

# Counseling Men in Prison



Jeffrey W. Aston

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## Counseling Men in Prison

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It is the purpose of this chapter to provide a therapeutic perspective for working with men in prison. Such work will occur in a most difficult environment with an often recalcitrant clientele. Even therapists skilled in intervention with other populations will discover prison work to pose problems and challenges that can fairly be termed unique. The criminal's skill at externalized blame and self-justification can make him seem at times impervious to change—it is others who are at fault, not he. It is the therapist who should be educated about the world's grim realities, not the inmate.

Counselors and therapists often become confused as to what sort of battle is being fought with their prison clients. Hoping to be of help, they are surprised to encounter ploys, deceptions, and manipulation that seem to serve no purpose. Some kind of struggle is clearly at hand, but its character and meaning remain hidden.

Men in prison are in conflict with themselves and others in part out of mistaken allegiance to an exaggerated and corrupt philosophy of masculine identity. There is a sense in which prisoners “should” act as they do in order to fulfill a peculiar notion of manhood. Since therapeutic change is impossible unless the client perceives growth to be significant in his own terms, that ideal of manhood must be understood by the therapist.

The terms *criminal* and *inmate* will be used in this chapter to refer to incarcerated men who evidence to significant degrees the cognitive-behavioral patterns described in Yochelson and Samenow's (1976) *The Criminal Personality*. While one encounters other men in prison who are not antisocial personalities, that smaller subset does not tend to present peculiar or unique problems for the therapist. The reader unfamiliar with *The Criminal Personality* (Vols. I and II) is advised to review that work in preparation for entering the correctional setting. The books convey in ordinary language a useful image of the sociopathic mentality. One gleans a portrait of individuals distinguished by the extremity of their concrete, short-range, selfish, exploitive, irresponsible thinking patterns. Without attempting a summarization of that lengthy material, I would note here that Yochelson and Samenow view

criminality, as defined by cognitive errors and irresponsible behavior, as measurable in a single direction along a continuum. A particular individual will demonstrate some degree of these characteristics, ranging from the responsible person (who neither contemplates nor acts upon criminal ideas) to the severe sociopath (whose mind “races” with criminal thinking and who commits violations whenever possible). Criminals are thereby differentiated from each other, and from responsible citizenry, by the extent to which they manifest such exploitive thinking and behavior. This cognitive-behavioral definition of criminality leads naturally to the authors’ prescribing a form of cognitive therapy as an intervention. The therapist is to aid the criminal in uncovering these cognitive distortions, in preparation for the subsequent task of correcting them.

While a knowledge of criminal thinking is important in working with inmates, a direct attempt to change criminal thinking errors one by one can be an arduous project. Equally important, the goal of simply reforming the self into a model of responsible citizenry will likely appeal to few prisoners. The challenge of a wider definition of manhood can however, become quite intriguing to them. To facilitate this process of redefinition, it is useful to understand more than one viewpoint from which criminals might experience the difficulties of masculine identity.

In contrast to viewing criminality as a phenomenon that varies in degree along a single continuum, I will describe the criminal’s preoccupation with his masculinity as assuming two possible, and somewhat opposed, forms: He can believe himself to fall short of an imagined masculine ideal, and thereby engage in constant attempts to prove how tough he is, or he can image himself as actually embodying an extreme masculinity that excuses his callous treatment of others in a dog-eat-dog world. While both types evidence a common preoccupation with notions of “manhood,” the former feels chronically anxious about his supposed hypo-masculinity, while the latter lives in shallow comfort within a hyper-masculine role whose limitations are not spontaneously recognized.

Each of the foregoing types will cherish an inward justification for his life of repetitive arrests and imprisonment. The hyper-masculine criminal violates the law out of an indifference to social mores that are “soft” and beneath him, while the hypo-masculine criminal strikes out against a world peopled by superior men and women who are “hard” and threatening. Each has his own dread of intimate relationships, which includes the therapeutic encounter. The hypo-masculine inmate, while initially far

more inclined to seek help and succor from a therapist, quickly sabotages the situation as his underlying fear of being revealed as unmanly emerges. The hyper-masculine inmate is likely to come to therapy only through external coercion or a brief desire for respite from the boredom of typical prison games. The therapy game itself will be tolerated so long as it represents an amusing forum for manipulation and self-enhancement. The therapist who is penetrating and persistent enough to avoid distractions will lose his hyper-masculine client as soon as the dialogue becomes intimate enough to threaten invasion of the tough-guy role.

It may seem at this point that the foregoing serves only to highlight the impossibility of doing any serious therapy with men in prison. I would instead suggest that while work with criminals who represent *extremes* of either type may be unproductive, the majority of inmates will exhibit more moderate tendencies.

It is similarly wise to be wary of those who are on the extreme end of the Yochelson-Samenow continuum of criminal thinking. For the purposes of this discussion, we can view that continuum as bearing an orthogonal relationship to the hypo-masculine-hyper-masculine construct. That is, one can be high or low in degree of criminal thinking while viewing the self in either hypo- or hyper-masculine terms; the conceptual dimensions are independent.

It is important to emphasize that the distinction between hypo-masculinity and hyper-masculinity is phenomenological in character. The terms refer to an inner experience of one's manhood, which can seldom be directly inferred from the inmate's overt behavior. Hypo-masculine types are no more or less socially competent, intelligent, strong, or attractive than their hyper-masculine counterparts. Since everyone in prison "acts tough" while concealing inward reactions, behavioral discrimination becomes even more difficult for the casual observer. One will tend to see on the surface only a uniform code of hyper-masculine role behavior among prisoners. The point for the therapist is to realize that *some* of those men have inner feelings that may be diametrically opposed to their efforts at maintaining the tough facade they believe they "should" embody. For others, that facade is experienced without dissonance, as entirely genuine.

A problem with much of the literature on criminality, from *The Mask of Sanity* (Cleckley, 1964) to

*The Criminal Personality* (Yochelson & Samenow, 1976), is that it highlights the distinctive features of sociopaths at the expense of making them appear quite foreign to the reader. It is sometimes difficult to emerge from these volumes with any intuition as to how one might bond with such persons in therapy, assuming that the reader retains any interest in doing so. An advantage to viewing work with criminals as continuous with a general concern for men's issues, is that such a bond is implied.

For the male therapist in particular, one is joined with the inmate in a common quest for liberation from an imprisoning gender role. One's wisdom as a therapist consists precisely in having examined the issue of masculinity at a level of philosophy superior to the crude images that inform the inmate culture. Rather than playing the superior role of doctor to patient or good guy to bad guy, the therapist can relinquish such superficiality in favor of genuine collaboration. The nature of this collaborative concern with masculinity may be made quite explicit, or remain unspoken as one deals on the surface with other presenting issues. The therapist often exerts a more powerful influence by virtue of the model of masculinity he embodies, rather than through the clever interventions he dispenses.

The idea that a therapist's human qualities represent a critical variable productive of client change has certainly been well examined in the more general context of research on psychotherapeutic efficacy. In the prison setting, however, one discovers this variable to be peculiarly highlighted. Prisons are tight, hierarchical structures deliberately removed from fluid interaction with a larger society protective of its comparative gentility. The men who come to prison bring with them some form of exaggerated preoccupation with power, control, dominance, and other attributes of masculinity. Unsurprisingly, women who enter this environment feel themselves to be objectified, on stage. It is equally true, however, that male staff will describe the sensation of being watched, judged, and evaluated. One might term this an accurate paranoia (and inmates voice the reciprocal experience of being constantly observed by staff).

Other chapters of this volume have alluded to that competition aspect of male identity which places men at odds and creates in them an underlying sense of being constantly at war with one another. Beyond the war experience itself, this combative intuition is nowhere realized more clearly than in prisons. Power struggles between and within staff and inmate groups may be contained, in more advanced and human institutions, to the level of surly memoranda and frequent litigation. Still, conflict in some form is never long absent. More important to this narrative is the sense one will feel while



working in prison of being constantly tested as “a man.” Since the inmates (and many staff) experience each other in terms colored by a fascination with manhood, the therapist is similarly experienced. The therapist’s ability to formulate a creative response to this awareness, can provide him enormous leverage. The following are some pertinent themes which inform the inmate’s understanding of masculinity.

### Strength

Whether the inmate complains about his subordinate role with staff, bemoans his unjust lot in life, recounts his successes (or frustrations) with women, or describes in rapturous terms his latest conversion to yet another religion, it is not difficult to detect in his monologues an underlying intrigue with visions of power. The very instability of the criminal’s flirtation with so many jobs, schemes, women, roles, and ideas suggests a restless quest for some strong position in life that will guarantee him risk-free access to whatever promises fulfillment. That none of his enterprises prove truly fulfilling is an important insight, but for now the idea of “strength” as a vehicle for supposed success and survival is worthy of examination.

The hypo-masculine criminal will engage in various maneuvers, or relate certain “facts” of his history, that are meant to convey an appearance of strength which exceeds his private estimation of himself. The therapist can often test for the presence of this discrepancy through straightforward inquiry. After listening to an inmate brag about himself, I have asked “How long have you felt so insecure about your image?” This tactic can refocus the dialogue toward exploring whatever subjective fears of being “weak” underlie the surface presentations. Once the subject is broached, the hypo-masculine client often evidences relief at being able to talk about his anxious concern that he is a weak man born into a strong world. He will begin to speak of his crimes as efforts to prove that he couldn’t be “pushed around by society.” He may or may not describe an abusive upbringing, but there is usually the sense of his having felt inadequate as a man since childhood or adolescence.

How the therapist responds to these disclosures will depend upon the particular context, but it is important to shift at some point to a more flexible, humane, and evolved definition of what being a man is all about. The hypo-masculine inmate will remain self-rejecting so long as he is tantalized by an image of masculine “strength” that seems unattainable. It is critical to demonstrate that this image is actually

*undesirable*, and that a basic reformulation of the weak-strong polarity is necessary. Since the client will leave the office to ponder these matters in a prison cell, it is important to be aware of how the prison culture around him defines strength.

The best way to derive an understanding of prison culture is to deliberately recruit a few hyper-masculine clients. Therapists invested in validating their own manhood might try placing a number of these men in group therapy all at once; it will prove an experience worthy of reflection. In any event, it is not difficult to elicit stories about the “tough joints,” where inmates may literally measure strength in terms of one’s ability to murder another human while remaining unmoved. Some hyper-masculine types who have been transferred to a more moderate prison (perhaps nearing the end of their sentences) will voice a kind of nostalgia for the brutal clarity of such settings, where men “don’t play games.” The sincerity of that nostalgia is one index of an extreme type for whom therapy is likely ineffective. I am reminded of those Vietnam veterans who explain their power maladjustment by confessing that nothing can recapture the adrenaline rush of a good firefight.

One can sometimes confront the hyper-masculine client’s distaste for “games” (i.e., civilized discourse), by pointing out that a dominance hierarchy of ruffians actually constitutes the shallowest of games imaginable. The so-called strength that is tested by such hierarchies can be recast as a kind of fragility. The more sensitive and defensive one is about one’s manhood, allowing violence to ensue from the most trivial of insults, the more insecure and “weak” one actually is. This theme, while providing reassurance to the hypo-masculine type, should be used to challenge the hyper-masculine inmate to develop that deeper experience of strength that abides in tolerance, forbearance, and eventual freedom from the need to prove oneself to others.

The therapist who is working with his client to reframe the construct of “strength” should be aware that both types will at times object that it is impractical to experiment with more liberated roles of manhood while in prison. Fail to be tough, and the others will get you. An appropriate reply is to differentiate between behavioral *tactics* and self-definition. While it may indeed be necessary at times to *act* tough in prison, one need not perpetuate the hyper-masculine error of an inner identification with that superficiality. It is helpful to suggest that one of the hallmarks of a more evolved masculine identity is precisely such tactical, or situational, role flexibility. It is, however, critical to distinguish an evolved

masculine flexibility from the mercurial inauthenticity of criminal role-playing, which is described in the next section.

### The Objectified Self

Criminals lie and they do so for a number of reasons. Rather than viewing their deceptions either as purely pragmatic (to fool authorities) or pathologic and involuntary (*pseudologica fantastica*), we will focus here upon the life of the lie as it relates to gender role. The criminal's obsession with a simplistic image of masculinity actually requires that he use lies in order to maintain that distance from himself and others which is demanded by the role. To understand this, one must note that male identity in general has a certain contrived and artificial character to it. Externally, men seek to grasp the world at a distance, and to control that contact through the power of their images, concepts, and biceps. Their genius at this sort of manipulation seems coupled with a concomitant inability to create and share meaning with others at the closer quarters of interpersonal intimacy. This may be due in part to the male's internal tendency to try and grasp the self in terms of the same surface images that inform his view of the world. Prisoners in sex therapy will, for example, report being most aroused by the woman whom they objectify in fantasy as somewhat distant and challenging. Bring her too close, and a certain type of arousal dissipates at the same moment that anxiety increases.

The criminal's problem with women will be examined in the next section. It is worth emphasizing that criminal lying serves in part to sustain a contrived, objectified self that represents an exaggeration of the male image. Men have a chronic discomfort with intimacy, which is epistemological in character, and which can be seen highlighted in inmates. Psychologists sometimes are surprised by the interest shown by many criminals in psychological theory. They will read texts, attend lectures, and one is tempted at first to find this encouraging. It is not difficult, however, to discern in this interest merely one more effort to acquire a tool that will enable the criminal to understand and control the world, relationships, and himself at a safely analyzed distance. It is like learning to love by reading *Hustler* (which he will also do).

Criminal lying and role-playing appears pathological because of its pervasiveness, yet the inmate will tell you in candid moments that he is merely making a more conscientious effort than most to perfect the art of impression management that everyone practices. Inmates are notoriously adept at proving this

by setting traps that will prompt the therapist to engage in some sort of defensive dissembling. This is sometimes achieved by asking unexpected personal questions, watching the therapist squirm or fib, and then concluding that indeed “no one is honest.” This shallow maneuver is interesting because a significant issue is being tested.

All humans are ambivalent about the possibility of being truly known by another. The advent of telepathy would, for example, arouse enormous anxiety and force a virtual restructuring of everyone’s identity. Assuming further that there is a particular masculine phobia about the prospect of honest self-disclosure, one would predict men to engage in approach-avoidance behaviors in connection with intimacy. While the initial approach is motivated by a desire to bond, avoidance comes into play at the point when the male epistemology, or objectified way of knowing, is threatened. The therapist will encounter this ambivalence in his criminal clients.

The inmate will approach out of a genuine hope of allowing the self to be known, yet as intimacy develops he encounters a curious blankness in that self if he makes a sincere effort at exploration. Beneath the lies and deceptions there seems no core from which to respond. It is at this critical point that the therapist may need to sustain the relationship by leading the dialogue. It is helpful to speak from personal experience about the curse of self-monitoring and self-control that binds the male’s tight identity. Inmates will readily identify with this, as they have practiced it in spades, and one can then begin to explore with them the diminished experience attendant to living this objectified role.

I have taken the somewhat personal risk of speaking quite directly about common masculine role limitations to large groups of inmates in prerelease programs who are preparing for societal reentry. These talks are at times greeted with spontaneous applause, rare for such audiences. Mentioning to them the analogy of Vietnam veterans who, returning home, often felt such alienation that they found themselves alternately withdrawing or fabricating stories to placate their audience is helpful. Recommending strongly to these inmate groups that they not make too strenuous an effort to quickly connect with other people, men or women, in relationships is also useful. Having lived the life of the lie, and having suffered the added isolation of prison, it is far too tempting to submerge one’s anxieties by “faking it” again with others. Emphasizing that there is no simple answer to the general male ambivalence about intimacy, is important, as is suggesting that those with the courage to risk themselves

in defiance of authority might contemplate the still greater risk of relinquishing their shallow self-control in favor of real exploration with people.

The outcome of even a successful dialogue about these matters is scarcely the inmate's discovery of his real self. Such expectations should be discouraged, as any "self" that the criminal could quickly discover would merely be another fabrication. Unpracticed and fearful of spontaneity, he must learn instead to begin a *process* of defining himself through simple, straight talk. What he will discover is not an object, but freedom.

## Women

This chapter has thus far explicitly alluded to the therapist as male. The themes of hypo-masculine/hyper-masculine preoccupation with strength, power, the objectified self and so forth, are intended to suggest areas in which the male therapist can establish a common explorative bond with the extreme men in prison. I frankly believe that female therapists, particularly attractive women, have a comparative hurdle to overcome in their efforts to penetrate the criminal facade. While male therapists may suffer the inmate's efforts to win a manly social-dominance game in counseling, women will encounter quite other complications. Before elaborating upon this, a general comment about the feminine role as "model" for criminals in therapy. Obviously a woman would not directly embody the model of evolved, flexible masculinity that was suggested for the male therapist. She can, however, seek to elicit such an evolution in the inmate by virtue of her own refusal to play the stereotypical female. Her disavowal of that role can force a complementary redefinition upon the criminal as he learns to interact with her. This relearning may then be generalized.

It is important to listen to the criminal's description of his women. One actual therapeutic advantage to the prison is its tendency to foster in the inmate a kind of monastic reflection upon his past, present, and future relationships on the outside. The fact of his incarceration usually creates serious problems in his relationships, and these are sometimes the most genuine of presenting issues brought to therapy.

Some incarcerated criminals have the good fortune to be involved with a woman who has become

assertive in her overt intolerance for the criminal's lifestyle. This assertiveness may well be of recent advent, as she has been forced to learn a more independent role when relieved of his dominating presence in the home. He then recognizes that he must change or risk losing her while in prison. This dilemma provides a ready focus for proving his views of the man-woman relationship. One usually discovers that he has kept the woman protected from knowledge of his criminal enterprises. While he will present this as a noble and necessary tactic of secrecy, one must press for an examination of the deeper psychological function. His criminal thinking and behavior is usually the large portion of his character. To conceal this from the woman has been to deny her any awareness of who he really is.

On the surface, the supposed need for criminal secrecy excuses his pursuit of an underground (and underworld) life separated from the pseudo-responsible role he plays at home. This underground life handily allows him access to the excitement of drugs, deals, and other women. He may later offer the bizarre argument that all of this has been in the service of responsibly providing an income to keep the home intact. One must counter by defining real responsibility in terms of frank and open negotiations between man and woman. Even if he had been reliably paying the rent, to end by surprising her with his arrest and imprisonment is scarcely responsible or remotely fair. Other humans have the right to know what they are bargaining for when we draw them into relationships.

At a deeper level the criminal secrecy protects him from even addressing with the woman his phobia of self-disclosure. It will not suffice for him to shift to a legitimate occupation upon his release to the community. He must hear in his woman's distress a desire for the real intimacy he has denied her, or neither home nor the new job will endure, and he will become again a social predator.

Perhaps more common than the foregoing is the criminal whose woman does not directly challenge him to change, because of her unfortunate complementarity to his image. Listen for a description of his woman that suggests a magazine centerfold, and you are likely hearing of such a creature. If you are dealing with a hyper-masculine client who uses this type of woman, the hope for change is remote. He has truly found his mate, and needs no therapeutic advice on how to continue to dominate and subordinate that willing stereotype.

More interesting is the hypo-masculine type who is only fabricating a dominant, controlled role in

order to contrive a supposed attractiveness. His success in such maneuvers is directly proportionate to the ambivalence he will feel about the fact of his pretense. He lives in continual fear that he will lose his woman to a superior competitor. The therapist can help him discover in this fear a sense that his “real” self would, if known, repulse his partner. I provoke hypo-masculine clients by agreeing that there always *are* competitors with more money, bigger biceps, and flashier suits. If that kind of surface is what his woman really admires, he is destined to lose. Because he does not truly feel himself equal to that surface, he might consider the possibility that the woman who loves him has intuited this, and values what lies beneath more than he does.

The hypo-masculine criminal who is willing to test this hypothesis with his woman almost invariably finds it confirmed. The woman has long awaited the opportunity to connect to him through his underlying sensitivity; it is the aspect she has been prepared to love. The fact that she did bond to a social rebel with buried sensitivity may suggest, however, her own conflicted attraction to the tough surface. In such cases there is much further mutual exploration and redefinition to be accomplished. One cannot, of course, conduct couples’ therapy with one partner absent. One can advise the inmate as he communicates through letters, phone calls, and occasional visits, but much of the work consists in preparing him to engage with the woman in post-release counseling. He can, at least, begin to formulate with the therapist a pertinent agenda of issues to be addressed in that forum.

## Conclusion

It would be presumptuous to suggest that the viewpoint outlined in this chapter can be used by the therapist to render his work with men in prison unproblematic or easy. Still, experience of nearly a decade in the prison setting has led to a sense of considerable promise in the project of focusing with these men upon their concern with masculine identity. An unusual liveliness seems awakened in both group and individual counseling sessions when the topic is broached in a serious and sensitive manner.

Much of how this will go depends upon the therapist’s ability to draw rather subtle distinctions for his inmate clientele. A problem with criminals is the fact that they are acutely sensitive to much of the game-playing that debases social interaction among men and women in the outside community. They move from this insight to a conviction that they possess a paradoxical kind of honesty in their forthrightly

predatory behavior. The intellectual inmate will read *Zen* and conclude that he embodies *satori* in his detachment from the common man's investment in a workaday ego. Both hyper-masculine and hypomasculine criminals will resist role redefinition because so many women still *do* respond to the romance of the rebel image. So why consider change?

The answer to these and a myriad other objections will depend, for better or worse, upon the therapist's own experience of evolving a new masculine identity. Yes, it is worthy to practice that detachment which protects the inner self from over-identification with social roles, but one must first *develop* a non-objectified inner self, or there is no authority to protect. Yes, many women have yet to integrate their needs for a man who is both powerful and tender, but a narrow appeal to them in terms of power will only preclude true communion and rebound upon the self.

As difficult as these issues are, one has the saving grace of admitting that no one yet possesses the answer of defining where male liberation ought to lead. It is important at this stage to learn honesty as one searches to define one's problems. That it is possible to evoke such honesty among the company of men in prison seems hopeful indeed.

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