say they know my family fears, looks up to, considered him to be a ghetto guru. The smallest dude in our nation with the biggest head ever, know where the ball or party stops and its with him. The fed’s don’t let him come back to Milwaukee too much from what I hear, but he’s got people from all over the Midwest maybe more places but who knows with the money he made ask [Pearl] who holds those dudes under-foot.

This was, in fact, true. When Capo wrote to Plato’s older brother, Hit Man, he said

But tell me what up with you and ur case. I hope you get a blessing cuz this jail shit for the birds. What up with big cuz tell that nigga I said what up and let him know it’s still love over here. [Weasel] still my nigga<sup>57</sup>.

Very few people will ever attain Weasel’s level of wealth and power. Yet, “ghetto gurus” are one (unattainable) model for a type of alternative accomplishment for low-income black males when they believe that they cannot attain the conventional American Dream.

The other significant thing about Weasel and the model of the ghetto guru is that he is not in prison. The basic unrealized model of street life is to commit crimes, make a lot of money, and *not get caught*. When they are apprehended, many offenders think that they made a mistake this time, but they can be released from prison and do a better job of being a criminal the next time around. Many prisoners also avowed that they did not belong in prison, mostly because it clashed with their self-concepts of being street smart. In a letter to another prisoner, Capo wrote:

Yeah I’m done with this shit too. Jail for the birds real nigga ain’t post to be here. So we got to stay out and stay away from this bitch. When I get out this time I’m bout to sit down and lay low cuz these people ain’t going to keep playing with us. So we got to be more careful and smarter.

Capo is suggesting here that getting caught was his error, not necessarily that crime itself was wrong. The model of being a “real nigga” is to be so surreptitious that they

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<sup>57</sup> “My nigga” is a person that you will be loyal to, through anything, no matter what.

get away with illegal activities or, in essence, to be smarter than the police. As Doctor See wrote: “Our plan is usually something like this. This time I’ll be incognito and let no one know what I’m doing.” In a similar vein, Plato’s cousin, Moonbeam wrote from prison: “I’ve been down for two years and this is not me.” Moonbeam cannot deny that she is in prison, so she denies that the person in prison is her “real” self because she is too smart to be there.

Another dream for drug dealing, occasionally articulated by my consultants, is to make a lot of money and then use it to buy legitimate merchandise or a store or some other way to transfer from the streets to a safer and more pro-social lifestyle. Capo said:

I know [Slam Dunk] is well you know, but he need to stop for some bullshit happen. You never make it far in the drug game. You have to get your money and you post to be in it for the money and turn the money into something positive. You know he really need to stop and try to go to school or try to do something with his life, but look who’s talking (lol).

Yet, whenever the prisoners expressed thoughts about making it in the legitimate economy, it was clear that they had so little experience with lawful work, it was difficult to imagine that they could realize their ephemeral goals. In a letter to a pen-pal website Plato wrote:

My overall goals are to become an entrepreneur in Construction, Food Exports, Clothing and Marketing Specialist Advocate upon the perusal of Business and Marketing degrees. This is the first time I’ve been in an adult prison. I’ve forgiven myself for the things I’ve done along with any victims I might have had. I’m hoping to move on with life and find friends or God willing that special someone.

He was also sure he could make money writing poetry and was very offended when I tried to tell him that was not going to be a highly profitable endeavor (although a marvelous leisure pursuit).

Hey tell me when you get some free time, because I really want to have you type out all those poems I sent you so I can send them to get copyrights and published after. I'm going to turn them into a book, with little stories to go with every poem. I tell myself you were right about me supporting myself, which I some-what do when given the chance to provide help to my peers. You've helped me with my writing skills, and taking away the spelling and handwriting I'll make wonderful literary art. You don't have to type those poems you can write them out, as long as I get them. When I finish this book I'll let you read it first, because your opinion means a lot to me –plus you're a book-worm!

He told me that if I could help him get his book of poems published, he would give me half of his profits – which he assumed would be substantial.

Doctor See also came up with ideas for making money in the legitimate economy:

This guy (me) is so serious about pursuing degrees in business, I'm doing self studies now. A guy I met in here gave me a list of wholesalers to get my products from. I'm going to start with mens, women, and childrens apparel. I might have to start by selling out of my trunk until I find a store front.

I'm going to pursue a musical career therefore I've enrolled at MSOE for musical engineering. Also I'm creating many inventions, being that I'm an inventive individual. I have the copyright and patent booklets and I will be getting all aspects of my knowledge of life patented.

Finally, nearly every black male prisoner I met (during the entire eight years I have been working in the prison system) was about to become the next famous rapper. Capo said: "I'm trying to take off with this rap shit, make some mix tapes or some shit. I got a hole lot of new shit." The improbable dreams and goals that many of the prisoners professed spoke to their complete lack of experience in any place other than the ghetto and in any other type of work except crime. Most of them had not even gone to a regular high school (as opposed to pursuing a HSED or GED while imprisoned), so they have not had any high school career counseling or consumer education classes. With the backgrounds they had, they missed many normal experiences that others take for granted. Capo wrote:

But I think I grew up and I'm done running the streets. I want to start working on a family and go to school and work a job. I learn my lesson. I wish I could start life back over and do things different. But that's why life is so crazy cuz we live and learn.... But it suck so bad my hold life I had to work<sup>58</sup> for everything I wanted. It wasn't the right way to make money but that's the only way I know how to. I never knew how to look for a job or work hard for money. I thought that this was the right way to do things. Now I know better. I wish I would of found this out a long time ago.

Capo, like most of the men went back and forth between asserting that it was possible to make the street economy work for him and avowing that he was finished with crime. I noticed, however, that these two poles depended on the context: his letters to other men were about how he was intending to go back to the streets when he was released, and his letters to me were about how he regretted his past behavior and was going to change.

With offenders, it can be difficult to determine whether they are genuinely sorry about the crimes they committed or whether they are just sorry about the effects of being caught. On the other hand, being depressed about the lifestyle or its consequences is not limited to when the men are in prison. Material goals, by themselves, are not that fulfilling and the men did question the trajectory of their lives, even when they were not behind bars. Man O' War wrote:

I was having one of my weeks 2 "Fuck the world" It happens 2 me in the world out there. I guess I'm never content wit my life so I get mad no matter how much money, popularity, or females give me attention or wat ever. I just figured that out 2day. Damn...

### Offender Narrative through the Lens of Agency

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<sup>58</sup> By "work" in its first usage in this passage, Capo means a large supply of drugs broken down into smaller units to sell for profit. His second use of "work" means to get a legitimate job.

Based on what was just said about the offenders' subcultural models, it is important to determine what the offenders themselves said about the reason(s) for their law-breaking. My original theory was to attribute a portion of the offenders' behavior to their environment, but I wanted to find out where they placed the responsibility for their behavior. Did they blame their internal character traits (i.e. unfettered personal agency) or did they consider external factors to be more important? If they felt that their behavior was triggered or constrained by external forces, what were those forces? As was stated above, Strauss wrote that social psychologists explain human action by using either "*dispositional attributions* which explain behaviors in terms of agents' stable internal traits and *situational attributions*, which explain behaviors in terms of contextual factors" (2007: 808). Offenders in this study exhibited what Ewing called "multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly" (1990: 251). They drew upon different alternatives in different situations.

To begin with, my consultants did take personal responsibility for their actions on a number of occasions. Man O' War wrote:

Why would u sell if u scared of time? It's a risk I say if you street then u got be able 2 do 7 years. I say I had at least 7 years in me. Street means 2 be out doing things in the street living the street life, hustling, robbing, slangin guns. For females street is hood rat, a hoe. ... Street that's my definitions. Yes but street means u chose that path.

Plato wrote:

I don't leave my having a large family as to why I've never sided with the law! I see my life, my struggle as do to my misplaced want's and need's gone about in the wrong way. As I've said, No Man corrupts another – for the choice is always mine alone to make. "This one thing even the angel's of heaven were never given"! (Choice)

I hope you see now that it is the black man who makes the decision to go to jail. The white man just build them we fill them.

Capo wrote:

I got to remember that I put myself in here, so I got to deal with what happens.

In each of these quotes, the men are not blaming any other person or circumstance for the fact that they broke the law and were arrested and imprisoned. They are stressing their own agency in taking voluntary actions that led to an unpleasant result. Words like “choice” and “decision” are not making anyone or anything accountable except themselves.

On the other hand, sometimes the men expressed a more complex and intermediate view about their own agency, as in this quote from Capo:

You know I'm just wait to get out of here I'm really through with jail for real. I know what I have to do to stay out. Just work school and other things to keep me out of the street. I know it's going to be hard, but I know if I put my mind to it I could do it. Just some time I get thrown off track you know. But once I get out I just have to try my best to get a job and get in school.

He is still saying that desistance from crime is his personal responsibility which involves “putting his mind” to staying out of the street, but the passive construction of getting thrown off track puts the responsibility on outside forces. Doctor See called those external influences that drew people away from the straight and narrow path “temptations.”

Even though the men often claimed responsibility for their own individual actions, they also pointed out that being born in the ghetto was not their individual choice. Fanatic wrote: “I just want you to understand that we don't choose to live this way we're born into this and also brought up to live this way.” One of the men with whom I briefly corresponded used the street name of “Product” because he said he was a

“product of his environment.” and I heard that phrase frequently from other prisoners as well.

Being a product of one’s environment is a situational attribution for offending, but there were specific aspects of the environment that were mentioned as reasons for why the offenders broke the law. The first, and perhaps most important of these was poverty, although that reason was not interpreted the same way by each of the men. Fanatic wrote that poverty meant that he needed not only to quickly acquire money for living expenses, but he had to have funds to “buy” respect from others and to acquire women. Man’ O War, on the other hand, said that growing up in poverty gave him empathy for friends and relatives (especially children) who were suffering due to lack of food or material possessions. For him, poverty was related to the distress of others which became his motivation for illegal action.

A correlate to the idea of poverty as a situational attribution for crime was the sense that it was difficult to find legal work, or that it did not pay enough. Most of the men mentioned this, as well as the fact that the courts punish offenders by charging them substantial court fees that they have no way to pay off (and nonpayment increases the fees with interest) and/or suspending their driver’s licenses. Fines increased their debts (and thus, their “desperate need for money”) and suspended licenses decreased their abilities to find work. This made them even more concerned about being unemployed for long periods, less confident that they could find work due to transportation issues, and more willing to use crime as a strategy for acquiring resources.



In addition, not finding a job immediately might not be as serious for people who can count on financial support from family and friends while they are looking for work. The problem with growing up in the ghetto is that all of one's family and friends are also poor, so there is no safety net to fall back on when one has no money. As mentioned above, African American fictive kinship networks seem to be shrinking among the urban poor since the 1990s (Braman 2007), so there is increasing desperation when someone is unemployed and has no prospects for immediate work. Man O' War, Fanatic, and Capo mentioned how they could not count on help from their families when they were not able to find work, so they needed to raise money immediately. Capo wrote:

I got to stop coming to jail. I know I always say that but I can't depend on people. I got to make money somehow right. It's hard to find a job so the only thing I know is to sell drugs ...

For women with custody of minor children, it is possible to acquire government transfer payments (welfare), but the amounts do not cover children over the age of eighteen or unmarried male partners. So helping adult sons, brothers, and boyfriends means less food money for the rest of the family – even though many women would not allow male family members to be homeless, the men often do not feel right taking food away from the children. Of all the men I met in the correctional system, only Plato had a problem with social welfare programs because he said they gave people the option to escape personal responsibility:

People are poor in the ghetto because they know and believe that this government will take care of all there needs and continue to hand out free shit on the tax payers bill. I feel shame knowing once again my people have been subjugated by this government and them selves.

I want to tell you that you shouldn't look at the past oppression of the black man, but the situation that now kills our hoods! The free money and short cuts given to us by the government, is the worst thing to happen to the black man since slavery.

I was frequently baffled by Plato's continued criticism of "lefties, "communists," and people who get government transfer payments because he has never had a job or paid any income taxes in his entire life. Furthermore, his prison food for the last eight years was provided by taxpayers. On a deeper level, however, I think he was criticizing people for not taking action on their own behalf, as he did when he committed crimes. Getting transfer payment exhibits a lack of agency which could be interpreted as weakness and that is not a positive trait in his eyes. Since he was the prisoner who was most adamant about the fact that "no one" he knew was really looking for a job, it is hard to believe he was genuinely concerned about taxes.

In addition to poverty and its correlates, the offenders also talked about the influence of specific other people or their Phantom Communities. Fanatic discussed the lack of a father, so he looked to other black males for role models or examples of black manhood. Doctor See, on the other hand, had a good father (who he referred to as a "positive role model"), so he blamed his friends and peer pressure. Capo discussed both good and bad influences from various others (who he called negative and positive people):

I'm going all the way up north to get away from everybody. I'm so tired of this jail shit. I'm done. I've got to drop all the negative people in my life.

I hate this place. I am away from my friends and loved ones and that's what hurts the most. But I know I got to stay on track and stay around positive people and don't go down the wrong road again. Cause you do ur thing for a min then it all come to a end.

All of the men expressed a desire for people in their lives who would provide emotional support and encourage them to go in a more positive direction. In this way, they

seemed to claim personal agency, but also suggested that agency sometimes needs reinforcement from caring people in their environments. Fanatic articulated this intermediate view that seems to identify a tangled web of social forces *and* personal responsibility when he wrote:

My life was crazy growing up, but sometimes you can't control how you was raised. But just sitting here feeling sorry for myself isn't gonna get me nowhere, that's why I try to block that way of thinking out of my head. I'm human like everybody else, and I feel with a little motivation and support I could accomplish anything.

On the one hand, he says he did not have a choice due to his upbringing, but on the other, he is willing to move beyond being bound by circumstances, but just needs a little help. Capo also discussed the possibility of accomplishing difficult change through internal discipline.

I been on my own since I was 15. I live on the street that's all I know. I went to school till the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. I get locked up and when I get out I said fuck school. But now I am working on my GED for I could get some kind of a job. I think I got a lot to do but if I put my mind to it I know I can do it [or] anything else.

Occasionally, one of the men admitted to a bit of greed or the quest for excitement as motivations for their choices. This contradicted the pathos of poverty, as the need for essential living expenses or to buy respect or to help other people. Sometimes crime was motivated by a desire just to buy cool stuff. Doctor See wrote:

Each man has his own story to tell. We have our own hardships, downfalls, failures, successes, desires, pleasures, dreams, nightmares, and opinions. Those of us who continue to "trap" are doing exactly what that word means, enclosing ourselves. Why would we want to indulge in something that bounds us? We do it because of our attraction to the thrill and got to have it persona.

Man O' War said:

As a man who came from poverty, and grew up wit nothing I'm use to budgeting and cutting corners. Even when I'm hustling I use 2 say play broke and get rich. = even if u have the money act like u don't if it's not a necessity (wrong spelling I know). It takes will power like at one point

I was into electronics. I wanted 2 buy the screens, radios, TVs 4 cars. But I noticed all the money I spent. Can u say or show where u spent ur last \$3000.

These types of explanations, however, were rare.

For the most part, my consultants used storylines that framed themselves as interdependent with others: “Everyone where I grew up breaks the law.” “My family and friends needed money for necessities”. “I did not have positive role models or positive friends.” “I had negative role models or negative friends.” Comparing these examples to Agnew’s five story lines, the one that least applies is “a temporary break with conventional others and/or institutions”. Except for Doctor See’s father, none of my consultants claimed to have had much exposure to conventional others at all. Other than Plato and Geppetto saying that their mothers wanted them to go to school when they were very young, none of the men had ties to anyone who seemed to encourage them to behave any differently than what they actually did. Except for the criminal justice system, there was no one telling them to desist from crime, or perhaps more importantly, to focus their energy on school or work as avenues toward earning money.

Fanatic wrote:

I’ve never really experienced no friend who just like to live life as it comes. Most of my friends are drug dealers or isn’t doing anything positive with their lives. That’s why I don’t have any friends any more. Mostly because of what [Capo] said they all disappear when you get locked up.

In this particular environment, street culture has reached a critical mass, so that members can experience a full level of associations from family and friends without hardly anyone telling them (or showing them by example) that crime involves actions that they should not be engaged in. Most of my consultants felt that “everybody” in the

same referential categories into which they put themselves (male, black, poor, street) was committing crimes, so this must be normal behavior.

Through their words, my consultants constructed selves who were heroic, although more like tragic heroes. The offenders had what the Greeks called *hamartia*: the flaw in character which leads to the downfall of the protagonist. Yet this flaw is also a particular kind of virtue that makes a person vulnerable to taking that virtue too far into a tragic mistake.

... courage sets natural caution aside; great-heartedness carries the possibility of arrogance; a person of grandeur, with an unusual scope of action, can readily lose his sense of proper proportion, forget his finitude. Everything that is best in the protagonists makes them vulnerable to their reversal [Rorty 1992:11] (cited in Taylor 2003: 163)

The reason why the “bad nigger” is a cultural hero or archetype in the ghetto is because, in the words of Ice T (cited above), “it takes a lot of courage to fuck the system.”

The poverty which the offenders experienced, the realization that jobs are more difficult to obtain by black men (especially those who speak AAEV), the shortage of financial and emotional support from family, the scarcity of “role models” while they were growing up, and the awareness of American racism all set up psychological spaces where the young men had no control over certain significant circumstances and felt powerless. But, crime is a “signifier of a self that can still make things happen” (Presser 2008). Each of the young men I came to know in the course of this project was an intelligent, resourceful person who took action. They were not passive victims. They did not stand idly by and wait for someone else to do something, but they took the bull by the horns and charged boldly forward into action – albeit, wrong action. Deviance is

an exhilarating kind of freedom, for a short time. Criminality is a powerful act of agency, but leads ultimately, through imprisonment, to agency's loss.

### **Offender Narrative Through the Lens of Morality**

Another important item for discussion in this study is the previously noted fact that one theme in offender narrative is that of positive morality, or presenting oneself as a good person, despite having made some "mistakes" (Presser 2008, Maruna 2001, Samenow 1984). In this study I have shown some specific behaviors that describe exactly what could be characterized as a good person in this community context, particularly sharing the wealth obtained from crime with family and friends who need money for essential living expenses. Offenders frequently claimed that they were using their money to help others -- and helping others is always positive behavior.

All of consultants assessed themselves as "good" a number of times despite everything they had done. Capo said:

I'm a cool person to be around. I am funny when I want to be. I am a good friend or try to be. I like help people with there problems if I could. ...

But sometimes I think my own people be rejecting me like I am some bad person. I know I'm not an angel but I try my hardest to stay up.

Sometimes they extended their decency to include some other people in prison as well, such as when Capo wrote "all of us inmates are not that bad, we just made dumb mistakes to get us here" and Geppetto said "you have to keep in mind that just because we're locked up doesn't mean we're evil people."

There were occasional lapses in their assessment of their moral adequacy, depending on their mood. Man O' War occasionally wrote about himself in a negative fashion. Even though he sometimes wrote, "I am nice" or "People don't appreciate my good heart," he also said:

I like tattoos. I plan on having a theme on each arm. Good & Evil. Good my son an angel 4 guidance hands holdin my son 4 Lords hands. Evil. Me, things that symbolized me , my struggles, Demon. Suffer, hate, pain, struggle, things like that.

In all the letters I received, this paragraph from Man O' War was the only time any one of the consultants referred to himself as "evil," although all of them admitted to doing some bad things (or making mistakes). The only other really negative self-assessment came from Capo who once said:

I wish you understand how lonely and hurt I feel right now. Man I really don't know what to do or say, I just got a lot of hate in me I have to let it out that's why I be fighting so much to let it out. Well if I end [up] back in the hole you know why.

Capo wrote this after shooting his victim, although before he was charged with it or he had admitted it to anyone.

My consultants particularly emphasized a contingent form of morality, based on special circumstances. Plato wrote:

I wouldn't say I'm all bad or all good, I just have my moments when you have to choose which system works best for lifes situation the hoods or societies laws. No one has try to understand why the hood works sometimes opposite to something society points out.

I myself have [been] to lots of different states but that was mostly to sell drugs or pick some up. My situation is very sophisticated, I'm mean I'm not really a bad person. Where I'm from everyone if not most robbes, sells drugs and shoots each other daily! Its not right and I don't condone it, but it a hard life inside the ghetto which makes them cheap! Consider going to another country where the living is substandard and the poor is 90% with little or no middle class. People start to manifest their own laws, and reject society because in all society has rejected them. Maybe you should drive through the bad parts of the city and look at what lives there. Then you might be able to grasp to true feelings man has for his brother and what dose not effect his life head on.

Here Plato says “it’s not right,” but he does not specifically say what are the underlying moral parameters of right and wrong. In another letter he said that “life is short,” and here he is saying that “life is cheap,” but he never articulates an opposite thought similar to life is (or should be) sacred. Most of the discussion about shootings in the prisoners’ letters focused on their sorrow about their friends and family members being killed, not on any idea that articulated a respect for life as a universal concept. The prisoners had some exposure to religion as a vague impression, but found the idea to be somewhat amorphous and confusing – especially in terms of whether it would affect their actual behavior.

Capo wrote:

I just got to keep pushing myself to stay positive. Things just crazy right now but it will get better. I’m not a real religious person, but I think it’s a higher power up there. But I just got to keep faith and hope in myself. Like you said it could be worse so I just should be grateful for all the things I had done in life or the time I had to be with people. Some people don’t get that at all you know.

Plato said:

I don’t have a religion and I’m open to what makes sense. I’ve learned a lot of religions so I’ve has a good look see of Gods.

Geppetto wrote:

As for religion. Christianity is my belief but it also means to be Christ-like & I’m far from it. I don’t live that lifestyle. But I do believe that I have a relationship with the creator God. Eventually I’ll get off the fence & walk the straight and narrow.

Doctor See wrote:

My release date is December 7 as of now unless I get approved for Act 28 (early release). I’m prepared cause I have the Good Lord with me & praise be to Allah that I’m provided for and nurtured.



My focus is going to be praise'n Allah, working, going to school, and doing my music. As long as I remain positive and continue upliftment of self, the universe will send me a beautiful, caring, honest, loveable, woman. Can't go looking for things cause all things good things manifest themselves to light.

Like Doctor See, Man O' War claimed to be a Muslim. As well as what he wrote (above) about his tattoos and having the "Lord's hands" holding his son, he also said:

... but people are playin. Mostly wit my money. My mom says she spent some on my son, ok, but not \$1700 when she hasn't been gettin him. Then my cousin says he's going to send this and that and never does. I had someone out there kind of workin 4 me he "jumped ship." Meaning skipped off. Then I'm still payin rent 2 keep my apartment and utilities. So its hard. My dad won't give me the money he owes me. So I gave my cousin and guy the address 2 send me cash. I feel it's a test. God is testing me, and I'm testing the world.

Plato's ex-girlfriend LaToya said:

Since being locked up has maded me a better person and I'm so serious [Plato]. I want a better life for my children and for myself. ... But I do know this, I'm not a bad person, I've just made bad mistakes

... But I'm keeping my head up and remaining strong. Now I'm into my Bible and keeping the faith but I'm not saying I'm a saint but I'm up to date on God... I pray every night that my life will be better and be that wonderful mother and woman that I know I could be.

None of the prisoners articulated any apparent sense of religion (or even secular philosophy) as forming a foundation for specific rules of morality, but actually seemed to agree with what Bellah said about "the sacred core of the *conscience collective*, the very sacred center of our society, what might even be called our civil religion, has moved from the churches to the judiciary" (1998: 620). Most of my consultants seemed to vaguely concur that if something is against the law then it is actually wrong. Never once did anyone suggest that any laws themselves were wrong or should be changed. (No one ever suggested that drugs should be legalized, for example.) While they admitted making "mistakes," none of the men were specific about their wrongdoing in the sense of saying that drugs are a public health issue or that it is wrong to take something that belongs to someone else. It was never clear whether they thought that

the actual crimes they committed were morally wrong actions, or whether it was just wrong to break a law in general. There was no religious or political reason for law-breaking (in any sense like Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*), but clearly material motivations, based on their relationships with other people and their influence on the men. This suggests that the lifestyle of the street is one that produces interdependent selves that are more influenced by the people around them than by internal religious or philosophical values that motivate someone's behavior regardless of circumstances. At the same time, however, being punished as individuals by the criminal justice system gave each of the men an opportunity to articulate independence and personal reform.

Fanatic wrote: "But even though you might have heard this a million times, I'm different from the others." Doctor See's letters were filled with self-help and motivational expressions.

What I do know is that I'm in a category by myself, being that I'm different. Yes, I've committed the crime so I have to do the time. Physically I belong but mentally I don't. As a man I accept it for what it is worth and learn from this experience.

Coming to prison is a beneficial factor, that will make my change a success. I know what "the Streets" have to offer and I refuse to buy any more of it. I don't care what people think or say about me. My main focus is reconstructing myself, to be a righteous member of my society. I will let no one influence me to stray from my goals. I'm going to surround myself with positive influences

But despite the fact that the offenders portrayed themselves as being generally good (either by following subcultural moral codes, by being typically decent except for a few understandable mistakes, or by trying to change back to the virtuous person they were in the past), they still exhibited significant denial about their crimes. The largest form of denial was in discussing robberies, drug dealing, and even shooting other people as

being “self-employed” or having an entrepreneurial spirit instead of being moral issues with consequences for others. While I do believe that many of the prisoners did use their money to help their friends and relatives, it was difficult, if not impossible, for any of them to openly acknowledge that they also hurt other people doing the same things. While they emphasized robbing other drug dealers, I know that they also robbed working people and small businesses who had honestly struggled to get what little money they had obtained. As mentioned in the introduction, I personally have been robbed, and so have some of my female friends, and we definitely are not drug dealers. Furthermore, there is the possibility of robbing elderly people or people who get disability checks. None of my consultants admitted to stooping that low, but I know from reading the newspaper and talking to prison officials that this frequently occurs in the inner city.

Another moral issue is that selling drugs does hurt other people. Whenever I suggested that the prisoners had been selling sickness and death to their own people, the best responses I got were, “If I didn’t do it, then somebody else will, so I might as well have the money.” “People are making their own decisions to buy it. I’m not forcing them to do it.” “Well, I was desperate for money and this was the only possible course of action.” The final answer was that “Drugs are not that bad,” which may have had some honest basis in their belief system since they also used some of the illegal drugs they sold themselves.

The issue of denial and the inability to admit the moral ramifications of what they did was everywhere in the offenders’ talk about their crimes. Plato wrote:

I'm here for an armed robbery and no I'm not going to tell you if I did it or didn't do it, all I can say I never pled guilty and I've never been one to follow rules. [Someone] asked me if I was afraid to come home, well I've seen and done a lot of foolish shit in life and it would be foolish to fear life itself. I got my mind set on change, but I've walked this road before and didn't like what I was feeling or seeing – so I ran back to what I knew best. Now I got people who's going to walk into that light with me, so if I turn back to the ghetto I know someone will be in my way.

While Plato does not say exactly what he felt or saw when he tried to walk down the road to change before, it could easily be interpreted as feeling remorse for doing “foolish shit” and that is a very uncomfortable feeling. Even though he did not plead guilty, that does not mean that he could not have felt guilty. Once, when I was having a conversation with Plato's younger brother, Slam Dunk, he said “I've done a lot of bad things to a lot of people, and I should feel guilty, but I don't.” This is an example of a person dividing himself into a narrator who is making judgments about the protagonist who is his past self, and that judgment has several layers of meaning. The statement is interesting because the word “should” implies a feeling of having a cognitive schema or model in one's mind about an ideal situation. If Slam Dunk had a conception of things he did actually as being “bad,” then he also conceived of the model of badness being followed by self-reproach and was puzzled when it was not. Gilligan explains this low level of remorse for impoverished African American offenders this way:

Why is inferior social status conducive not only to feelings of inferiority, but also to feelings of innocence? Because pain, punishment and suffering not only intensify feelings of shame, they also relieve feelings of guilt and sinfulness. That emotional principle ...is the psychological mechanism that underlies both the religious practice of penance, in which self-inflicted pain or deprivation relieves the feeling of being sinful; and the legal practice of punishment whose purpose is to remove or undo moral and legal guilt. And poverty *means* pain, punishment and misery (both etymologically and psychologically) (1996: 206-207).

Impoverished African American men may feel *shame*, a word that Gilligan defines as the absence or deficiency of self-love and which he contrasts to *pride* or a healthy sense of

self-esteem (47). But they do not often experience guilt because they feel like they have suffered enough and been punished enough by poverty and racism.

### **Street and Fieldwork Ethics**

During the production of this dissertation, my professors asked me to write a statement of ethical positioning due to the fact that I was working with a population that performed illegal activities. I was asked provide specific examples of dilemmas I faced while doing field work. I found this question to be very difficult due to the fact that most of this ethnographic account was produced from letters that prisoners wrote (or phone calls or visits) which all occurred when they were behind bars. I obviously did not observe them doing any of the crimes that they were arrested for, and met all of them (except Capo) when they were already in the correctional system.

When I did field work on the street, I was taken into people's houses where I met entire families which consisted of several generations (from babies to grandmothers) and, except for using illegal drugs, nobody committed any crimes in their own homes. The most disturbing thing I actually witnessed was drugs being smoked when babies were in the room. Fleisher (2000) and Bourgois (2003) commented that they saw drug use around children, and pregnant women smoking crack, and found this upsetting, as I did. But, first of all, there was no way to report this to Child Protective Services and still continue to do any fieldwork in the area because I would be considered a snitch. Second, it seemed to be pointless to try to report dozens of people for doing something that was actually quite common. Where I come from, people sometimes put alcohol in

babies' bottles to put them asleep, which is probably about the same as what I witnessed in the inner city. When I told consultants that babies should not be inhaling drugs, the only response I got was, "Why not?" and the rejoinder to my answer about health and development was "I've been smoking since I was eleven and it has not hurt me. Everybody does it."

When I drove people around in my car, the men carried guns with them, but I grew up in a rural area where everybody had guns in their homes or in their trucks, so this did not seem to be terribly unethical to me – except for the fact that I sometimes worried that I could get shot if someone decided to shoot at one of my consultants when I was with him. The men claimed to be carrying the guns for protection, and did exhibit genuine fear of being shot (i.e. looking around to see who was there before getting out of the car, wanting to park right next to the doors of stores so as to not be exposed outside very long, and jumping or ducking in response to noises). But, for the most part, the reality is that gang life is much less dramatic in real life than it has the reputation for being.

Plato and Capo belong to large and well-known gangs that have national reputations and a presence in other cities, (although the two men do not belong to the same gang). "True" and fictional stories of gangs are now popular in television shows, movies, and books. Gangs have established associations with extreme violence in the national culture, as well as in criminal justice legislation such as gang enhancement laws. Yet many scholars and ethnographers who observe actual gang behavior are of the opinion that some of this commotion is simply a moral panic.

Gang members talk violence a great deal; they do far less ... Street gangs through the years have done nothing more often than they have done something. Their most customary activities are sleeping, eating and hanging out. Criminal acts are a minority of the acts they engage in, and violent acts are a minority of those (Klein in McCorkle and Miethe 2002: 211-212).

Fleisher's gang ethnography about Kansas City gangs describes a very similar situation:

In the time that I watched Fremont kids earn and spend drug money preceding the bust, I watched them engage in a subsistence drug economy, meaning that they earned just enough to meet their daily needs but little more than that. Earning more would have meant they'd have to spend more time working and less time hanging out. The balance of work and hanging time was weighed heavily toward hanging out (2000: 76).

My own observations of the behaviors of the members of Plato's and Capo's gangs were very similar. Much of their daily lives consist of listening to music, watching television, playing video games, drinking alcohol, and smoking blunts,<sup>59</sup> mostly at the homes of mothers, sisters, aunts, and girlfriends. Also, the men spend a great deal of time either taking care of their own children or babysitting for family members (and often simultaneously doing the things just listed) while the children's mothers are working at legitimate low-paying jobs. (When I was trying to assist Capo's sister in writing a letter to the judge regarding leniency in his sentencing, I asked her about good things that he had done in his life, and she said that he liked to babysit for his nieces and nephews and that he was really good with children.) I also observed gang members spending a lot of time working on old cars in attempts to keep one running, although they were frequently towed by the city government because the men could not afford license plates or did not have driver's licenses. Mundane activities far outweighed crime but, as Klein pointed out, *talk* of crime was ubiquitous. Plato said:

<sup>59</sup> A cigar hollowed out and filled with marijuana, so that the smoker is getting tobacco (from the leaf wrapper) and marijuana at the same time. Almost all of the gang members I know also smoke regular cigarettes. I was constantly being asked for lighters, and the fact that I do not smoke was often met with astonishment.

Remember what I said be careful about the questions you ask, you might here some shit you didn't want to know. Boasts about murders and robberies are common in the hood and people are quick to robbe others if given a chance...

The very fact that people are boasting about crime, as opposed to hiding what they are doing (or what they *claim* to be doing), shows that crime is prestigious, not something of which to be ashamed. In short, I heard a lot of talk about fistfights, stabbings, and shootings, but I never actually saw my informants point a gun at anyone. I heard gunfire but, truthfully, I sometimes hear that at night where I live myself anyway. I also saw the flash from gunfire, but I did not know the people who were shooting. Sometimes the men showed me battle-scars from fights or wounds from being stabbed or shot, but none of this happened in my presence. The men I came to know did not want me to get hurt, so I was usually dismissed when something dangerous had the potential to happen. In fact, street spaces are mostly male spaces (Miller 2008, Anderson 1999), so black women generally were not involved in street violence either.

Capo belongs to a well-known Chicago gang, the Mambas, along with Plato's cousin, Dog Dayz. Plato and his biological brothers, Slam Dunk, Hit Man, and Movin On, are Copperheads. While one of the gangs is supposedly "People" and the other is supposedly "Folks," (and Internet gang sites assert that the two gangs are in "war"), that seems to mean nothing among the men I observed in Milwaukee. Capo, a Mamba, is good friends with Movin On, a Copperhead, and lived with him for a while. Dog Dayz and his Copperhead cousins, especially Slam Dunk, are very close and spend a lot of time with each other. The only gangs any of the men have mentioned having a problem with on the street are Mexican gangs. Despite that, Dog Dayz and his own mother (who



is Mexican) belong to supposedly rival gangs, although they get along very well with each other. All of these people get their cocaine (to make crack) from Plato's cousin and that tie – which is economic - seems to be stronger and more significant than their gang membership.

Of course, all of these men are occasionally very violent, get in numerous fistfights, and carry (and use) knives and guns, but the impression that I get is that the fights are personal, between individuals who do not like each other, and gang membership (by itself with no other provocation) has very little to do with who is fighting. One of the storylines listed for crime by Agnew was “an unresolved dispute” and that seems to be almost a daily occurrence for most men in street culture. The biggest issue is when people threaten each other economically, either through attempting to rob someone they know or being on someone else's drug-selling block. Like Fleisher's work in Kansas City, I found that the most important ties were either economic or to close biological relatives, not to the gang, although talking about gang tenets was a frequent pastime. I agree with Fleisher's characterization of the stories of loyalty, violence, and gang rules as being a sort of street folklore (2000: 57).

Finally, it is also important to remember that offenders (generally) are sent to prison for the worst thing they ever did (or at least got caught for), but that activity may not have taken up very much time in the man's full biography of his life. It takes less than a minute to shoot someone, and even robberies can be performed fairly quickly. These activities are set against long stretches of time in which gang members are just doing things that nobody writes ethnographies about. I saw gang members doing their

laundry, sweeping floors, washing dishes, giving each other and little boys haircuts, trying to fix their stereos, peering under the hoods of cars, playing cards, buying clothes, buying groceries, hanging out at the magazine rack at the grocery store looking at music and gun magazines, playing with children, giving bottles of formula to babies, walking their dogs, and of course, the ubiquitous television and video games.

Once Plato wrote to me:

In the past I used to write a lot of girls, but they only wanted to talk about sex and here about my bad boy life. I can correspond that way until I get frustrated, but if they send money I will try and become pleasant.

Just like prison girlfriends, most people want to hear about the consultants' "bad boy" lives, but that's a fairly small percentage of their whole lives – which are not that much different from anyone else's lives. This may be one of the main reasons why they retain perceptions of themselves as still being good people: crime does not take up very much of their time compared to other things, and some of those things *are* good things.

In the final analysis, after getting to know a number of prisoners during the course of this ethnographic project, it was difficult for me to blend the subject and the object as D'Andrade describes in this passage.

To say someone is a 'crook' is to refer to more than the objective fact that something was intentionally taken by someone who had no legal right to it; part of the meaning of 'crook' is that the person who did this did something *bad* and is a *bad person*. Many of the terms of natural language blend the way the world is and our reaction to it... (1995:399).

For the sake of clarity (and for lack of a better word), I chose to keep referring to my consultants as "offenders," but I did tend toward a position that matched those of the men. They did bad things, but they were not bad people. While this may also be denial on my part, I found it very difficult to define the exact characteristics of a bad person (or

a good person). At the same time, it appeared that the men linguistically minimized their own negative behaviors due to what Cohen called “a search for some hope in the wreckage of their lives” (2001: 55).

### **Offenders and the Culture of Honor**

One very important reason why I did not believe that my consultants were bad people was because I could see that they were operating from a framework of a cultural narrative that I did not share, but that I could see as being logical and coherent. As was stated earlier, I agree with Nisbett and Cohen’ association of inner city street culture with the culture of honor (1996: 90-91). To reiterate, they assert that males in cultures of honor are more likely to respond violently not only to physical threats to self, family and possessions, but to insults that may lower their status in the eyes of others and thus give them a reputation for weakness. This reputation would then make them more vulnerable to having their possessions, women, or even their lives taken by other males who would take advantage of any man perceived to be less powerful. Nisbett and Cohen have suggested that cultures of honor are common among pastoralists because their fierce reputation would reduce the possibility of having their entire herds stolen in one fell swoop by enterprising raiders looking to increase their wealth. The authors also state that the same type of reputation needs to be cultivated in any similar situation where “the possibility exists that scarcity will be produced by the predatory actions of others, especially when the state is unwilling or unable to provide protection from such predation” (89).

As I pointed out, inner city black offenders are frequently involved in armed robberies, both as perpetrators and victims. Three of my consultants were imprisoned for that crime, and one of the others admitted to me that he had done it, although he was never caught or charged. Furthermore, armed robbery of other drug dealers is extremely profitable due to getting both drugs and large amounts of cash. Four of my primary consultants were charged with drug dealing as adults and another mentioned that he did it, although he was not charged. According to Anderson, people in the inner city have a belief that “stickup boys” chose victims based on signals of vulnerability which “allows residents to move at least some of the responsibility for a successful robbery from the stickup man to the victim by averring that it is up to those who use the streets – particularly themselves – not to be ‘picked’ for a stickup” (1999: 130). This clearly dovetails with my consultants’ explanations for their own behaviors and attitudes.

Man O’ War said:

I am nice!! ☺ But as males, black males in the streets and prison systems we have to be aggressive at times. People pray on the weak, if u let someone treat u [wrong] then they’ll keep doing it. So u have to stand up 4 ur self.

Plato said:

I’m doing well and only hoping to get out of this damn prison. I’ll go back to super-max because I see there’s no keeping my hands off these niggas. Since I’ve been down here there has been lots of propaganda going around about me. No more fighting “I’m done.” I don’t have an obligation to any of these fuck-boys, so now I’m going to try and get out of this prison. You should call up here and tell them that I’m trying to leave here because of the gangs fighting and I no longer want to be apart of it.

I was trying at being good and just got harass every chance those damned C.O. got to fuck with me. I tried to write the shit up and they told me "sorry can't do anything about it"! For now on I back to my old self, being the nice guy get you treated like shit. If anyone says any dum shit to me I'm going to beat their ass on the spot. If I go back to super-max it will be better than kissing ass and being pushed around.

As Nibett and Cohen point out, "People in a culture of honor who respond with aggressive and dominant behaviors after an insult may be acting quite rationally if they are trying to avoid the stigma of the insult from their peers" (1996: 53). As I pointed out above, African American inner city males see committing economic crimes as a rational choice under their specific circumstance. They also see cultivating a reputation for being strong, fearless, and good at fighting to be rational behavior because, without that status, they would have a great deal to lose. Not only are weaker people perceived as more vulnerable to robbery on the street, but they are also more vulnerable to robbery and attack in prison. As was quoted above, Plato told me:

... if someone disrespect you here you better fight or at least hit him or spit on that person, because if not you'll be washing underwear, giving your canteen, being punch or cecked maybe raped if you run into a shamless boy-lover. You can tell but the C.O. only use you into they can get what they need to move up to a better position, You can try saying you got Aids or Hiv, but people will beat your ass anyway.

To assert that cultivating this reputation is a matter of rational self-interest is not in opposition to saying that being fierce and fearless is also cultural behavior. Culture can be built from realistic problems in the environment. While culture is frequently thought of as existing first in the mind, and then being revealed by actions in the physical world, it can be demonstrated that culture also plays out through an intervening process in that sequence by stimulating unseen physiological reactions in the body. Nisbett and Cohen did experiments with white males from the North and from the South and

discovered that cortisol and testosterone levels rose much more sharply in Southerners in response to an insult than in those from the North (1996: 45 -48). While this would not be visible to the naked eye (nor did I do physiological experiments with my black consultants), it can be assumed from these experiments that culture creates some physiological effects that are responses to childhood socialization into particular beliefs. When I was discussing Geppetto's story about the man who wanted the return of his used hat (and extra money), I said that Geppetto's decision to fight was based on his being raised in a culture of honor. I quoted Rosaldo as saying that "feelings are not substances to be discovered in our blood, but social practices organized by stories that we both enact and tell. They are structured by our forms of understanding" (1984 cited in Markus and Kitayama 1991: 235). While, on the one hand, I do agree that feelings arise from cultural narratives, I have also suggested that it is unrealistic to suppose that the body can be ignored in a discussion of selfhood as if "the inner self" and the body are somehow genuinely separate entities. While feelings cannot be discovered in the blood, cortisol and testosterone can be found in the saliva, and this proves that hormonal reactions are occurring just prior to or simultaneously with behavior. Men in cultures of honor respond physiologically to insult, and while they certainly can still chose not to fight, they do perceive challenges to their status as much more serious than those raised in cultures of dignity.

Nisbett and Cohen's theory stated that many white Southerners came originally from herding cultures in Scotland and Ireland where a great deal of raiding historically occurred. Herding cultures depend on their animals for food, and the loss of the

animals means that they can no longer eat. (This is simply another way of stating that there is a strong relationship between culture and ecology.) Along this same line of reasoning, criminal subcultures depend on the money obtained from crime so they (and whoever is depending on them) can eat -- or pay for housing, heat, electricity, clothing, medical care or other necessities in the urban north (where heat and electricity can also be matters of life and death). Many cultural practices arise organically from the ecological environments where people live and are closely tied to simple subsistence. First, and foremost, people need food.

My initial inability to understand urban crime comes from my personal background and the ways that I grew up thinking about food. Even though I grew up in a poor family, I never wanted for food for one simple reason: my family was a farm family. My use of the culture of honor theory for inner city African Americans is also tied to the fact that there is an opposite cultural form in the United States. The original dignity-based culture of the north -- where the self was built with separateness and restraint -- came from the land-based farming settlers (such as the Puritans, Quakers, Germans, and Dutch) who could not as easily be robbed of their entire wealth at once. That is a description of my culture.

I began my life on a farm in a rural area in Illinois near the Mississippi River. My parents' house had a wood-burning stove, an outhouse, and a party-line telephone. My family raised beef cattle, dairy cattle, chickens, and sometimes pigs. We had an orchard and huge garden where we grew many different kinds of fruits and vegetables. I was raised knowing how to go into the fields and roadsides to find wild plant foods, and

many people who lived around me hunted and ate deer, rabbits, squirrels and other wild animals. I remember one evening when my father and I were coming home at night and he accidentally ran over a raccoon. He stopped the pick-up truck, threw the animal in the back, and we ate it the next day. People did their own butchering, home-canning in glass mason jars, or freezing of excess food for winter. In short, I may have grown up poor in material possessions, but I had *no conception* at all of what it meant to be hungry. There was food all around me and nobody I knew had any trouble finding it.

My rural biography is significant because I have been doing my field work with an urban population who is completely divorced from the land and has lost all knowledge of how to get food except from a store or a restaurant. Being involved with the service learning program at Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design since 2001, I have frequently worked with the Hunger Task Force in educating our students about food insecurity. In Milwaukee we have many inner city food deserts which are very sizeable areas where there are absolutely no large grocery stores with fresh or affordable food. The only places where people can buy food are fast food chain restaurants, corner stores, or gas stations. Since many inner city residents do not have cars, and even public transportation costs money, they are unable to travel long distances to get anything to eat that is either healthy or sold at a reasonable price. As mentioned above, the key to human survival is extracting food from the environment, but there are very few people who make a clear analytical line between urban food deserts and crime. Ecological anthropologists discuss how people obtain food through highly varied subsistence strategies in different environments, but some of this analysis breaks down when



discussing post-industrial urban societies in which people have only two subsistence strategies – to use money to buy food or to get free food from shelters, food pantries, hot meal programs, WIC, or government food share/food stamps. As mentioned above, there are many programs available especially for custodial parents with small children, but it is difficult for adults with no children, grown children, or who do not have legal custody of small children to get essential services such as health care and food. (Fathers are very seldom custodial parents.) Academics have noticed that violence has been more strongly associated with poverty in some areas of the developed world, but not in others (Nisbett and Cohen 1996: 84), but have not concluded why. Yet, I have not seen “poverty” defined except by cash income expressed as the amount of dollars earned per year in comparison to the number of persons in a family. In my opinion, the cash economy is not the only relevant factor. (Venkatesh, 2006, also covers this regarding the underground economy.) In my case, my family earned very little actual money, but we had plenty of food so the numerical amounts listed on the income tax returns really did not matter. In the inner city, however, people have no way to get food, except either through cash (which does not go very far if someone is buying food at a gas station or corner store) or humbling themselves by asking for help from some sort of social welfare program. As Plato stated above, people feel shame when they have to go to the governmental or charitable organizations to ask for help.

I bring up the issue of food in contrast to the specter of the image of Man O’ War and his sister (and many other children like them) walking to the store with “\$3 worth of pennies 2 get food when mom was at work.” There were many times when my

consultants, or children living with them, asked me to buy them food. In my mind, the poverty frequently discussed by my consultants may have some slight relationship to not having certain material objects, but it is much more importantly associated with the more basic issue of lack of food. Having gone into the Hunger Task Force warehouse (the central distribution point for food that goes to shelters, food pantries, and hot meal programs in Milwaukee) or into the shelters and pantries themselves, it is hard to turn away from the fact that hunger is not only a significant issue in what is supposedly the richest country on earth, but it is a huge problem specifically in Milwaukee. Many writers have pointed out that there is a substantial portion of inner city adults who commit crimes with the express purpose to get into jails and prisons so they can have a bed to sleep in or a warm place in winter or simply to eat (Gilligan 1996, Fleisher 1995, 2000, Venkatesh 2006, Pager 2007). This is hardly an efficient way to feed people, not to mention the fact of helping them maintain their self-respect. Considering Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the first needs at the base of the pyramid are physiological, including food. Directly above that is the safety and security of the body. These needs must be met before anyone can focus on any needs that may be referred to as those related to the inner self. A lot of ink could be, and has been, spilled in discussions of inner city crime without acknowledging the subtle variations between the experiences of different groups of people in poverty. We need to recognize the distinction between those in rural areas who still can hunt, gather, and farm (regardless of how much money they earn), and other people in cities whose poverty is based on genuine issues with

food-acquisition. As I said above, and will point out again below, the physical self has an enormous impact on the psychological self.

### **Offender Narrative and the American Dream**

Throughout this research project, a number of important observations have been made. To begin with, this is a study of African American offender narrative. Prior studies of offender narrative usually have been done by criminologists and sociologists, but have not used the same criteria for inclusion into their study sample. Previous research on offender narrative *has* considered offenders to be part of a group – but that group was those who have broken the law and been sanctioned by the criminal justice system. In short, the unit under study was simply offenders (usually of multiple races), and the control group, or opposite to those in the study, were persons who have not been sanctioned for breaking the law. This project is unique because the offenders who have shared their stories with me are part of an American subculture that has characteristics that exist in geographic contexts that are separate from the criminal justice system, yet intimately tied to it through the fact that just a few inner city neighborhoods in large cities supply close to half of the prisoners in the United States (Clear 2007). Not only are the persons in my study offenders, but they share common characteristics of race, income level/ social class, and residence in segregated districts. In addition, most of my consultants' male friends and relatives have been flowing in and out of the criminal justice system as well. As Wacquant describes, the men circulate “in

a close circuit between” prison and the ghetto so that the two places heavily influence each other and now constitute a “single carceral continuum” (2008).

The offenders in this study have two layers of cultural experience: to be a black male who grew up in poverty, and to be an American. One of my theses throughout this study has been that their offending behavior is not merely the result of individual pathology or completely voluntary choices, but has some connection to growing up in an environment in which particular types of law-breaking have a cultural meaning. So the narratives that they have produced are not merely offender narratives, but cultural narratives. The problem, however, is specifically identifying the culture. Calling this work “offender narrative” was an easy classification because each of the men in the study were arrested, convicted, imprisoned, and labeled by an arm of the state as a “felon.” That fixed boundary had a number of immediate and long-term consequences. These include the experience of imprisonment and post-incarceration sanctions such as checking in with parole officers, drug tests, inability to live in public housing, inability to get student loans, difficulty in getting jobs, etc. The boundaries of their ethnic group identity, however, were more problematic. According to Fredrik Barth:

The identifying of another person as a fellow member of an ethnic group implies a sharing of criteria for evaluation and judgment. It thus entails the assumption that the two are fundamentally ‘playing the same game’, and this means that there is between them a potential for diversification and expansion of their social relationship to cover eventually all different sectors and domains of activity. On the other hand, a dichotomization of others as strangers, as members of another ethnic group, implies a recognition of limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgment and performance, and restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest. (1998: 15).

In the United States, physical appearance has a specific type of cultural meaning that has not diminished through time: people with dark skin and curly hair are usually

categorized as the descendents of slaves and called “African Americans.” Yet, regardless of whether people with this particular appearance belong to the black middle class, street culture (or the “underclass”), or are even recent immigrants from Africa, they share the experience of frequently being treated as “strangers” in the United States by being denied jobs and housing, as well as being more frequently stopped by the police, based solely on their racial category. According to Barth, ethnic groups have a “membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order (1998:11). Yet, while all black people are frequently categorized together as one ethnic group by those who are not black, my consultants classify themselves not only by appearance, but by the beliefs and behaviors that distinguish them from other groups, some of whom look like them. In other words, how they identify themselves and how others identify them is not always done by using the same criteria for group membership. As I brought up in the beginning of this study, discussing “what is a self” by talking about only the inner selves – which academics tend to do – leaves out the importance of the body. People identify themselves and others with their bodies, as well as their thoughts and behaviors, and African Americans especially have this experience because they are physical minorities in the United States. Regardless of whatever multiple inner selves they have, they frequently get treated certain ways by other people based solely on their outer selves. This then has an effect on their inner selves and who they think they are or who they can become.

Classifying the identities of the men in this study was challenging because there is significant variation within my small sample, and because the prison system and the men themselves chose to attach referential labels differently depending on the situation. Fanatic, Capo, and Geppetto all clearly identified themselves in writing as “black”, although Geppetto referred to himself as “light-skinned” and Capo called himself “dark-skinned.” This reinforces the idea that appearance is somehow part of the ethnic category, although not its total definition. Man O’ War, on the other hand, has a Vietnamese first and last name, and is classified as “Asian or Pacific Islander” on the Department of Correction website. In his letters to me, however, he labeled himself as “black.” His cousin, Doctor See, said of himself “I’m of mix culture African American (father) and Puerto Rican (mother).” He also told me that Spanish is his second language. On other occasions, however, he also emphasized the black part of his identity, using that specific word.

Plato had the most flexible ethnic identity construction that changed depending on what type of point he was trying to make. When he was talking about sex or his last name, he was French or French Creole. (“Being French has made me in some way a romantic.”) Sometimes he said he had Native American blood, sometimes he called himself “African,” and sometimes he said he was mixed with white. Being from the south side of Milwaukee, he spent a lot of time around Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, so he claimed extensive knowledge of those cultural groups, if not biological affinity. In addition, he disavowed affiliation with black people who were middle-class, got government benefits, were cowardly, or did not follow the concepts of gang life. He

said,” Again skin color doesn’t mean shit, just like white have different nationalities – blacks do too!” While all of my consultants most frequently referred to themselves as “black males,” they also policed the boundaries of their self-defined category with behavioral characteristics for inclusion or exclusion. Plato wrote:

People can sit and watch outside the box for a million years, and still not be able to conclude what it means to experience the ghetto. As you know I myself can’t give reason to half the things done in the ghetto, even with the gift of education most people can only describe an atom of experiencing the ghetto because none are identical. If tried to go another hood more than likely I would be killed, because even though I’m black – I’m an alien!

All of my consultants clearly incorporated into their selfhoods the idea that they were black, male, and street and each of those shared social identities positioned them as certain types of people in alignment with or in opposition to other types of people who did or did not share those characteristics identified by race, gender, and class. In fact, despite some academic writing on gender as a performance, it could also be argued that maleness is a category of the body and people are treated from birth a certain way based on their reproductive organs. One of the consultants in this study has a brother who is transgendered and every time he is arrested, the correctional officials have him strip off his bra, skirt, high heels, and wig and put him in the male section of the jail based on the appearance of his naked body with no discussion of the subject of where he feels he belongs. Like race, gender is usually taken to be a physical category, regardless of who people believe themselves to be inside.

Barth’s “dichotomization of others as strangers,” is a persistent issue for African Americans despite the fact that wider American society tries to pretend that we now live in a post-racial society, especially now that we have elected a black President. So,

even though Disproportionate Minority Contact/Confinement has been acknowledged by the United States Department of Justice and, consequently resulted in a federal mandate for each state to investigate and prepare action plans for reducing minority youth in confinement, the underlying reasons for the issue are still highly contested. In short, the debate is between people who take the position that there are higher percentages of minorities in prisons and youth detention facilities because African Americans just commit more crimes, and the opposing viewpoint that racial profiling is operating in who the police choose to stop and search, whether white youth involved with drugs are diverted into (medical, noncriminal) rehabilitation programs while black youth are sent to correctional facilities, as well as disparities in how people are charged or sentenced based on race. In addition, the issue of juveniles being charged in adult courts or sentenced to adult prisons has also been related to race (Leonard, Pope, and Feyerherm 1995). In short, regardless of beliefs and behaviors or any conception of who offenders view themselves to be on the inside, the body may have a significance greater than it has been given credit in most prior studies of selfhood. Identity can never be seen simply as an internal category because people have to respond to how they are treated by others, and much of this comes from others' perception of their physical selves, particularly for the population that was being studied here.

Cohen's work about denial seems especially appropriate in reference to examining African American offender narrative in a cultural context. As was quoted above, whole societies can be in denial about disturbing information so that "its implications – cognitive, emotional or moral – are evaded, neutralized or rationalized away" (2001:1).



This is true in the United States when it comes to issue of race and class. Mainstream American society has trouble facing the conflict between the actual reality of the black underclass and the purported ideal that everyone can attain the American Dream on an equal playing field. Instead we celebrate Martin Luther King Day once a year and forget about King's ideals. In his 1963 "I have a Dream" speech, he said that one hundred years had passed since Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and still "the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity." Nearly fifty years have now passed since King's speech and, for many people, conditions have not changed. We have changed the laws so we no longer have de jure segregation, but we still have de facto segregation with islands of poverty. But many people who are not experiencing the negative effects of those circumstances refuse to acknowledge that fact.

Public discussions about racial caste in America are relatively rare. We avoid talking about caste in our society because we are ashamed of our racial history. We also avoid talking about race. We even avoid talking about class. Conversations about class are restricted in part because there is a tendency to imagine that one's class reflects upon one's character. What is key to America's understanding of class is the persistent belief – despite all evidence to the contrary – that anyone, with proper discipline and drive, can move from a lower class to a higher class. We recognize that mobility may be difficult, but the key to our collective self-image is the assumption that mobility is always possible, so failure to move up reflects on one's character. By extension, the failure of a race or ethnic group to move up reflects very poorly on the group as a whole (Alexander 2012: 13)

Here the term "collective self-image" is related to the idea of what it means to be an American, supposedly persons living in a free and equal meritocracy. If the meritocracy is not a reality, then people who have more status or material possessions did not actually earn the right to them through their own unfettered agency, but had special privileges due to the circumstances they were born into, such as having a

particular appearance (being white), or growing up in a neighborhood with better schools or less violence, or having better parents or role models than people in the ghetto or in the prison system. What Alexander calls “evidence to the contrary” is what Cohen refers to as “information that is too disturbing, threatening or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged.” Furthermore, while this project has been about African American offender narrative, it is also about American culture as a whole and how it creates narratives about the American Dream, and whether the collective self-image of the possibility of upward mobility is really “collective” at all -- or whether some people find it impossible to see themselves as genuinely being part of that cultural Rags to Riches story.

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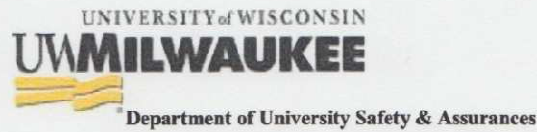
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## Appendix – IRB Approval



Benjamin J. Kennedy, MA  
 IRB Manager  
 Institutional Review Board  
 Engelmann 270  
 P. O. Box 413  
 Milwaukee, WI  
 53201-0413  
 (414) 229-3182 phone  
 (414) 229-6729 fax  
<http://www.irb.uwm.edu>  
[bcmedbf@uwm.edu](mailto:bcmedbf@uwm.edu)

**New Study - Notice of IRB Expedited Approval**

**Date:** October 6, 2010

**To:** J. Patrick Gray, PhD  
**Dept:** Anthropology

**Cc:** Julia Kirchner, MS

**IRB#:** 10.247

**Title:** Emotional and Social Support Networks of African American Male Prisoners

After review of your research protocol by the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Institutional Review Board, your protocol has been approved as minimal risk Expedited under **Category 7** as governed by 45CFR46.110.

This protocol has been approved on **October 6, 2010** for one year. IRB approval will expire on **October 5, 2011**. If you plan to continue any research related activities (e.g., enrollment of subjects, study interventions, data analysis, etc.) past the date of IRB expiration, a Continuation for IRB Approval must be filed by the submission deadline. If the study is closed or completed before the IRB expiration date, please notify the IRB by completing and submitting the Continuing Review form found on the IRB website.

Unless specifically where the change is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects, any proposed changes to the protocol must be reviewed by the IRB before implementation. It is the principal investigator's responsibility to adhere to the policies and guidelines set forth by the UWM IRB and maintain proper documentation of its records and promptly report to the IRB any adverse events which require reporting.

It is the principal investigator's responsibility to adhere to UWM and UW System Policies, and any applicable state and federal laws governing activities the principal investigator may seek to employ (e.g., [FERPA](#), [Radiation Safety](#), [UWM Data Security](#), [UW System policy on Prizes, Awards and Gifts](#), State gaming laws, etc.) which are independent of IRB review/approval.

Contact the IRB office if you have any further questions. Thank you for your cooperation and best wishes for a successful project.

Respectfully,

Benjamin J. Kennedy

## CURRICULUM VITAE

**Julia Kirchner****Education**

Ph.D. *University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee* December 2012  
Major: Anthropology

Dissertation Title:

*Never Put Your Head Down Unless You Pray:  
The Stories of African American Men in the Wisconsin Prison System*

M.S. *University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee* May 1999  
Major: Anthropology  
Certificate: Museum Studies

Thesis Title:

*View from the Bottom:  
The Experiences of W-2 Transitionals under Wisconsin's "Welfare Reform" Law*

B.A. *University of Wisconsin – Madison* August 1992  
Major: Anthropology  
Major: English with Creative Writing Emphasis

**Teaching Experience***Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design*

June 2007 to present, August 1999 to August 2006

Adjunct Instructor

Courses taught:

Origins of Human Violence

Building Community (Service Learning)

Call to Story (Service Learning)

Anthropology of Animals (Service Learning)

Human Thought & Action (Introduction to the Humanities)

The Word and the World (Freshman English)

*University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee*

August 2006 to May 2007, August 1998 to May 1999

Teaching Assistant, Anthropology Department

**Academic Administration**

*Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design*

January 2001 – August 2006

Service Learning Coordinator

(Full-time administrative position with continuous, part-time teaching responsibilities)

**Academic Awards**

*University of Wisconsin Milwaukee:* Dissertation Fellowship 2007-2008

*University of Wisconsin Madison:* Elected to Phi Beta Kappa 1992