Intersecting Oppressions and Mass Incarceration: Male Opportunity Over the Life Course

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The introduction of mass incarceration during the 1970s has caused the United States to have the highest population of jail and prison inmates in the world, and sociologists have become increasingly interested in examining the criminal justice system and the influences that such a prison boom can have on resource access, economic opportunities, social institutions, and particular family processes over the life course (Alexander, 2012; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). Research demonstrates that disparities have been created and maintained within the penal system through the institutionalization of targeted races and classes, most notably young African American men with low human, economic, and social capital (Pettit & Western, 2004; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). Pettit and Western (2004) argue that incarceration now represents a life course stage in which young adults' educational, family life, and work trajectories are significantly disrupted and/or delayed. Individuals enter prison during particular stages in the life course, and the prison system ultimately determines which employment options and social support networks former inmates will have access to upon reentry into society (Pettit & Western, 2004; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). For instance, prisons often do not address the specific needs and deficits of offenders, resulting in such individuals reentering society with low educational attainment, continued drug addiction, and poor relationship skills (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010).

Former prisoners typically lack educational attainment and labor skills, characteristics that are highly valued in today's post-industrial society. Mass incarceration increases labor force discrimination by promoting sentencing disparities that overwhelmingly target individuals of low socioeconomic status, lower inmates' job skills and employment training opportunities, and stigmatize ex-inmates (Pager, 2009 as cited in Wakefield & Uggen, 2010;Western, Kling, & Wieman, 2002 as cited in Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). Most prisoners come from poor or

working-class neighborhoods and are employed by low-paying employers prior to their arrest (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Wycliff, 2005). Prisoners then accumulate wage penalties and face decreases in lifetime earnings, and such losses disproportionately target African American men (Pettit & Lyons, 2007). In addition, government aid and funding for prison programs have significantly declined, resulting in the intersection of economic, family, and health disparities among prison populations and underserved communities more generally (Travis & Visher, 2005). For instance, although "the high rates of infectious disease among prisoners mean that this population provides an important opportunity for reducing community-wide rates of illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted diseases," prisons lack adequate funding for medical treatment and fail to implement solutions that will confront large-scale problems in at-risk communities (Travis & Visher, 2005).

Family trajectories, and social support networks more generally, are significantly disrupted when a person is imprisoned and lacks financial capital. For instance, male prisoners, and African American men in particular, have significantly lower marriage rates when compared to individuals who have not been imprisoned, and imprisoned men in their twenties are half as likely to be married than non-institutionalized men in their twenties (Western & Wildeman, 2009). Upon release from prison, individuals are viewed as undesirable partners as they often lack the financial capital and social networking skills necessary for relationship establishment and maintenance due to technological advancements and changes in social relationship norms and expectations that occurred during their incarceration (Western & Wildeman, 2009).

Although associations have been found to exist between incarceration and socioeconomic status, family processes, racial background, and health care disparities, only recently has literature examined the interaction between economic status, incarceration, and marital trends

(Comfort, 2007; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). Families that *are* built prior to imprisonment tend to be poor, and this poverty is worsened when the principal wage earner is removed from the home (Bakker, Morris, & Janus, 1978). Wives report that, when their husbands are incarcerated, the most challenging concerns involve housing and financial difficulties, often resulting in wives becoming financially dependent on state aid, private organization sources, or church funds (Bakker, Morris, & Janus, 1978). When a woman's husband is incarcerated, housing, food, clothing, and other necessities typically become unaffordable luxuries, and such living conditions take a large toll on marital conditions and family life (Daniel & Barrett, 1981).

Although social support is one of the most important sources of successful reentry, prisons are primarily located in rural, nonlocal areas with complex rules and costly forms of communication, making it difficult and expensive for family members to uphold relationships with incarcerated spouses, children, and friends (Bakker, Morris, & Janus, 1978; Cooke, 2005; Day, Acock, Bahr, & Arditti, 2005; Travis & Visher, 2005). Sending packages, making collect calls, depositing money into an inmate's account, and the expenses associated with long distance travel, public transportation, lodging, and income loss during prison visitation hours can also deplete a couple's economic resources (Bakker, Morris, & Janus, 1978; Comfort, 2007). Recent research findings demonstrate the immense financial burdens associated with communication maintenance between inmates and their family members. For instance, Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, and Zack (2001) found that a sample of poor women in northern California were found to have spent an average of one-quarter of their earnings solely on maintaining contact with their incarcerated partners (as cited in Comfort, 2007). When serving a long-term sentence, an inmate often recognizes the economic hardships associated with communication and therefore

discourages visitation from his or her partner, which can adversely affect marital stability

(Cooke, 2005).

Wives do occasionally report positive effects that result from their husbands'

imprisonment, though the effects tend to be small (Comfort, 2007). For instance, females report

feelings of relief when their partners, who have suffered from long-term drug addiction or mental

illness, are taken out of harmful environments and given care, although usually it is partial and

inadequate (Comfort, 2007). Women and children also report that they feel safer because they no

longer have to worry about domestic abuse or illegal behavior, and that their husbands and

fathers become motivated to change their ways (Comfort, 2007; Lopoo & Western, 2005).

Research that has been conducted in the past has focused on prisoners with average

sentences of approximately 30 to 40 months (see Pettit & Western, 2004). However, the

introduction of the "three strikes" law, mandatory minimum sentences, and decreases in parole

release have brought about major increases in the number of "lifers," or individuals granted life

sentences (Mauer, King, & Young, 2004). Lifers made up approximately 20% of state prisoners

under California's indeterminate sentencing principles in 2010 (Weisberg, Mukamal, & Segall,

2011). Despite such high rates, scholars have only recently begun looking at the effects that life

sentences have on the lives of individuals and those around them, and few studies have

thoroughly examined the reintegration process that lifers face after being released back into

society (Johnson & Dobrzanska, 2005; Mauer, King, & Young, 2004). In addition, a Supreme

Court ruling in 2011 has led to the passage of AB 109, or Realignment, which has shifted

decision-making authority, resource usage, and low-level offender supervision from California

state prison and parole systems to local counties and communities (Weisberg, Mukamal, &

Segall, 2011). It is essential that we study populations of both lifers and non-lifers in California

because the combination of AB 109, overpopulating prisons, and low recidivism rates among

lifers has caused both groups to be released back into society at increasingly high rates (Travis,

2005; Weisberg, Mukamal, & Segall, 2011). This study seeks to investigate how lifers

experience their prison sentences while dealing with long-term financial and social capital

disparities over the life course. It has significant implications not only for prison populations and

the criminal justice system, but for the underserved and disadvantaged communities from which

prisoners come from and renter upon release from prison.

Methods

Participants

A total of 10 former male prisoners were recruited to participate in a study that would

measure intersecting oppressions prior to, during, and upon release from incarceration. All

participants had been sentenced to life in prison and had recently been released back into society

as parolees. Purposive sampling was used to conduct an in-depth examination of formerly

incarcerated men who were currently residing in or working at the only transitional housing

program specific to lifers in the state of California. Nine of the recruited participants were

currently residing in a Catholic-based transitional housing program and one had been recruited to

work at the transitional housing program after completing a different reentry program.

Participants ranged in age from 32 to 75 years ($M = 52.9$). The racial composition of the

sample was 40% Caucasian, 30% Hispanic/Latino, 20% Other, and 10% African American. Five

of the men identified themselves as being middle-class citizens at the time of their arrest and the

remaining five identified themselves as residing in low-income or poverty-stricken

neighborhoods when arrested. Participants were convicted at an average age of 26.6 years, but

conviction ages ranged from 17 to 50 overall. Participants spent an average of 25.6 years in

prison, and all but one was housed in state-level prisons throughout their entire prison terms. Whereas one of the men had received a life sentence after stealing a jet plane, nine participants had received a life sentence for a violent crime. Of the nine participants who were convicted of violent offenses, five were convicted of murder in the second degree, two were convicted of murder robbery, one was convicted of first-degree murder, and one received a life sentence for attempted murder.

Measurement

This study measured the ways in which intersecting oppressions influence lifers as they experience prison sentences and deal with long-term financial and social capital disparities over the life course. Using an interview design, associations between gender, race, and socioeconomic status were measured in comparison to criminality, perceived opportunity, and perceived treatment over the life course. Lifers' attitudes and experiences were measured through the use of both broad and detailed questions pertaining to the constructs of gender, age, and socioeconomic status in relation to social and economic experiences prior to imprisonment, social and economic experiences during prison, and social and economic experiences upon release from prison.

In order to measure such constructs in an organized and efficient manner, a 16-item interview schedule was constructed and questions were divided into six categories that would ultimately be analyzed separately from one another. The four most in-depth sections included *Personal Life History and Social Contexts Prior to Imprisonment, Economic and Social Experiences in Prison, Gender, Race, and Social Class in Prison*, and *Economic and Social Experiences After Prison*. An example of a question from the *Personal Life History and Social Contexts Prior to Imprisonment* section was "Can you please tell me about your upbringing in

terms of family life?" Each lifer was encouraged to describe his neighborhood in terms of social class, any male and/or female role models that he had while growing up, and local incarceration rates. The *Economic and Social Experiences in Prison* section included questions such as "How did being incarcerated affect your relationships with others?" and "Do you feel as though the costs associated with communication affected the termination, maintenance, or development of relationships while you were in prison?" An example from the *Gender, Race, and Social Class in Prison* question category was "Was there a certain level of masculinity you felt you had to uphold while imprisoned? If yes, how did you deal with this?" Finally, the *Economic and Social Experiences After Prison* section included a question that addressed how long-term imprisonment has affected social and/or economic opportunities throughout the life course. Participants were asked to discuss the stigma associated with crime, marital and/or sexual relationships, relationships with other family members, job prospects, etc. In addition to the questions from the four major sections, participants were asked what their highest levels of education were (*Some high school, High school diploma, GED, Some college, Associate's/Bachelor's Degree*), information about their crime (e.g., *Non-violent* or *Violent*, *Victim(s)* or *Victimless*), and other basic closed-ended questions in order to get a better sense of participants' attitudes and experiences.

Processes

A structured interview schedule was used to collect data for this study in order to measure particular similarities and differences between and within groups of lifers. Although participant responses oftentimes led to probing and questions were asked and answered out of order when necessary, the interview schedule was usually followed consistently and in order. Interviews were recorded using Photo Booth, a computer software application developed by

Apple Inc. that can be used to videotape for lengthy periods and can simultaneously record nonverbal cues and verbal responses. Interviews ranged in length from approximately 25 minutes to 120 minutes, with most exceeding one hour.

The interviewer discussed the purpose of the study and confidentiality matters prior to interviewing participants. After participants provided informed consent, the interviewer asked a range of open-ended questions in addition to basic demographic information and information pertaining to participants' criminal histories. Participants were encouraged to expand on questions when they felt they should, and they were given a chance at the end to discuss experiences and topics that had not been addressed but that they thought were necessary to cover.

After obtaining a sufficient amount of data, interview recordings were transcribed and measures were coded through the examination of overarching themes and response patterns. Demographic information was copied to SPSS, a statistical software program, and descriptive statistics were run to obtain basic ranges and means for demographic questions. The obtained qualitative data was then examined to determine significant trends and relationships. Data was coded and analyzed after thoroughly examining participants' responses to questions from the four prominent question categories described in the above section. Overarching themes, such as *Prison Makes You Racist* and *Freedom Ain't Free*, were developed based on response patterns that were found within and between men of specific races and social classes. This coding technique was viewed as appropriate because it incorporated large amounts of complex and multifaceted qualitative information into clear and consistent patterns.

Results

Several overarching themes were used to describe the experiences and perceptions of lifers.

1. *Not Like The Others*

　　In one particular way, lifers distinguished themselves from the non-lifer population. The men discussed working hard to get out of prison because they felt they had "something to lose" if they were unable to be found suitable for parole. Participants from all races and classes tended to follow this logic of thinking, although they noted that those who had spent a lot of time transferring in and out of prison, those of minority races, and those of lower classes often held the view that getting out of prison was too hard or that there was no point in trying to change. For instance, Lifer 3, a middle class Caucasian male, noted that, unlike non-lifers, who "have been in and out of jails and prisons all their lives, [m]ost lifers…develop some type of regular program of work and/or education and recreation. They follow the coda, 'Do your own time.' Do your program and mind your business." This finding might explain why my sample included a disproportionately high number of middle class and Caucasian individuals compared to average prison populations. Lifer 10, a middle class Italian man, said that "[lifers] do whatever [they] can in prison to come out. [They] go to school, [they] work, [they] keep [themselves] occupied, [they] do not bother [themselves] to go with the gangs in prison."

2. *Unhealthy Influences*

　　Most lifers that I interviewed either lacked positive role models or had never had a role model. This was particularly common among men who lacked positive father figures during childhood and who came from low-income neighborhoods with higher-than-average crime rates and violence. Lifer 4, a man who grew up in an impoverished neighborhood and identifies as Hispanic/Latino, said that his role models were his two older brothers. Unfortunately, both of his brothers had passed away, but the one that he had admired most was his role model because he "showed no fear." Lifer 7, a Pilipino who had grown up on the streets, described his father as an

alcoholic who had frequently been physically abusive and who had ultimately broken apart his family. His brothers and sisters ended up in the foster system while he became involved with drugs and criminality as a juvenile. His role models "were people [he] met on the streets that drank and used drugs," so that, "[w]hile everyone was in school, [he] was getting high."

3. *Guilty Until Proven Innocent*

Participants noted that, throughout the trial process and prior to conviction, they encountered troubles pertaining to inequitable representation for those without large amounts of financial capital. Unfair legal representation was perceived as a problem by participants from both middle class and lower class backgrounds, regardless of race. Lifer 5, a middle class male who identifies as Hispanic/Latino, said that his lawyer failed to instill a sense of hope in him. Rather than treating him as a respected client who was potentially innocent, she failed to represent him to the best of her abilities. Lifer 5 was one of six brothers who ended up being convicted of the murder of one male. During an interview with him, he demonstrated his frustration with the criminal justice system by saying, "[i]nnocent till proven guilty? Nah, that's not right. Guilty and you have to prove you're innocent." Interestingly, Lifer 10 pointed out that, had he had $250,000 before going to trial, he would have never gone to prison. His lawyer had told him that, if he could supply the money, he would be able to go home. He stated that, "even if they commit crimes, rich people don't go to prison."

4. *Rich [and White] People Don't Go to Prison*

Although several participants identified as being middle class, most of the men heavily emphasized the fact that rich people do not go to prison. The system was perceived by participants as specifically targeting those with low financial capital, which tended to be members of minority races and uneducated populations. Surprisingly, the one African American

participant who took part in my study (Lifer 1) was uninterested in pointing out how classism

and racism affected the institutionalization of certain races. This might be because he grew up in

Bakersfield "on the cusps of middle class." Socioeconomic status tended to be associated with

educational disparities and particular gender roles in cases where impoverished living conditions

and low financial capital were apparent. Lifer 5 sarcastically exclaimed that, "Whites are a

minority because they 'don't commit crimes.'" Lifer 10 pointed out that "the majority of the

people in prison not only are low-income people, but also are very low-educated people." Rich

people and people who have access to higher education were seen as never experiencing

incarceration. When asked if he graduated high school, Lifer 4 responded with an answer that

established the complex nature of intersecting oppressions. He said that no one in his family

graduated high school and that, he liked school but "just didn't do it." He then said that his

"mom was passive and was like whatever, I got too many kids, I'm just trying to feed them all.

Medical, cheese lines, welfare, all that shit." When asked if he was from a low-income

neighborhood, a Caucasian male (Lifer 8) said, "Everybody's low income."

5. *Prison Makes You Racist*

Every single participant noted that prison makes prisoners racist, making this the most

commonly agreed upon theme from my study. Interestingly, participants said that both the

inmates and workers in the prison tend to perpetuate this pattern. Inmates are separated into their

racial groups when on the yard, at the phones, in the chow hall, at job assignments, in school,

and practically everywhere in the prison. Lifer 2, a middle class Caucasian male, described the

prison institution as "a divide and conquer regime that the guards instill in the inmates, [for,] if

[the prisoners] are mad at each other, [they] are not mad at [the guards]." In prison, Lifer 3 wrote

an essay that described a similar pattern.

"Violence due to racial conflicts is probably the problem most feared by the prison administration, since it can spread like wildfire and quickly involve much of the inmate population."

He noted that racial tensions led to prisoners being housed with inmates of the same racial group and that, in prison, "racism is the rule rather than the exception." In fact, *not* being racist can be detrimental to your safety. Lifer 5 said that, "it's all about race [in prison]. In order to survive, you stick with them (Hispanics). It's a prison gang, or else you won't survive. Prison makes you racist…It's like familia (referring to Hispanic gang in prison; he was interrupted by Lifer 2, who told him not to say the name of the gang because he is on parole). I can't talk about it. If you say something wrong, you'll get killed. I was lucky I did all my time with my brothers. They were tough." Lifer 7 said that he did not notice racial discrimination prior to being incarcerated. Lifer 10 had a story that highlighted racial tension in prison.

"Let me put it this way, the first day that I went to Folsom, and it was early afternoon, I went to chow, I went to dinner and the first thing…I had three white guys at my table, and they said to me, 'Your name is ____.' And I said, 'Yes.' And they say, one of them say, 'If you have any problems, don't come to us. We will not help you.' And I look at them, and I say, 'Why will you not help me?' And they say, 'You are not white.' You know? And I say, 'I never say that I was a white person, you know what I mean? But thank you anyway.' They say, 'We are the Aryan Brotherhood. The gang of the Aryan Brotherhood.' Then the cats came…You know, the cats? Meow…They say they are the bl- the African American people. They call them cats. You know, you ever hear when they talk to each other? The cats, the cats, they mean the guy and uh…Anyways, the cats came and they said the same thing to me, you know, 'We cannot help you. You are not black.'"

6. *Undocumented Misconduct*

Men from all social classes and races discussed the misconduct of prison workers that essentially went undocumented. This was surprising because the interview schedule did not include questions specifically pertaining to officer or worker misconduct. Lifer 2 noted that prison guards would sell inmates cell phones for $400 or $500 in prison, although the devices were illegal. The officers would then confiscate the cell phones from inmates' cells and would be praised by their bosses for doing so. In the essay that he wrote in prison, Lifer 3 said that,

> *"the punishment for rules violations or for doing something which a guard or the administration resent (e.g., writing to a congressman or the press regarding anything critical of the prison) is of an unofficial type. Unofficial punishments can include strip searches, cell searches in which the inmate's cell is torn apart and personal property damaged, confiscated, or thrown away, and not being able to take showers. Filing a lawsuit is sure to result in an inmate being treated worse, and usually in being transferred to a worse prison; sometimes the inmate will be repeatedly transferred from one institution to another, which is referred to as 'bus therapy.'"*

Lifer 3 also said that the correctional officers' motto is "trail them, nail them, and jail them." He then described a disturbing situation that he witnessed while on the prison yard.

> *"While in the yard, the chow hall, and much of the time while in the wings, inmates are watched over by guards with guns; so it is not unusual for inmates to be shot when an 'incident' occurs. For example, once this past year, while out on the yard one inmate was assaulted by another inmate; no weapons were involved. A guard in one of the gun towers shot both men repeatedly. I don't know whether a warning shot was fired. Warning shots are not required; sometimes they are given and sometimes they are not."*

Lifer 4 witnessed officers throwing blue jeans out to vans to be sold at swap meets for $10. The blue jeans had been made by inmates and "were supposed to be inmate clothes." Lifer 6, a Caucasian man who had lived in poverty, said that "it's all about if [the correctional officers] like you and your job. If they like you, you'll be level one (referring to prisons with the lowest security levels and most desirable conditions)."

7. *Loner Without a Gang*

Lifers of all races and from both low class and middle class backgrounds were adamant in highlighting their rejection of prison gang life. Most participants said that it was easy to stay unaffiliated with gangs. However, they viewed themselves as loners and did not associate with many people due to the heavy gang presence in prisons. Although Lifer 5 did note his involvement with a Hispanic gang, this association was probably established as a result of having family members in prison with him. I also did observe gang-related tattoos on Lifer 6, but he said that his tattoos were from nearly 50 years ago. When I asked Lifer 1 about joining gangs, he said that, although you do not have to join any gang, "you're surrounded by it,… and you associate with people that are in gangs, it's on the boil. It's like being on a campus, you associate with students! That's a given - everybody's a student, you know what I mean? Whereas in gangs, everybody's in a gang….You're accustomed to being around it." Lifer 10 said that he was essentially a loner in prison because he did not attach himself with any gangs or groups. When I asked if it was difficult to avoid gang membership, Lifer 9, a Hispanic/Latino from a low-income family, said, "no, I just had to say 'no.'"

8. *Man in the Making*

Even though most lifers chose not to join a gang, each of them said that they were either already "masculinized" and tough prior to imprisonment or that they had to become more

masculine upon entrance into prison. Some also referred to "toughness" as having certain

emotions. Lifer 1 was already accustomed to being masculine prior to incarceration, but the way

he appeared to others was somewhat dependent on being unaffiliated with a gang.

> *"I didn't need to bolster myself or pump my chest up to put the fear into anyone, no I did*
>
> *not. Because I already had that mentality, you know what I mean? Coming from where I*
>
> *was, you know, where I was from - not geographically where I was from but where I was*
>
> *from mentally - I already had that disposition. That, you know, I'm tough as nails*
>
> *anyway! And that just translates right in line with the prison mentality, you know what I*
>
> *mean? So, you know, once people see how you conduct yourself- they see that you're not*
>
> *with gangs and stuff like that- nobody's gonna cross that line with you."*

Lifer 7 said that a prisoner "had to play the role of somebody tougher than the next

person because the way people were - they tried to control you with words, their size, or their

age." Lifer 4 said that he was labeled "stoic" and as "having no emotions" by his psychologist in

prison. Such traits served as unattractive to parole board members, who were interested in

inmates showing empathy and insight into their crimes. Lifer 4 also used a simile to demonstrate

masculinity in prison. He said, "You know how dogs play? How they like to get rough? They

start showing their teeth and growling? Rawr. It's like that." When I asked if such behavior

would get a prisoner in trouble, he responded by saying, "Psh. You get hurt if you allow yourself

to get hurt. And sometimes even if you don't, but, you know, that's because you already got 4 or

5 people whipping your ass." He said that he "don't know too many Bruce Lees in the prison,"

and when I asked what that meant, he said, "You know, [Bruce Lee] used to fight 30 people…he

never got a scratch and he fights about 50 people at a time! You know, and they all got knives

and guns [in prison]." Lifer 5 pointed out that, once prisoners are released from prison, they are

fearless because they survived so much in prison. For, "if you survived in prison, why can't [you] here?"

9. *Prison Doesn't Rehabilitate You. You Rehabilitate Yourself.*

Each of their lifers attributed their success in adopting educational skills, work experience, and success in rehabilitation (drugs, alcohol, anger, etc.) to themselves in some form or another. They constantly reminded me that the prison system lacked effective resources, funding, and programming, which ultimately had a detrimental effect on those who were in the system. If prisoners were determined to get out of prison, they had to work tirelessly without succumbing to harmful habits and trends. Lifer 5 mentioned that, "Prison doesn't rehabilitate you. You rehabilitate yourself." Lifer 1 seemed to be frustrated with the way in which programming and resources were constantly being taken away by the state.

> *"You get reduced yard time because there's some sort of training being done or not enough officers coming in for the day or officers being moved from one yard to the other yard to cover their yard - all kinds of stuff, you know what I mean? They're having banquets. They might have a banquet for a ward and then they don't run any programs because people come and get plates and stuff on a certain shift and then when they change shifts, that second shift comes on and then they go get some food. And there's no program that whole time - that's why they're doing this! You know what I mean? You know, so there was a lot of ways of keeping people from doing things. Lockdowns or so called investigations or somebody might have written a note saying something happened to somebody or, you know, anything! You know what I mean?"*

10. *Undesirable Partner in the Making: Social & Financial Disadvantages*

Although Lifer 7 said that he lacked relationship experience because of his upbringing, most men attributed their lack of social skills and relationship prospects to three major issues: changing social and behavioral norms due to technological advantages and progressive trends, lack of financial capital, and age upon release from prison. For instance, when asked about the social challenges associated with reentry, Lifer 5 emphasized the difficulty in forming relationships with women. Whereas, "[b]ack in the day, you'd say 'Hey, what's up girl?,'" and you would get a woman's number, things were different now. Now, walking up to a woman and asking her out is seen as "awkward," and "you meet people on the Internet now or else they think you're gonna kidnap them or something." Lifer 5 indirectly referred to his disrupted dating and educational trajectory when he asked, "Do you have parties at your school? I miss those. Now, I could never go to a college party." Lifer 2 referenced his interrupted marriage and parenthood trajectories, explaining that he was too old to get married and to have kids. He then asked, "Isn't dangerous for a girl to have kids after the age of 40?" He was also confused about current social expectations and norms involved in forming intimate relationships. His dating trajectory was influenced by his low financial capital and parole restrictions, though he had been middle class prior to imprisonment.

> *"A girl would have to kiss me before I knew what to do. I've had a few girls wink at me, but I didn't know what to do, what they were looking at. I ain't got two nickels to rub together so I can't take her out. I can't drink, maybe church is the way to go."*

Lifer 2 had made an online dating account and had acquired many followers. However, he said that he did not know what to do with the followers and referred to himself as being "lost." When looking at a woman's profile on the online dating website, he said, "She makes

$150,000 a year. I make about twelve grand a year, I'm not sure we're gonna fit." This again points out the financial instability that complements imprisonment.

I overheard the Lifer 2, Lifer 4, and Lifer 6 discussing homosexuality while eating lunch one day. They each seemed quite confused and surprised about the increasing prevalence and acceptance of homosexuality, particularly among lesbians. Lifer 2 asked me if I knew any particular methods that could be used to distinguish between heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual women. He wondered if there was some sort of catch phrase or signal that could be used to identify their sexual orientations. Lifer 4 described the increasing prevalence of homosexuality as being "*reaaaaal* weird." Lifer 2 went on to say that he was "a caveman" who "came out of the stone age." All he knew was that "Ellen DeGeneres is an angel and she's got a neat show." Lifer 6 said that he did not necessarily care about homosexuality so long as homosexuals did not get in his way.

Several of the lifers lacked knowledge about technology. They were particularly surprised with how widespread and advanced cell phones and laptops had become. Younger participants were more likely than older participants to have smart phones. The oldest man, Lifer 10, refused to use a computer, although he had to buy a cell phone and learn to use it in order to stay in contact with his parole officer. This might have to do with his low financial capital in addition to his age. Socioeconomic status impacted whether or not individuals purchased or had technological devices upon release from prison. Lifer 2 and Lifer 3 were the only two men with cell phones, both of whom had been middle class prior to imprisonment. Lifer 10 shared a story that accurately demonstrates the astonishment that several lifers had shared upon release from prison.

"On the plane, and I asked, do you have a pencil and a sheet of paper to write a letter. So I have this little pencil (shows how small) and a piece of paper. Then I felt like I needed to go to the bathroom, so I get up and start walking. I'm walking down the middle of the aisle and I'm looking right, I'm looking left, and I see everybody laptop and phone going. I'm looking at my pencil and say, 'Wow, I am really from the cave.' (laughs)" They didn't have laptops before you went to prison? "No, I went to prison, at the time that I went to prison. A cell phones, they were like this big (spreads arms wide) and they were this container. That's what I saw…We had payphones all over the place. All over the place, every corner there was a payphone, you know what I mean? You could stop in any place, you put in ten cents, and make a phone call to New York….I come out, 'Where is the phone!?' There is no phone! There is no payphone! (cracks up) And then they had a payphone at the bus station, and can't figure out how to use it! And it's hard, I went over to look at it and was like, 'Wow, not for me.'"

11. *Communication Difficulty and Troubled Relationships*

11a. *Life Before Prison: Broken Roads to Crime*

A few of the men reported being in romantic relationships and having close family ties prior to imprisonment. Some, however, were living on the streets because of family problems (Lifer 7), drug habits (Lifer 8), or rebelliousness (Lifer 6, Lifer 9). This affected the ways they acquired social skills and used such skills to form relationships. Lifer 7 said that his struggle with reading and writing affected his communication skills and dating trajectories. Although he had met girls and dated a few, "he never really had a serious relationship before prison where [he] lived with them or anything."

11b. *Life in Prison: Holding on and Letting Go*

Most of the men lacked consistent communication with their family members or significant others while in prison, and this often negatively affected or terminated their relationships. Lifer 5 and Lifer 10 had family who either had been in prison prior to their incarceration or had spent time in prison with them. Although Lifer 8 formed and maintained a romantic relationship successfully while imprisoned, he noted that communication difficulties and strict regulations did make it hard to stay closely connected. Each of the other participants found it very difficult to communicate with others and to have stable relationships due to prison communication costs, rules, and locations. Some lifers ended relationships so that their loved ones could live better lives. Several of the participants' girlfriends left them and formed new relationships and, in some cases, entire families. For instance, Lifer 5 stayed with his girlfriend for a year and a half at the beginning of his prison term, but the relationship was terminated when his girlfriend went to the Army and found someone else. He said that, "You lose everything when you go to prison. And all you hope for is to live till you see your parents again. You don't have any more friends. They all leave." We thought that he was fortunate because his dad, uncles, and cousins frequently visited him and because his cousins and brothers were in prison with him. Lifer 10 had children with whom he lost contact after a year in prison. he blames himself for his son's drug addiction and imprisonment. Lifer 1 said that new prison rules had made communication even more difficult. Lifers "used to have visits every 90 days for 48 hours" and could "send [their partners] the money [they] made" so that their dates could "bring food in" when visiting. However, the prisoners now had to pay expensive costs for food in prison and would not be refunded if their partner was unable to visit. Lifer 1 ended up having three marriages between the years of 1983 and 1995. He attributed his broken relationships to prison separation, prison transfer, and the discontinuation of overnight family visits. Lifer 2 was also

surprised that food expenses were so costly for family visits. A TV dinner could cost up to $70

or $80 dollars. Lifer 8 said that, whereas many "guys would have girls send them packages and

money [in prison], [he] would've never accepted anything in there." The prison that he was

transferred to was eight hours away from his hometown, and he would not send his girlfriend a

visiting form because it "was time for her to move on." Although Lifer 4 stayed in contact with

his family, he broke up with his fiancé after being engaged for three years because she would

have had to drive three or four hours to visit if they had stayed together or had gotten married.

11c. *Life on Parole: Freedom Ain't Free*

        Almost every participant emphasized either directly or indirectly that, upon being

released onto parole, they were not completely free because of certain limitations and

restrictions. According to Lifer 3, as long as lifers are on parole, they are still the state's

property. For instance, Lifer 1 noted that he could not spend Christmas with his family because

of the parole terms and conditions preventing lifers from traveling past a 50-mile radius. Lifer 10

was waiting for next year because then he would be able to visit his family in Massachusetts.

Lifer 4 was planning on rebuilding his relationship with his daughter. He wanted to get her out of

the mental institution she was sent to and wanted to "fix the damage." There was also a stigma

attached to lifers that made reintegration quite difficult. Lifer 8 mentioned that, while he was

applying to Azusa Pacific to finish his Bachelor's degree, he was asked about his criminal

record. When he stated that he had committed a felony in the past, an application question asked

him to describe the felony. When asked about dating, Lifer 4 said that he visits his old girlfriend

because "she's got the money."

12. *Job Experience and Employment*

Although many of the men had learned valuable skills in prison and had extensive training in specific fields of work, some men did not actively seek employment because they were too old or did not know how to. Others had trouble gaining employment because they experienced discrimination by employers, were limited in job access because of parole restrictions, or had experience in jobs that required physical labor and that had either been replaced by technology or were not as marketable in today's society. Lifer 4 had wanted to become a truck driver since he had experience as one in the past. However, he could not apply for a position in that line of work since his parole conditions would not allow him to travel past a 50-mile radius. He was also frustrated when developing his resume and applying for jobs because "there is a 27-year lapse of time [in which he] ain't got no job history, or no history because [he] was incarcerated." He said that he had to tell the truth on his resume and on job applications, which kept him from even trying to become employed because it "pisses [him] off." Others, however, noted that the education and job skills they acquired in prison had helped them gain experience for the outside work. For instance, Lifer 7 acquired "masonry, construction, janitorial, landscaper, [and] yard crew" skills in prison that helped him "prepare for jobs outside of [prison]." He now works part-time in the parking maintenance business and had an interview scheduled for a janitorial maintenance handyman position." Lifer 3 had made connections in prison, had become educated in prison, and was familiar with computer and data application because of the job he performed in prison. He therefore was in the process of interviewing with a security company.

Discussion

The major findings from this study support past research demonstrating that men are likely to lack stable social and financial capital over the life course prior to imprisonment, while

in prison, and upon release from prison regardless of race and socioeconomic status (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Western & Wildeman, 2009). The results also indicate differences between non-lifers and lifers and ultimately emphasize that a variety of factors can differentially affect the social and economic capital of lifers throughout the life course. Gender, race, and social class play a large role in intensifying hardship and difficulty in each of these stages, but hardship can be controlled to an extent through the use of individual agency. Physical aggression, violence, fearlessness, and strength are viewed by lifers as necessary characteristics of masculinity, regardless of socioeconomic status or race. The separation of races and the promotion of gang involvement in prison both encourage and perpetuate racist attitudes and violence among criminals. Lifers, however, tend to avoid gang involvement and violence by spending time alone and focusing their attention on getting out. Socioeconomic status prior to imprisonment does affect social and financial stability during incarceration and upon reentry into society, but several other factors, such as the type of work experience acquired in prison, also contribute to lifers' successful reintegration.

It is necessary to more thoroughly explain the similarities and differences that exist between non-lifer and lifer populations. Gender, race, and class are intersecting oppressions that largely affect whether or not non-lifers and lifers become involved in crime and are institutionalized. For both populations, prisons usually lack effective programming and education, do not provide rehabilitation opportunities, have unreasonably high costs associated with prison, foster racial discrimination, and do not always supply inmates with job opportunities that are valued in today's society. Certain forms of masculinity are adopted and perpetuated by men in penal institutions in order to avoid harm, danger, and a "weak" reputation. Non-lifers and lifers have to deal with the heavy presence of race riots, gangs, violence, and drugs.

Although lifers are similar to non-lifers in many respects, they do have advantages over non-lifers in surprising ways. Despite the fact that gender, race, and class largely affect whether or not individuals become involved in crime and are institutionalized, race and socioeconomic status may not necessarily impact whether or not lifers gain educational and work experience in prison. Those who are actively motivated to change their behaviors and can avoid trouble within prison by standing alone will ultimately have a better chance of being found suitable for release by the parole board. In this sense, work ethic and the desire to get out of prison determine lifers' actions in prison more than intersecting oppressions.

The implications of my study should be noted. First and foremost, prison workers should be placed under strict watch so that mistreatment does not go unacknowledged and unpunished. Racist and illegal behavior should not be tolerated within prisons whether performed by inmates or workers. Prison institutions should also promote contact and communication between inmates, friends, and family members because research shows that such communication is healthy and necessary for successful reentry (Cooke, 2005; Day, Acock, Bahr, & Arditti, 2005; Travis & Visher, 2005). Prisons should provide more effective schooling programs, rehabilitation opportunities, and up-to-date technology-based and service-sector based jobs so that lifers have possibilities upon reentry into society. Since lifers have only recently begun integrating into communities at rapid rates, policy makers should revisit issues regarding parole terms and conditions for lifers and may want to revise them based on lifers' good behavior and experiences in prison. Because lifers have such low recidivism rates, it might be useful to rid of felony checkboxes on school and work applications to prevent discrimination against lifers.

There were several limitations that could have impacted my study results. Because my sample size was small, it most likely did not accurately represent the range of lifers'

socioeconomic statuses or races and therefore cannot be generalized from. Also, my participants were accepted into a Catholic-based transitional housing program and may therefore have had specific qualifications, attitudes, and experiences that differed from those of other lifers. Future studies should increase the sample size and look at lifers from a more representative range of socioeconomic statuses, races, and communities. Since lifers generally agreed with one another in that rehabilitation in prison depends on work ethic and determination, it might be the case that race and class do not impact whether or not lifers gain educational and work experience in prison. However, participants did acknowledge the fact that the prison system is largely racist and classist, so this might not be the case. Future research should therefore examine prison education and work opportunities in more depth to better understand prison dynamics. In addition, researchers may want to look at the experiences of lifers' family members in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the effects that lifer imprisonment and release have on families. Finally, research should examine the effects that lifer reintegration has on the communities from which lifers come from and renter upon release from prison.

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