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Teaching Sociology in a Men's Prison: How Total Institutions Shape Pedagogy and Engagement with Content

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Abstract

Sociology can be a highly emancipatory discipline, permitting students and researchers to identify and thus alter the structures that contour their lives. Nowhere has this been clearer to me than in teaching sociology to incarcerated students in state prisons. Drawing on nine semesters of teaching experience and a complement of semi-structured interviews, I analyze patterns and challenges that emerge in the teaching and learning of sociology in this environment. I explore how in units of sociology that challenge or denaturalize the social organization of the prison or students' temporary identities, learning is altered and conditioned by their environment. In this sense, my analysis goes beyond other thinking on student engagement with privilege and oppression, showing that the particular social characteristics of a prison have meaningful effects on learning. I conclude by offering thoughts about the power of voice and writing, both public and private, in overcoming some of these obstacles.

Keywords

sociology, prison education, critical thinking, writing

INTRODUCTION

Sociology can be a site of conflict between carceral educational models designed to correct individual pathology or "wrongness" and the discipline itself, which is aimed at the analysis of social structures. Rehabilitative services in prison, including education, are primarily focused on assuming responsibility for individual behavior. As such, critical analysis of social structures may be perceived (by both students and the prison structure) as an attempted escape from that responsibility. Sociological inquiry, on the other hand, focuses on the critical analysis of social life and the patterns therein. Ideally, learning sociology would offer students an opportunity to reflect on the self while also learning to locate their experiences within the social structure—and this should be true for students on both the inside and the outside.

Education, however, cannot be detached from the context in which it takes place (Davidson 1995), and we must therefore consider the ways that critical engagement between structure and agency would be meaningfully different for incarcerated students than it would for students who are not incarcerated. Specifically, social structures that exist within a prison may affect students' identity—as it does for non-incarcerated students—and in this case, it may make it difficult for students to engage certain ideas deeply because of their own

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situational vulnerabilities. For instance, the culture of hypermasculinity within a men's prison may make a deep sociological analysis of gender roles and/or sexuality dangerous for students to engage in classroom conversation because it would jeopardize the stability of social relationships that govern their daily lives.

In this paper, I explore how these two forces (the modification of the individual self through rehabilitation and individual responsibility vs. the analysis of the social structure through sociology and critical inquiry) interact. Drawing on observation and interview data from a men's prison facility, I argue that the nature of the total institution and its social organization condition the ideas and content that students engage with in a sociology class. I outline the ways in which some of these insights around identity, vulnerability, and learning are generalizable to adult learners outside the prison. I conclude by offering some suggestions by which teachers of incarcerated students may cultivate critical thinking skills that acknowledge the realities of teaching in this environment.

METHODS AND SETTING

This article draws on my own teaching experiences as well as interview data that were gathered through qualitative social-scientific research procedures. The paper itself developed conceptually over the course of teaching nine community college–level courses in six semesters at a state prison facility from 2014 to 2017. That is, my experience as an educator functioned in many ways like participant observation would function in a more conventional ethnography. Five out of the nine classes that I taught were Introductory Sociology; two were a more advanced class called Social Problems (open to graduates of Introductory Sociology), and two were a class on globalization. In four semesters, I taught at the men's medium or maximum facilities, and in two semesters, I taught both at the men's medium facility as well as in a blended class of female students from the women's minimum/medium/maximum facilities. The students that I taught over this time period totaled approximately 200. They ranged in age from 19 to about 60 (though most were between ~25 and ~50), serving sentences anywhere from several years to life. Classes ran the approximate length of a college semester anywhere else—usually about 15 weeks.

The data cited in this paper come from fully voluntary, open-ended, semi-structured interviews with former students, who were interviewed after their courses were completed and their grades submitted. I did not feel it was appropriate to ask current students to participate in a research study while they were also participating in my class. However, as students' former instructor, I had a high level of rapport, which permitted for detailed and thoughtful interviews after the semester(s) had ended. Former students were the sampling frame for the interviews conducted; the project was approved both by the university's Institutional Review Board as well as the Department of Corrections research unit. The excerpts of student writing that appear here are shared with permission. Because men comprise 93 percent of prisoners nationwide (BJS 2018), they were also overrepresented among my students—and accordingly, among my respondents. The sampling frame for women was too limited to be anything more than suggestive, and thus, the analysis and data in this paper are confined to analysis of the men's facilities.

The prison buildings themselves are large, block-like, and gray or tan. The facilities are spread out across a large campus that includes various buildings at different levels of security as well as an intake center and administrative buildings. In men's medium and maximum security, the educational units comprise separate wings of both buildings. To reach them, instructors walk across the prison yard, typically accompanied by a correctional officer (CO). The yards during crossing times are filled with people going to activities, playing basketball or chess, or walking the track; when nobody is about they are bare and expansive, cut through by shadows of the wire fences. In medium, there is a small herb and vegetable garden that adorns a strip of grass outside the education wing. In all facilities, my classrooms resembled high school classrooms in less affluent public schools—cinderblock walls, concrete floors, individual desk-chairs that we arranged in a circle, a blackboard—and my class shared the space on a rotating basis with other classes, including GED courses. Given the high degree of control that the prison maintains over possessions, standard fare classroom detritus (e.g., a jar of pencils or an abandoned water bottle) is absent. There are no staplers, no scissors, no stray notebooks lying around. Surfaces are very slightly sticky; they smell of cleaner.

COs were not present in my classrooms during instruction, though in some instances they were close enough in the halls that they could hear the class discussion. Classes in the medium security facility typically had between 20 and 30 students in attendance per semester; classes in the maximum security facility were capped at 17. Students attend

classes as part of a community college program that enables them to earn an associate's degree while incarcerated. Classes are offered at a deeply discounted rate, and there is a long waiting list (sometimes numbering in the hundreds) to get in. For most of my students, my classes represented their first exposure to sociology and often their first exposure to college-level coursework as a whole.

Despite the unconventional teaching environment, I largely adhered to the pedagogical practices that I developed for students on the outside when planning the course and creating syllabi for students on the inside. These practices are based on the idea that internalizing material is best achieved through conversation, debate, and writing rather than, for instance, lectures and quizzes, an approach that differs somewhat from how classes are often taught in prisons (Foley and Gao 2004). My classes included a substantial reading load of both books and journal articles. I believe that students learn better if they "practice" sociology; mine is a pedagogical approach designed to facilitate active rather than passive acquisition of material. This included, importantly, the use of weekly reflection papers that were assigned as homework. These essays had minimal requirements beyond a critical engagement with the week's assigned reading and were of modest length (one to two pages, though always handwritten because students do not have access to computers). I provided a list of questions intended to help students "jump start" their writing, but as long as the essays were thoughtful and demonstrated an understanding of the week's reading material, students received full credit. Classes were discussion-oriented, and the final grade was based in substantial part on active class participation both in quality and quantity.

Though I did not initially set out to write about my experiences when I began teaching in this environment some years ago, my own experience within my classrooms permitted me to both analyze my teaching and reflect on my effort to cultivate a sociological imagination and a practice of inquiry in my students.

CRITICAL THINKING, THE SELF, AND TOTAL INSTITUTIONS

Sociological training within a prison can bring structure versus agency debates into particular relief in students' own experiences: They can either regard themselves as failing to conform to society because of their criminal behavior, or they can see themselves as having been failed by a society structured by racism, classism, and the like. Neither extreme, however, is a good place to educate, and this dichotomized version of prison education overlooks the interaction of all of these dynamics: "The former seems too naïve in failing to acknowledge the power of social forces, and the latter is too pessimistic and leaves no scope for education to have a meaningful role" (Tennant 1996:5; 1998), nor for individual character, will, and decisions. Therefore, good adult educational spaces require a place to critically engage both social structure and one's own agency.

Critical thinking is without question the most important skill on which college-level sociology, and indeed most postsecondary education, is premised. Additionally, because of poor access to quality schooling and generally low educational attainment (Arum and LaFree 2008; Hagan and Foster 2012), critical thinking is *not* likely to have been a focus of many incarcerated students' education up to this point in their lives.

Practice in critical thinking marks one of the biggest challenges of teaching in a prison environment—a challenge that is impossible to thoroughly extricate from the realities of the total institution itself. Most students in prison are from lower social classes; as such, they have likely been exposed to educational practices dominated by restricted codes of communication (Bernstein 1964, 1981). The most common consequence of restricted codes is a passive, memorization-bound approach to learning, which is itself well suited to survival in a prison environment and other oppressive social systems. In particular, few students have been prepared for the kind of critical thinking to which many college instructors, including myself, aspire in our teaching (cf. Arum 2011; Davis and Jordan 1994). (I reiterate that this dynamic has nothing to do with intelligence; it has to do with how one learns—socially—to use whatever cognitive abilities with which one is born. I do, however, mean to say that can be a challenge to support students in moving out of the simple, fact-oriented type of learning that restricted codes foster.) Additionally, restricted codes frequently lead to a very authoritarian approach to social relationships, including those in the classroom. According to Bernstein (1964, 1981), they pave the way for a status-oriented (as opposed to person-oriented) mode of control. In the former, everything is controlled by appeal to roles and rules that follow from them.

Even in the context of restricted codes, adults are critical thinkers. They have to be—critical thinking is "embedded in the vivid contexts of adults' everyday lives" (Brookfield 1987:228). Teaching a class based on critical thinking to adults differs meaningfully from teaching college-aged

students or children—adults tend to have a much stronger sense of self simply because they have had more time in the world to experience its offerings and understand themselves within it (Elliott, Kao, and Grant 2004). I use Freire's (1972:27) definition of critical thinking as "the process in which [people], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of socio-cultural reality that shape their lives and their capacity to transform that reality." In other words, critical thinking depends inherently on a sense of identity—on the self.

Within prison settings, practice with critical thinking can provide ways to improve both the lives and the capacities of inmates. Pedagogical practices that give student-inmates responsibility and respect while also encouraging independence can help restore their self-esteem and create equality within spaces of learning (Behan 2007). Incarcerated students particularly have used critical classroom spaces to redefine themselves (McCorkel 1998), as a way to identify and hold on to their real or "core" selves within a total institution. These critical spaces can provide student-inmates with ways to "get around the organization's assumptions of what [one] should do and what [one] should be" (Goffman 1961:107). And yet the prison fosters unique and specific relationship with students' selves. Goffman's (1961) classic analysis of a total institution was based on a prison; the totalistic features of the prison environment have primarily to do with a bureaucratic and repressive organizational form that controls every dimension of life. Participants in a total institution are expected to homogenize, and all structures within the bureaucracy encourage such a process.

The total institution invariably runs into problems when it must accommodate less regimented situations, such as a sociology class. A prison is the ultimate expression of a restricted code: There is a correct and an incorrect action for every circumstance outside of the classroom. Activities, ranging from mealtimes to headcounts to crossings in the yard, are strictly monitored, and deviation from this rigid choreography can carry grave consequences, including loss of privileges or stints in segregation (solitary confinement). Prison is a setting that by design explicitly discourages critical thinking or questioning because the answers to any possible questions are assumed to be predetermined. One student told me that the prison sentence had made her "forget how to think."

Students in my classes simply did not believe they would not be penalized for risk taking; in all of my classes, it took several weeks (and several cycles of essays) for them to engage in critical discussion, particularly in the form of class participation. They may have been concerned that they did not know "how" to do it. They may have been anxious about articulating "wrong" answers or the potential consequences of taking an "incorrect" position. This is likely partially attributable to circumstance (the students and I were new to each other most semesters), and the discipline of sociology was new to all of them before they were enrolled in my class. However, speaking without being spoken to, raising one's hand, offering one's opinion, and disagreeing with an authority figure are strongly discouraged within the prison and in my analysis, fully condition students' behavior inside the classroom for the first few weeks of any semester. In almost all cases, it took several weeks of constant encouragement on my part, proof that their grade would not be damaged by "incorrect" answers, and a few moments of critical discovery of their own for students to begin to routinely engage.

Most importantly, however, a total institution is intended to fundamentally alter human beings; total institutions are "forcing houses for changing persons; each is a natural experiment on what can be done to the self" (Goffman 1961:12). Such spaces are intended to deprive the inmate of the tools necessary to construct their own identities, requiring them to construct alternative ones based on the scripts that are available to them within the institution itself. This combination of a loss of resources from the outside and the intensity of new demands on the inside creates this assault on the self (Schmid and Jones 1991), forcing people to reimagine who they are. The strategies that people use to manage their lives within total institutions are profoundly influenced by the structure of the organization; inmates depend on their own ability to exploit various types of organizational resources for the construction of an alternate understandings of themselves (McCorkel 1998).

In practical terms, this means that student-inmates will in many cases construct temporary versions of themselves based on character traits that are valued in prison; they will reimagine themselves according to the pieces of their identity that permit them to survive in such an environment. Specifically, male inmates will frequently embrace a specific type of macho or supercharged masculinity (Hua-Fu 2005; Jewkes 2005; Sabo, Kupers, and London 2001) that not only excludes women but also preys on weaker men. They will also frequently embrace a working-class identity. Selves may be constructed around a racial or ethnic identity, and inmates will in many cases serve their terms surrounded by those

who committed similar crimes. Hierarchical arrangements based on conviction are characteristic of most prison cultures, including the one in which I work, with armed robbers at the top (the epitome of masculinity) and child sexual predators at the bottom, perceived as the antithesis of such masculinity (Hua-Fu 2005). Pieces of students' temporary prison identities also carry some degree of privilege even in the world "outside." For instance, masculinity in the United States corresponds with a number of important social privileges, as does whiteness. I will elaborate on these claims in detail in the following; the point here is that each piece of a temporary identity gains particular salience within a prison context because so many pieces of one's "normal" identity (i.e., that of father, partner, businessman, etc.) are disallowed.

Together, these are complex sets of dynamics: Students are living within a total institution, reconstructing themselves temporarily to manage incarceration, and in so doing adopting supercharged gender and racial identities particularly. Under the circumstances, the sociological project of deconstructing social processes (and social privilege) encounters a particular challenge, as well as particular opportunities, to its full expression.

TEACHING PRIVILEGE, TEACHING INEQUALITY

Critical thinking, dependent as it is on internalizing the meaning of the social world, by definition also interacts with students' identities. In doing so, it highlights the tensions between social structure and students' individual agency. Understanding privilege, (in)equality, and oppression can be difficult because it complicates one's perception of their own agency, and it may contribute to feelings of powerlessness. In learning, when new information conflicts with our deeply held ideas, when "new truths battle established beliefs for space in our consciousnesses—we tend to respond with all manner of defense mechanisms" (Gorski 2009:54) in response to the psychological stressors that emerge from such inner battles (Elliot and Devine 1994). Students in a prison are no exception to this. The question of how students grapple with their many different kinds of privilege and oppression must be a central one for effective teaching of sociology and critical thinking (Caldwell 2012). As a study of society and social patterns, sociological analysis fundamentally rests on an understanding of how different people at different times and in different places are privileged, oppressed, channeled, or otherwise directed toward certain social outcomes.

Prison education settings fundamentally change the stakes for such learning because students are managing temporary identities at the same time they are absorbing new information. Nancy Davis (1992) has identified three ways in which students frequently react when they encounter their privilege in the classroom: through resistance, paralysis, and rage. "Resistors" in class will often be defensive about or deny inequality (Haddad and Lieberman 2002). Students can also experience "paralysis," in which they feel overcome by the power of these social structures and "don't want to talk about inequality anymore" (p. 235). Students in positions of privilege may feel that they are being cast in the role of victimizer or oppressor (Bohmer and Briggs 1991). For students who have themselves experienced oppression and inequality, classroom engagement with those issues can provoke feelings of rage. This rage likely comes from a realization that the frustration they have been feeling all their lives is actually personally aimed at them, intentional by the frustrators, and is unfair in some way (Berkowitz 1989). Rage particularly can permit for scapegoating but can also be a powerful motivator.

These analyses are excellent starting points, but in this article, I would like to suggest that "resistance" particularly is structural as well as psychological. In the context of a prison, resisting information and/or analysis of privilege protects vitally important pieces of students' temporary identities, protecting against both potential physical and social vulnerabilities. We shall now look at how this occurs.

DATA THEMES

I have thus far set the stage for understanding how students' temporary identities as well as their lives within a total institution condition what they are able to receive in a sociology class. Here, I identify several patterns in how students engage critically (or don't) with specific subfields in sociology. In some cases, students are less inclined to engage in a classroom discussion but will thoughtfully do so in writing. In other cases, they will make arguments that are not in keeping with their critical capacities as a way to support their "temporary selves" (the temporary identities they assume while incarcerated). For almost all students in the men's prisons, masculinity was one of the two vestiges of privilege that they retained within the total institution and their isolated lives. For white students, whiteness was also a precious remaining vestige of privilege. Deconstructing either might make a student seem less entitled to the respect they receive (because these attributes would

then be perceived as social and not innate), rendering them vulnerable.

Critical Thinking and Structural Analysis

Generally speaking, on issues where students felt strongly and similarly across racial lines, there was a great deal of conversation and spirited engagement. Feelings of transracial or class solidarity carried the day; personal stakes were lower for students in the class, and they permitted themselves to engage more freely. For instance, on analysis of institutional problems (education and mass incarceration particularly), students were able to critically engage each other verbally as well as in writing; intellectually daring, intelligent conversations frequently ensued.

These conversations as well as the coursework nurtured strong critical thinking tendencies in many respondents. In post-course interviews, students showed clear indication that they internalized course content by applying it to themselves and absorbing sociology as analytic language through which to understand processes in the world with which they were already familiar. One student reflected:

> You learned more stuff in [sociology] class about the real world, like about stuff that's really going on. . . . But when you learn to look at things from a different view, know what I'm saying? Like to learn to see things from a different angle, it kind of opens your eyes up to things differently. Like, you live in the ghetto your whole life and you don't really understand how it gets to be that way, you know what I'm saying? But when you take that class and you can kind of—like, widen that scope more and more and more, and you see all of these things that make this area the way it is. You know? Like, now it makes more sense to me. . . . The whole time you're growing up you can't really make sense of it, because you're too young. But when you start reading this shit, and you're like: "what the fuck?! . . . Maybe *that's* why things are the way they are!"

Education, in other words, helps students begin to grasp social and empirical explanations for their own lives and identify the forces at work within them. A black student observed:

> We [inmates] don't have that access to the Internet. We don't have that access to a lot of those things that a regular person can just pull up. So, when I read a [sociology] article [for class], I read it a couple of times and it becomes profound in me. Because now I can say, "Oh, *this* is what I've been talking about!"

Just like many students on the outside, incarcerated respondents often think about sociology deeply and integrate a more structural analysis into their lives. One white student traces the way in which this structural understanding has altered the type of citizen he sees himself being:

> Stuff like that that we learned is . . . it kind of angers you at the same time. But it makes you understand like what was really going on in the world. Sometimes you're sitting here, you don't really know [that] how I voted and all this stuff *really* affects us. We're like, "fuck that, it's not going to affect me anyway," but really, at the end of the day, it does! And a lot of this stuff that you learn in that class—it makes you want to be, . . . for me it makes me want to be, like, an active part of what goes on in society.

A Latino man—a former gang member—recounted in an interview that he experienced frustration with his gang stepdown class because it failed to address the cultural and social needs that a gang meets. That is, he made a highly structural critique of the anti-gang training program:

> In class . . . well, [the teacher] talks about anger issues. She's an anger management teacher. So it's understandable, and it's a good class if you really want to learn from it. But a gang is not just a neighborhood. It's your life. It is your *identity*. It shapes you, gives you language, it gives you a belief. It gives you all of that. That's part of what the class doesn't have—and in sociology we talked about that.

Not only did this student begin to think differently about his own education, but his comment suggests that it may be generally beneficial to intentionally integrate sociological perspectives into prison education programs as a way to help students understand their experiences. A stepdown program that purposefully explores issues of identity and belonging, for instance, may offer important additional resources to students who are trying

to reshape their lives that individual-level behavioral modification programs (e.g., anger management) do not.

However, despite this deep internalization of the sociological perspective, as represented in the previous data excerpts, in units of sociology whose analysis challenged or denaturalized the social organization of the prison, student engagement was reduced and became conditioned by the realities of their lives. In the following sections, I explore how specific areas of sociology may pose challenges for instructors working in a prison environment.

Gender

Men's prisons are "ultramasculine world[s] where nobody talks about masculinity" (Sabo et al. 2001:3), and constructions of masculinity in prison develop within this homosocial total institution (Karp 2010). Although various types of masculinity are adopted to counter some aspects of marginalization (scholar, skilled tradesman, and expert in legal matters and prisoners' rights are common examples), an extreme construction of masculinity as an identity position is the most universal response to the imperative to conform to the lower working-class dominated prison culture (Jewkes 2005:61). This is sometimes used, particularly among minority men, to compensate for feelings of oppression (Gibbs and Merighi 1994). Competition for status reinforces this type of hypermasculinity, which in turn can present difficulties when critically engaging issues of gender and sexuality in a sociology class.

Such a world means that for straight men particularly, any suggestion of something *other* than hypermasculinity may render one's reputation and one's temporary self vulnerable, if not also one's physical self. Probing the sociological question of *why* men and women behave as they do (in class) casts doubt on one's own self; in other words, to explore the idea that gender performance is social (rather than intrinsic) may call into question one's own gender performance. And this, in a prison environment, can have consequences. Related, incarcerated adult learners often feel that their manhood is the only remaining piece of their identity. One white respondent says that talking about gender is difficult "because you have to keep up a macho aspect in here." A black man reflected in an interview:

> I mean, it's definitely weird. Because there's more things to manhood than hypermasculine, hyperaggressive man. But that's the only thing we're left with to show how superior we are, because when you strip us of our autonomy and basically our name—all we're known by is our number, and our clothes, and our identity—we have to somehow separate ourselves. So, when you separate yourself from weak to strong [by embracing masculinity], that gives us a little bit more autonomy.

This man makes an articulate link between his masculinity and the lack of respect and autonomy that he is afforded as a prisoner on a regular basis. In a world where you are known by your number, in other words, your manhood remains your own. A Latino student, in an interview, offered his perspective on why there is so much hesitation to speak about these themes out loud: "In regular classes, we talk about them issues [gender and sexuality], they still don't wanna. Because now 'you might be gay, you might be trying to come on to me.' . . . It's like a shield."

In many classes, in-class conversation on gender sought ways to justify male dominance in the home and elsewhere. Comments about keeping women "in their place" and the appropriateness of punishing women for disobedience were regular occurrences in men's facilities. Markowitz (2001) proposed that students who resist discussions that critically examine social life sometimes do so because they misconstrue empirical and theoretical information provided in class as moral arguments; critical deconstruction of gender production, in this line of thinking, could therefore conceivably be seen as a moral argument for gender equality. For instance, one very gifted student, despite his ability to skillfully deconstruct other social forces, turned his comments defensively toward the Christian creation myth of Adam and Eve and the notion that women were formed from a man's rib as a way to explain gender differences. However, I propose that the conversations were particularly explosive because of the specific value of masculinity within a prison. Channeling the discussion to the sociology of gender—of how it is produced and reinforced—was a persistent challenge for me as an instructor in an environment where masculinity is so prized. (The challenge was particularly pointed because as a woman, I retain my own strong opinions about gender roles and socialization; being conscious of my own positionality was an ongoing project.)

If refusing to engage in conversations on gender became "a shield" for incarcerated students

to protect their masculine identity, writing and homework assignments often offered a more forgiving avenue for critical engagement. To be sure, the same "shielding" responses still emerged from time to time: One student, responding to a brief article titled "Ten Things Society Unfairly Expects of Men" that examines social consequences of gender construction for males, wrote a scathing response paper, calling the author crazy and "probably a lesbian"—the charge of "lesbian" intended in this case as a proxy for "man-hater." This young man—otherwise an excellent student, a thoughtful writer, and with a competent grasp on classical theory—simply refused to engage the unit on gender via any medium.

Frequently, students who did not engage deeply in class discussion on issues of gender were far more willing to engage in the private, one-on-one forum of weekly reflection papers. One student reflected—based on the same article—on the ways in which he was expected to "act like a man" and how the lessons of manhood had come from his father, usually through violent encounters. Many observed that these expectations contributed to their unwillingness to show emotion even in highly traumatic scenarios (e.g., the death of a family member). For some students, considering how masculinity is constructed may afford them insights into their own behavior and help them make sense of their own responses to tragedy. Students reflected in their homework assignments about the dearth of emotions that were socially acceptable, feeling powerless, and even how feeling powerless had been contributing a factor to their crimes. One wrote: "I think the whole role of a man as unemotional contributes to a lot of problems in society, not just in extreme cases such as mine. I think emotional intelligence should be taught to children in school, so future men will learn it is okay to have feelings."

The pedagogical challenge here seems to be that incarcerated male students have no protection from being labeled a "pussy" if they deconstruct gender in front of their peers. This may be the case to some extent on the outside (certainly in broader culture, as this student alluded previously) but is certainly supercharged within the hypermasculine environment of a prison. Writing assignments, on the other hand, permit students to engage these questions where the stakes for themselves are lower.

It also seems that male students struggle to reconcile the notion of themselves as privileged in terms of gender given their lived experience as stigmatized inmates and often, as people of color. From the perspective of a black man doing time, for instance, the notion of any type of social privilege may seem absurd. Acknowledging privilege along a different dimension (i.e., in terms of gender) may seem to devalue the feelings of stigma and oppression that many experience due to their incarceration, legal status, or race.

Race

Racial tensions, while baked into American life, also frequently persist within institutions in which minority men are overrepresented (Karp 2010)—in this case, in prisons. Inmates sort themselves into racial groups for most parts of their days, including in classes, at work, and in living spaces. In the facilities where I taught, students reported that COs intentionally separate inmates into cell blocks and living quarters by race because they perceive themselves to be reducing racial tensions in doing so. In almost all cases, students in class seated themselves roughly by racial group: loosely into the categories of black, white, and Hispanic (called "Spanish" by the inmates themselves). The challenges of teaching critical thinking around issues of race in many ways mirror the challenges of teaching gender, but students tend to be somewhat more open to engaging verbally. Further, the prison classroom is a place wherein some discussions surface in a way that they might not otherwise.

In my experience, students of color tend to express their comprehension of the difference between sociological understandings of race and class as well as their comprehension of the linkages between them. They also tend to have a relatively sophisticated theoretical grasp of the interplay between those dynamics and are able to articulate them from experiences in their own lives. Further, and perhaps because a great deal of empirical sociological work validates or reflects their lived experience, they are frequently willing to engage those questions critically in the classroom space. In teaching units on race and ethnicity to incarcerated black men particularly, I often got the feeling that the discipline was giving them a different (and socially legitimate) language to express their experiences. In an interview, as we were discussing race relations in prison, one young black man observed:

> [In prison] you have to be aware of everything around you, but you don't really put a language to it, or words to it. Unless you're in a sociology class. So you may see different sub-groups, kids from different neighborhoods, and kids that identify with three different groups . . . but you don't really think much of it unless it's in a textbook, and you're learning about it. Then

> you could think back two months later, like, "Oh, I remember when he did that, I remember when I seen these kids." And the definition you attach it to—after the situation [changes].

Despite the fact that I, as a white woman, had very little in common with many of my students demographically, the authority that I conferred as a professor seemed to legitimate their everyday experiences of race, racial construction, and racism both in the prison and outside of it.

Students of color often see and are typically able to engage the ways in which social institutions and class contribute to construction and experience of racialized people in the United States. Both their in-class comments and writing reflect that. "Transitioning from adolescence to adulthood is sometimes difficult," one student wrote of his public education in an impoverished part of the city, "but the transition from public school to jail was a breeze." Such reflections are common and demonstrate nuanced understandings of how various social systems—including education and law enforcement—contribute to institutional racism in the United States.

White students, on the other hand, were clearly torn between not wanting to be perceived as being racist (and frequently had a great deal of curiosity about race works socially) and their allegiances to the groups that keep them safe within their prison experience—their allegiances to their privilege. In the same way that deconstructing masculinity might challenge and imperil one's temporary self, deconstructing whiteness might do the same. Here, white students frequently identify social class and its attending institutions as a seemingly reasonable resolution to these problems. Instead of expressing overtly racist views, they express classist ones that are coded to refer indirectly to race, a type of "color-blind racism" (Goldsmith 2006). That white students frequently couch racism in terms of "class differences" resonates with the findings of others, who have found that semantic moves permit for saving face while expressing (intentionally or unintentionally) racist views (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000).

As a part of this, many white students would rather assume personal responsibilities for institutional failures than deeply consider the idea that social class and race pattern their lives. As Pence and Fields (1999:150) have observed, "once white students recognize their advantages, they have to acknowledge that institutionalized inequality not only exists but favors them." This proves to be an extreme challenge in many cases. The idea that race shapes life in the United States challenges the deeply held values and narrative of equality that, as white men, many still retain faith in. In other words, to consider oneself a "failure" suggests nothing more than individual pathology: failure to absorb the lessons of society and failure to "fit in." That is a hard lesson, to be sure, but it is focused on the experience of an individual person. But considering how the economic and social system is structured to help some fail and others succeed so deeply challenges their sense of identity that many white students refuse to engage it. In other words, apprehending the ways in which the social structure is unjust can be a huge existential crisis—on top of the existential crisis already provoked by being in the prison and having to construct a temporary self. For students of all races, incarceration is a particularly difficult time to examine privilege—one's freedom is so dramatically curtailed that the mere notion of being in a position of privilege often feels ridiculous—and even insulting.

Despite these varying degrees of willingness or ability to see or perceive structural racism or racialized social processes, students of all races often describe the classroom as one place where they can and do engage each other explicitly on this issue and where deep learning can occur. Interview respondents brought this up repeatedly and without being questioned on it, which I found surprising. In other words, sociology class afforded an opportunity to discuss things that are otherwise not typically discussed. One black man said:

> So, what I like about the social sciences is, it's that ability—in here for us, as inmates, white, black, Hispanic, Asian, it doesn't matter who you are—to have these debates. . . . So bringing that all together and try to come to understanding. It almost seems like the prison environment, it makes more sense for people to come together and try to understand what society is out there.

When asked why he thought this was so, this student responded: "It's because we're forced together. See, out there you're not forced. If you don't like that neighborhood, you don't like your neighbors, you can move. And here, we don't have a choice." A biracial student describes this type of interaction in strikingly similar terms:

> [In prison] it's people from everywhere, and it's the most extremes. It could be the most-humblest person to the most-violent person. And then you see their point-of-views, and you probably would never talk to them every day, on the streets. I'm sure classrooms on the streets have a variety of people, backgrounds, but here I kind of feel like it's—forced. And you're forced to get to know that person.

A third black student offers his observations on how racial identities affect class interactions:

> I think [classes have] a racial undertone, in prison, because that's the only identity we have. . . . So, you see it, and it's kinda whispered about, but people don't come up to talk about it. But when we do, especially in class, I think it goes well. Even certain groups, they'll stick with only the white guys, or Spanish guys. And we all see it, and it's not spoken about. Or it's joked about. But there's truth in jokes, you know. . . . So it's hard, but I think there's more of an opening to speak about [race] in prison that on the street. . . . Because we have to live together, and we see it first-hand.

When questioned about where he thought that these opportunities for conversation came from, the student paused. Outside the window a crossing period had just begun, and crowds of men in prison uniforms had begun to make their way across yard en route to the gym or the education wing. He continued:

> I feel like, in here, you have so little respect to give to people—or because we're disrespected so much—that the little respect we can give is *listening*. You know? So we'd rather give that out than have tensions arise and go back to your room. So this guy looking at you crazy, so you can hear him out, even though you don't accept it, even if you're not understanding, just listen him out. And then that's the level of respect you show him, and then you can respond. And for the most part, it works out.

This man sees the capacity to listen and engage as the only gift that he has to give his colleagues and those around him. Further, he understands that gift as something that ultimately has a social outcome: It encourages people to listen to each other. Another student offered a resonant take: "Coming in here you grow, you have more respect for what everyone's going through." In other words, a prison can foster compassion in a unique and unlooked-for way.

When asked about what instructional behaviors help facilitate this compassion, a white student said decisively, "I think the best way to make it more comfortable is to actually talk about it." When questioned why, he continued:

> Because if you're not talking about it, you're just harboring some type of resentment or ill feelings towards another class or another group. If you talk about it, then maybe you can come to some type of understanding or agreement. You might not still like that person, but you can understand where they're coming from or, all right, that makes a little sense why that person acts this way. But, to not know nothing about that person at all and to harbor those type of feelings or resentments and to never talk about them is just going to make it worse. . . . And that's why it was good in that class, because it was like open discussions and it's like "Let's talk about this type of stuff."

Though class discussions are frequently touted in adult education as simply being ways for students to master course material (Bonwell and Eison 1991), this research found that it can offer an additional benefit, particularly in a charged and restricted environment like a prison: the ability to help students talk their way to levels of greater compassion. In this regard, even though students' own identity (particularly their race, gender, and status as "inmate") heavily condition their responses to empirical and theoretical content in a sociology class, the social context of the prison forces engagement in a way that classrooms on the outside may not. This is an important finding for instructors of the social sciences and humanities in prison settings and an unexpected benefit for carceral education as a whole.

Writing for the Public in Prison

Units in sociology class that challenge the social organization of the prison were frequently difficult for students to engage, as I have demonstrated. And

yet the practice of writing is also differently meaningful in a prison; many students who reported that they had little to no interest in writing when they were on the street now feel more committed to it. It should also be noted that writing for classes in prison may present particular challenges as computers are unavailable in these facilities and course papers and homework must all be written by hand. As one black student observes:

> I think writing is more significant in here, because that's kind of the only line of communication we have. And I use it as an outlet, especially [when I was in] in Maximum-Security and High-Security, where I would sometimes vent through writing. Poetry, or whatever the case may be. And in the street, I never wrote. I'd text, but in here all your emotions come out in writing, whether it's for an essay, or writing to a friend. They genuine and they come out, and sometimes you don't even stop because it's soothing.

This is a common account among incarcerated students. As an instructor, I was surprised and initially very unprepared for the degree and frequency of personal—and extremely painful—stories that emerged in students' homework. Another black student frames his relationship with writing slightly differently: "[Writing is] our freedom of speech. Because in here, you could get in trouble for *saying* anything. Out in the street, you can say whatever you want, but that's our freedom of speech. Once we put it on the paper, that's our freedom."

If speaking out loud in class is difficult because of the fragile social structure within the prison itself, when students had opportunities to write for a public audience, many were willing to assume greater risk—both social and intellectual—in voicing their opinions and analyses than they did for the sake of the class alone. From this I conclude that such a critical space (writing for the public) can greatly increase the quality of both critical engagement and writing itself in a prison environment.

I discovered this in the fall of 2014 when a student at the men's medium security facility wrote a compelling response paper on the topic of public education. We had been studying social institutions, and he had been reading a piece by academic-turned-journalist Jonathan Kozol. When grading the student's paper, I noted that it had the skeleton of a good op-ed: It identified a relevant problem in the news, explained why it was important, and proposed a solution. With the help of myself and the editor of local news source, the student revised his essay and published it as an op-ed, which circulated widely. Its publication demonstrated for the student that at least some of the outside world was willing to listen and ready to engage him on civic issues, and therefore, his responsibility to the quality of his analysis and writing was high.

Seeing the debate that the piece generated and the reactions of admiration from other incarcerated students and with the blessing of the prison authorities, the news editor and I launched a public op-ed project focusing on the writing of incarcerated students. Within a year, 26 incarcerated students published pieces on topics ranging from a lack of vocational opportunities for people serving sentences, to the role of money in politics, to the school-to-prison pipeline, to sociological meditations on the function of the correctional system as a whole. (For instance, a piece from 2015 was titled "Prison Is about Resocialization, Not Corrections.") While few of these public pieces engaged issues of race or gender—the two most reactive social issues within prison—they directly took on institutionalized class and educational inequalities as well as prison issues. One student's piece generated a follow-up interview and an investigative report from a local NBC syndicate, an experience that immediately transformed him from a modestly committed young man to one of the most engaged and hardworking students in the class.

These editorials were ancillary to the class requirements, but the high levels of participation in the program suggest that the opportunities to be heard and taken seriously—especially in the context of being incarcerated—are powerful motivators for students to refine both their analytic and writing abilities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING SOCIOLOGY

Sociology can be an emancipatory discipline. But the acquisition of the skill, like any other, is conditioned by what students are able to absorb given the lives that they lead and the vulnerabilities that shape their identities. These data have, I hope, suggested some of the ways by which incarcerated students' ability to engage is subject to their surroundings.

The particular challenge of teaching critical thinking in a space designed to maximize students' personal responsibility (e.g., a correctional facility)

is a unique one and perhaps best managed by thoughtfully considering the interaction between personal responsibility and social structure. One Latino respondent, when asked about what he thought sociology was going to be like before beginning class, said somewhat sheepishly:

> I—I was in high security for about nine years, and during that time I read a lot of books. . . . Sociology, for everything I read about it, it was an excuse for people's behavior, for their actions. Like oh, because you know, I was raised in this neighborhood I'm gonna act like this *because* this neighborhood. Sociology teaches that your environment affects how you act. Everything I ever read about it [before class] was, was a justification for a person's actions. So, when I started class, my mindset was, "okay she's gonna teach about how our environment affects us, and that's gonna lead to why we did crimes, why people who do this and that." And it was just a justification and it leaves out the personal. Like the character, like your choices. But you didn't do that though. So that confused me.

While parsing the tension between structure and agency is frequently one of the most challenging tasks for sociology students—not just those in prison—the specific dimensions of incarceration bring that tension into much greater relief. Students in a prison (likely far more than students on the outside) desire to feel agentic, precisely *because their circumstances are designed to strip them of agency and self-determination* in most aspects of their lives. To deal with this, and in addition to emphasizing the ways in which empirical sociology is probabilistic (rather than deterministic), my instructional approach is frequently to try to foster thinking about ways in which people and institutions can hold each other accountable. As incarcerated people, my students are obviously being held accountable by an institution. Inverting that dynamic—even as a thought experiment—can help students think about the process in reverse. For instance, we may explore how people hold institutions or the economy accountable. In my classroom, this line of questioning typically leads to teaching some basic civics within an introductory sociology class (i.e., representative democracy as a way to hold institutions and politicians accountable) as well as intentional and thoughtful units on social movements and social change (i.e., boycotts, community organizing, or mobilizations as other ways that people can hold institutions and economies accountable).

Second, when a sociology class questions the genesis of the vestiges of privilege that students in prison retain (specifically in this paper, of masculinity and whiteness), students frequently resist. There is precedent for expecting this type of resistance, and perhaps it should not surprise us. However, the dimensions of this process are qualitatively different for students in a prison than students on the outside—acknowledging privilege not only means internalizing it but potentially disrupting one of the very few channels of respect and self-esteem that exist in a prison setting.

This inability to acknowledge some social patterns may also inhibit students from seeing the connections between different types of structures and oppressions. For instance, a brilliant black student who took two classes with me became deeply interested in sociological theories of race and had developed a very sophisticated Marxist analysis by the end of his two semesters. This same man, however, ardently resisted engaging a similar analysis of gender. (In this regard, he is not so different from many male Marxist thinkers that were never in prison.) At one point, exasperated, I asked him outright why he refused to believe that the same pattern of invisible rules that conditioned his own life also conditioned the lives of others. My response in that moment was driven more by frustration than I had intended (and likely by my own positionality), and yet it provoked an unexpected new receptiveness to gender analysis in the student himself over the course of the following weeks. Predictably, then, instructors should be prepared for rage as a product of this resistance (Pence and Fields 1999).

But perhaps the greatest lesson for teachers is that in supercharged environments such as prisons, a variety of forums in which students may voice their opinions and engage their questions can be very important. While pedagogically I feel that classroom discussion and seminar-style teaching is the most effective and useful (not to mention, it builds skills in respectful debate and disagreement), the pressures of a prison may dampen classroom discussion on gender, though it may also provide unexpected advantages on the issue of race. Specifically, writing may be a "safer" place to critically engage some ideas within sociology because of its relative privacy. Writing within a prison setting presents its own set of problems (especially in facilities where computers are inaccessible and revising handwritten papers can be

difficult and time-consuming), but I have found that it offers a unique opportunity for students to share their thoughts on the social structure as it relates to their own lives. This insight is likely generalizable; when non-incarcerated students' social identities are threatened in a classroom context and are difficult to discuss openly, writing may be easier for them as well. Related, the opportunity to write for public consumption both dignifies the endeavor of writing and creates a system of accountability for students to their own quality of analysis.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I reflected on patterns and challenges facing instructors of sociology within a prison environment. I demonstrated that in units of sociology whose analysis challenged or denaturalized the social organization of the prison or the temporary identities that they have constructed to withstand the experience, student engagement was reduced and became conditioned by the realities of their lives. In this sense, my analysis goes beyond other thinking regarding how students engage with their own privilege and oppression, showing that the particular characteristics of a prison have meaningful effects on students' learning. I have also offered thoughts about the power of voice and writing in overcoming some of these obstacles.

The United States has the largest prison population in the world; notwithstanding the structural issues facing the criminal justice system, education has been shown to dramatically reduce recidivism rates. Completing an educational program in prison reduces the likelihood of recidivating on average by approximately one-third and suggests a 24 percent increase in the likelihood of getting a job (Ellison et al. 2017). These numbers are higher still for students who earn college (rather than high school or GED) degrees. Postsecondary education that permits advancement to this goal should be understood as a constructive use of time and resources and a meaningful teaching experience for professional sociologists.

Finally, sociology—as the study of the social world and the visible and invisible social rules that pattern it—is relevant intellectual preparation in postsecondary education generally and for incarcerated students in particular. Incarcerated students, because of the structure of their days, typically have a unique opportunity to reflect on their circumstances (social, economic, and existential), and many of them do. Providing an analytical language through the teaching of sociology can permit this group of adult learners to become more critical and engaged actors in their own lives.

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