

**Reaching Men in the Shadows:
Men's Circles in a Prison Setting***

Steven Spitzer, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Sociology
Suffolk University
Boston, MA 02114

*In SPSMM Bulletin (Special Focus Section, Holly Sweet, Editor) American Psychological Association, 2002, Vol 7, No 4, pp 5-7

Over the last year, I have organized and facilitated two weekly men's groups at a Federal Prison in Massachusetts. With the support of a team of six men skilled in the techniques developed through the Mankind Project (see Barton, 2000), we have offered these inmate groups (8-10 men) a variety of skills and experiences. The groups were established to create opportunities for self-reflection, trust building, and the development of emotional literacy for incarcerated men.

The difficulties men face in identifying and expressing their feelings are well documented (Real, 1997; Pittman, 1993; Pollock, 2000). Prison environments, with their emphasis on toxic masculinity, power, hierarchy, and the inmate code (Sabo et al, 2001), put men at even greater risk of disconnection. The institutional setting rewards stoicism, toughness and detachment from feeling. Incarcerated men must "wear the mask" if they are survive with respect to either the inmate subculture or the prison staff. Our prison groups endeavor to take off "the mask" so men can begin to address their deepest wounds.

Goals and Operating Principles.

- 1) The groups are designed to offer inmates useful and accessible tools to heal their wounds in the crucible of the prison setting. Ultimately, the objective is to create self-directed groups where inmates master the skills necessary to support themselves in an ongoing and autonomous group process. The circles work most effective when they dissolve the distinctions between facilitators and group members, as well as between those inmates who are perceived to have more or less status in the institution. The leveling process creates an

alternative to the hierarchical power-based models provided by both the administrative and inmate cultures.

- 2) We want to empower men to find the support they are seeking from other men. Cooperation, trust and non-hierarchical agreements are scarce in institutional settings. By their very nature and by policy, correctional institutions create a binary world of mistrust between groups. The most obvious divisions exist between inmates and staff, but there are also significant antagonisms between inmates. The power of the circles is that they directly challenge these distinctions, offering inclusive and safe containers within a profoundly stratified, unsafe and unpredictable environment.
- 3) Deep emotional work can only be done in “safe containers.” The circles are designed to create boundaries between what goes on inside and outside of the container and to sanctify (hold sacred) the work done inside the circle. Confidentiality agreements, consistent group structure, as well as a focus on “walking your talk,” contribute to a sense of safety and trust in the groups.
- 4) Accountability for behavior and integrity (congruence between words and action) is a cornerstone of the circle-building process. Within the prison circles, men are held accountable for their actions and commitments. When men fail to do what they say they will do, they are asked to acknowledge their breach and to offer a simple act of service to get back in integrity with the group. Through this process, trust can be restored and intimacy deepened.

- 5) A key goal of the groups is to teach emotional literacy (Goleman, 1994; Casarjian, 1995)—the ability to identify feelings, separate feelings from facts and judgments, and own what is projected onto other individuals and institutions. When men can identify their feelings and connect them to both cognitions and actions, impulse control improves and responsible decision-making becomes possible. Men in prison, perhaps more than most, need to confront the ways they have acted unconsciously in their lives. By introducing basic techniques to separate feelings, judgments, desires and projections, the circles help men better face issues in their everyday lives. Through attention to language, belief structures and action, the groups promote emotional ownership in the most basic sense. Inmates are encouraged to examine and confront their choices without externalizing or blaming either circumstances beyond their control, other inmates or guards, or the conditions of their incarceration. At the same time, a space is created in the groups to acknowledge and honor all the feelings that men have (sadness, fear, anger, joy, shame) about their lives—feelings that cannot be expressed safely in the prison environment.
- 6) Part of the process of empowering men in prison is to challenge the stories they have made up about who they are and why they are in prison. The groups offer a supportive yet no nonsense environment in which life stories can be told and retold. Instead of trying to reframe the narratives offered by inmates within a traditional moral/legal context, so they can “see the light,” inmates hold each other to a standard of personal integrity and truth-telling that

emerges directly out of the group process. This type of feedback and expressive process leads men toward a “restorying” of their lives (Kenyon and Randall, 1997). They have a chance to step out of their stories and claim ownership of key life decisions. The circles differ from approaches that import clinical and moral narratives by creating a home grown discourse of responsibility that can be honored by the men directly.

- 7) The circles introduce men to critical skills in conflict resolution and ways of safely and effectively expressing feelings without violence. Violence is an accepted and expected form of communication and status maintenance in prison settings. Violence is also a well-established way of “doing masculinity,” (Messerschmidt, 1993; Sabo et al, 2001) both within and beyond the walls. Men serving time remain unclear as to how feelings, especially anger, can be expressed without significant costs to themselves and others. Through bio-energetic and other expressive processes, men learn how to release many of the pressures and “demons” that haunt them in the prison setting. In addition, inmates are taught ways of expressing their truth without fear of reprisals or triggering other men. A key to this process is teaching how triggers are imbedded in projections—the displacement of qualities onto others that we deny in ourselves. The clearer their understanding of projection and the stronger the container, the deeper and more authentic the language of emotions that can be spoken.
- 8) The circles provide a vehicle to men who are ready to look for a deeper meaning in their lives. The crisis of incarceration often motivates men to

re-examine their lives and to explore new paths and directions. Men's circles are an excellent context for the work necessary to find and follow an authentic life course (Levoy, 1997). Men can identify their visions and articulate the actions necessary to move toward achieving them. The prison groups offer an opportunity to connect the present to a future that promises much more than the revolving door of crime and institutionalization. For perhaps the first time in their lives, men can look deeply into what has held them back and envision a very different future. This re-visioning is a critical step in taking a different direction once they are released.

- 9) Prison circles can mentor men in the creation of a healing community within the prison walls. By connecting men more directly and responsibly to feelings in institutional settings, the pains of imprisonment can be eased and doing time can become a productive step on the way to self-realization. Ultimately, bridges can be built between men working in groups both inside and outside prisons, thereby easing the transition of incarcerated men back into their communities. Through this process, the world becomes a safer place, one man at a time.

In sum, the intention of the project is to create "islands of trust" within coercive institutional environments. Within these islands, incarcerated men can accomplish several things. They can practice skills that will help them use their time more productively, begin envisioning an alternative future, and set the stage for their release back to the community. They can begin the long and difficult process of identifying and working through the wounds that have derailed them in life. And finally, men can learn

another way of being with men—an experience that allows them to transform competitive, shaming and abusive relationships into cooperative, supportive and enriching connections.

Men's circles are not a panacea for all men, whether they are incarcerated or not. Nonetheless, it is clear that for many men these groups can create a framework for getting directly in touch with themselves and their personal work. In total institutions the injuries and burdens of gender are clearly reinforced. Yet, in spite (or perhaps because) of these obstacles, incarcerated men are continually drawn to the power and possibilities of this work. This is perhaps the greatest testimony to the value of men's circles as a response to both crime and the crisis of masculinity in the modern age.

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