Gender’s Role in Abolitionist Pedagogy:

A fictionalized autoethnography through letters from prison

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study-in-progress will use fictionalized letters from prison as a method to examine the role of gender in abolitionist pedagogy. Preliminary findings from data collected during my experiences as a prison educator and researcher in myriad facilities in the United States—minimum, medium, and maximum security; men’s and women’s; and re-entry—suggest that the gendered nature of prison ideology acted as a barrier to prison abolition-focused pedagogy. Preliminary findings also suggest that incarcerated people might possess the expertise to develop abolitionist solutions to the US’s epidemic of mass incarceration. Results of this study contend that, in order to cultivate prison abolition-focused change in the United States, efforts must focus explicitly on transforming the gendered character of prison ideology. Moreover, preliminary evidence suggests that, by first transforming the deeply gendered ideology inside prison walls, a recursive response outside of prison walls will ensue.

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With 5% of the world’s population and 25% of the world’s incarcerated individuals, the United States incarcerates at higher rates than any other country in the world. Once individuals become incarcerated, efforts to rehabilitate them behind bars ironically do more harm than good to individuals, families, and communities (Alexander, 2010; Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004; Haney, 2001; Jones & d’Errico, 1994). Research shows that once an individual is incarcerated, it is more likely that he or she will return to prison than not (Esperian, 2010).

In stark contrast to these depressing realities, ample research has shown that prison-based education serves as an antidote to the epidemic of mass incarceration facing the United States (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; Esperian, 2010; Nally, Lockwood, Knutson & Ho, 2012; Steurer, Linton, Nally & Lockwood, 2010). Moreover, individuals involved in prison-based humanistic education (PBHE) show even further decreased re-incarceration rates (Rafay, 2012; Williford, 1994). However, few studies have explored the effects of PHBE beyond re-incarceration rates.

In response to this gap in research, I conducted an action research pilot study whose purpose was to examine what occurred when a course in college writing that I taught, comprised of students incarcerated in a women’s medium security correctional facility in a small state in the Northeast of the United States, engaged in PBHE [see Gender-relevant, context-specific, critical, democratic pedagogy within a women’s medium-security prison] (Ferreira, 2013). Themes that emerged from this study were abolitionist in nature, meaning that (1) students engaged in critical discourse about the role and function of prisons in American society, and (2) brainstormed alternatives to imprisonment. These themes suggested that such pedagogy might constitute a pathway toward prison abolition. This class encountered institutional pushback related to gender; consequently, students were disallowed from engaging in the level of transformation they envisioned.

Inspired by the abolitionist potential of the aforementioned study, I similarly designed and taught subsequent PBHE courses that served as starting points for more action research studies in abolitionist pedagogy (Ferreira, 2013). Over and over again, my classes encountered pushback related to gender until, ultimately, I was pushed out of the institution entirely.

**Subsequent Action Research Studies and Institutional Pushback**

**Gender-Relevant, Context-Specific, Critical, Democratic Pedagogy within a Women’s Medium-Security Prison**

With the help of students in a semester-long college writing course within a women’s medium-security prison in the Northeast of the United States, I devised a research-based humanistic curriculum that was gender-relevant, context-specific, critical, and democratic (Brown, 2005; Connell, 1996; Freire, 1983; Martin, 1994; Pearl, 1997). The findings of this study revealed that, at least within the context of the course, students were driven to: (1) transform their assumptions through challenging and controversial subject matter; (2) foster love within the classroom; (3) develop their identities; and (4) practice democratic classroom culture. Data also suggested the themes that emerged were abolitionist in nature because students engaged in critical discourse about, and brainstormed alternatives to, imprisonment (Ferreira, 2013).

Among the many challenges that arose during the course, many were based in gender. One example included the sexual abuse of students by correctional officers. The knowledge of abuse caused tension both between individual students and between students and prison personnel. Consequently, as a result of relationship conflicts, many students simply refused to participate in group instruction, depending on which other students were present. Another example included the hierarchal organizational structure of the facility (Bolman & Deal, 2013). One illustration of the hierarchal structure occurred when students attempted to organize an event during which they would share their academic work with the warden and other administrators. The warden would not allow it to take place even though many stakeholders agreed with the value of such an event (Ferreira, 2013). In a conversation surrounding her decision to ban this event, the warden questioned my professional pedagogical choices and asserted that students did not need transformative education but rather education based on a deficits model (Freire, 1983; Valencia, 1997). The warden acted as the patriarch of the individuals incarcerated within the facility, and ultimately had the authority to disallow the event from taking place. Though the warden of this particular facility was female, she still acted in the interest of patriarchy by silencing the voices of the women whose experiences were contrary to the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo (Brooks & Hebert, 2006; Butler, 1990).

A final illustration surrounds the psychiatric drugs prescribed to students. “Psychiatric drugs continue to be distributed far more extensively to imprisoned women than to their male counterparts” (Davis, 2003, p. 66). At times, students were so medicated that they were rendered incapable of participating in instructional activities. Other times, students explained to me that they were so medicated they were unable to attend at all.

**Context-Specific, Critical, Democratic Pedagogy within a Men’s Maximum-Security Prison**

At the end of the semester during which I taught the aforementioned course in the women’s facility, I was transferred to another facility within the same prison— men’s maximum-security. Moved by the abolitionist findings of the pilot study, I went on to replicate the course similarly; with the help of students, I devised a curriculum that was context-specific, critical, and democratic (Freire, 1983; Pearl, 1997). (This course was not designed with gender-relevancy in mind because, as a female teacher in an all-male facility, I felt that, unlike within the context of the women’s facility, this was not my area of expertise. Nevertheless, gendered issues arose.) Having learned from the institutional pushback of the previous semester in the women’s facility, this semester I chose not to share with prison personnel the details of our curriculum. Analysis of student work, my field journal, and incidental documents revealed again, at least within the context of the classroom, that we were engaging in abolitionist pedagogy—through critical discourse about prisons and alternatives to imprisonment. Again, I encountered institutional pushback. This time, the pushback I encountered was not related to the nature of the pedagogy but rather the positivity and hopefulness the class inspired.

Similar to my experience in the women’s facility, many of the challenges that arose during the course were based in gender. One example included the hyper-masculine culture of correctional officers (Jhally, Ericsson, Talreja, Katz, Earp, & Media Education Foundation, 1999). Nearly all the correctional officers at this facility were male and maintained culture of machismo and punitive justice inherited from a centuries-old male-dominated penal tradition (Foucault, 1995). By way of illustration, I noticed correctional officers assuming an intimidating posture, name-calling, and humiliating incarcerated individuals. On numerous occasions, correctional officers often praised each other for admonishing incarcerated individuals and were reticent to reprehend fellow correctional officer for mistreating an incarcerated individual. When correctional officers saw me praise my students for their academic accomplishments, officers often suspected my motives. Threats to the hyper-masculine norm were suspicious and deviant (Davis, 2003). On multiple occasions, I was reprehended for being “too nice” to incarcerated people (Ferreira, 2013).

**My Termination**

After two semesters in maximum security, I was transferred to another facility—men’s medium security. Before we could begin to deeply engage in abolitionist pedagogy in this facility, I was terminated from my position a result of responding to a letter written to me by a student. Prison administrators maintained I was obligated to turn in the letter and seek punitive consequences for the student. I asserted that I did not feel this was necessary, and as a result, prison administrators determined that my level of care for students was unethical and posed a security risk. Prison administrators also assumed, incorrectly, that I was in a romantic relationship with the male student who sent me the letter.

The events surrounding my termination constitute the criminalization of my behavior, which deviated from the hyper-masculine, punitive prison norm (Davis, 2003; Jhally, et. al, 1999). The events also constitute my sexualization (both as a woman and a woman of color) and assumption of hetero-normativity (Brooks & Hebert, 2006; Butler, 1990).

**All the Way Home**

In addition to engaging in the aforementioned classroom action research studies, I was simultaneously working on a study that sought to evaluate *All the Way Home* (name changed for confidentiality), a one-of-a-kind re-entry program with abolitionist goals. Eventually, I was pushed out of this study as well. Though the program worked with individuals who were no longer incarcerated, I learned that the prison’s reach extends beyond its walls. When the institution learned that I was working with *All the Way Home*, parole and probation began to maintain heightened surveillance on individuals in the program. This heightened surveillance threatened many individuals with re-incarceration. So, in the end, I chose to cut ties with the program.

The events surrounding *All the Way Home* demonstrate the institution’s ultimate characterization of my pedagogical choices and care for students as deviant and criminal. Since the institution did not have just cause to prosecute me, instead the institution threated to prosecute participants in the study who remained under its patriarchal custody (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Davis, 2003).

**Purpose**

Amongst all the forms of institutional pushback I have encountered in my work as a prison abolition-focused educator and researcher, challenges related to gender have consistently recurred. Consequently, this study seeks to conduct an in-depth exploration of gender’s role in abolitionist pedagogy.

**Significance**

Nearly 2.3 million people are presently behind bars in the United States (Glaze & Herberman, 2013). “There is significant research suggesting that incarceration encourages rather than discourages criminal activity” (Jones & d’Errico, 1994, p. 7). Moreover, incarceration physically, mentally, and emotionally damages incarcerated individuals, families, and communities while doing little to rebuild the trust lost or to recompense the damage caused by crime (Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004; Clear, 2008; Hagan & Foster, 2012; Haney, 2001; Western, 2007). The most certain outcome of incarceration is more incarceration. In fact, incarcerated individuals have about a 75% chance of returning to prison once released (Esperian, 2010). It is high time we begin to envision a society in which prisons, as we know them, are obsolete.

Prisons are “integral to understanding the larger constellation” of societal ills (Vaught, 2012, p. 261). Instead of regarding prisons as dumping grounds for individuals who are unable to conform to the norms of society, we might regard prisons as a reminder of the imperative for social change. As such, the findings of this study might help us imagine what society would be like if prisons were no longer dumping grounds for societal castaways, but rather vehicles to transform society toward the abolition of prisons.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study operates from the intersection of three theoretical frameworks: social reconstruction ideology (Schiro, 2012), prison abolition ideology (Davis, 2003), and critical feminist theory (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Social reconstruction ideology stresses the imperative to deconstruct the unhealthy systems present in our society in order to rebuild a more just and equitable world. In agreement with social reconstruction ideology, prison abolition ideology asserts the need to abolish the prison system as we know it and, subsequently, to reconstruct of a new system of justice. Critical feminist theorists would attest that gender inequities in greater society are amplified in prison, and consequently, social reconstruction is in order.

**Social Reconstruction Ideology**

First, I operate from the theoretical lens of social reconstruction ideology, which means that I

assume that our society is unhealthy—indeed, that its very survival is threatened—because the traditional mechanisms developed by society to contend with social problems are incapable of doing their job… [I also] assume that something can be done to keep society from destroying itself… To save society from self-destruction, [I believe that] we must develop a vision of a society better than the existing one… in which our present society’s problems do not exist and in which social justice for all people prevails. Then we must reconstruct our society into the envisioned one ‘that extend[s] the principles of liberty, equality, justice, and freedom to the widest possible set of institution[s]” and people.’ (as cited in Schiro, 2012, p. 133-134)

In alignment with my social reconstructionist lens, I believe that prisons as we know them, are incapable of delivering justice. Prisons and related institutions form an oppressive system that delivers disproportionate doses of injustice to the most vulnerable and historically oppressed communities and individuals. As such, I believe in the abolition of prisons, as we know them, and the subsequent reconstruction of humanistic systems based in equity and justice.

**Prison Abolition Ideology**

The second theoretical framework from which this study operates is prison abolition ideology. In the tradition of scholar-activist Angela Davis (2003), I identify as a prison abolitionist. This means that I believe in the feasibility of a world without prisons, as we know them. I believe this can be achieved by way of nurturing a just and equitable society, which, among other things, would include decriminalization of many acts presently defined as criminal, including drug possession, inability to pay court fines, prostitution, and victimless crimes. It would also include an end to the War on Drugs, redistribution of wealth, “demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, [and] a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all” (Davis, 2003, p. 107). To be sure, even in a just and equitable society, harm committed between individuals and against society is inevitable. But, instead of responding to harm punitively, I believe in responding to harm through a “justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance” (Davis, 2003, p. 107).

It is important to note that this position differs from that of reformists and proponents of the status quo. Reformists would argue for working within the present framework to improve the rehabilitative capacity of prisons in order that, upon release, previously-incarcerated individuals might be better equipped to fulfill an economic niche in society. Proponents of the status quo would argue from a deficits perspective that criminal behavior is unchangeable, and prisons are succeeding in their main function, which is to keep society safe by segregating criminals (Lin, 2002). An abolitionist framework discounts deficit thinking and considers the riddance of the present system altogether.

**Critical Feminist Theory**

Critical theorists study the structures that uphold the disadvantages of marginalized groups. Feminists believe in the equality of men and women though they assert that society has been set up as a patriarchy—according to the desires and wants of men. This gender inequity manifests through performance of gender roles, sexualization, misogyny, hegemonic masculinity, hetero-normativity, etc. (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Butler, 1990) Critical feminist theory constitutes the intersection of critical theories and feminist theories. The result is a theory that “identif[ies], critique[s], and seek[s] to change inequities and discrimination, particularly those that are based on sex and gender” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 326). Critical feminist theory is an especially robust theoretical lens in the context of prison.

Certainly women’s prison practices are gendered, but so, too, are men’s prison practices. To assume that men’s institutions constitute the norm and women’s institutions are marginal is, in a sense, to participate in the very normalization of prisons that an abolitionist approach seeks to contest. (Davis, 2003, p. 61)

In alignment with prison abolition ideology and social reconstruction ideology, critical feminist theorists would find especially relevant the deconstruction of prison practices that amplify the gender inequities present in society. Furthermore, critical feminist theorists would support a movement to reconstruct a society based in gender equity.

**Summary of Theoretical Framework**

I believe in the power of education to reconstruct a society in which prisons are obsolete. In my understanding, the only sustainable solution to society’s epidemic of mass incarceration is prison abolition, which would necessarily involve the deconstruction of oppressive structures, such as gender, that uphold the present prison system. Prison abolition would also involve the subsequent reconstruction of systems based in equity and justice.

**Review of the Literature**

To fully understand the scope of the gender’s role in abolitionist pedagogy, it is important to understand four distinct bodies of literature as well as how each builds on the other to frame the present study. I begin with the present state of prison-based education in the. Then, I explore literature surrounding prison-based humanistic education (PHBE). Third, I will highlight the most relevant findings of other research on abolitionist pedagogy in prisons. Finally, I will investigate literature surrounding gendered institutions in both traditional educational settings and prisons.

**Prison-Based Education**

In the United States, incarcerated individuals involved in education show a dramatic decrease in re-incarceration rates. According to researcher John H. Esperian (2010), one study conducted in the states of Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio revealed that offenders who participated in educational programs were 29% less likely to go back to prison than their peers who did not participate in educational programs. Moreover, research shows that individuals who have participated in prison-based education are 13% more likely to obtain post-release employment than individuals who did not participate in prison-based education (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013).

Notwithstanding their efficacy in reducing re-incarceration and increasing post-release employment, educational opportunities in prisons are generally few in number, lack resources, and are highly subject to institutional volatility (Kilgore, 2011; Williford, 1994). Though the vast majority of Americans believe that incarceration should serve to improve the lives of incarcerated individuals and prepare them for re-entry into citizenship, there is a “fundamental tension between [prison stakeholders] who would simply punish and those who would improve the lives of prisoners” (Jones & d’Errico, 1994, p. 5). Among other contexts, this tension manifests in the context of prison-based education—a mechanism that serves to improve the lives of incarcerated individuals.

What is more, prison-based educational programs lack cohesive theoretical and curricular aims. For those lucky enough to be incarcerated in an institution with educational programs, most initiatives assume aims of cultural transmission—training individuals to meet the pre-determined needs of society (Burton-Rose & Wright, 1998; Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972; Williford, 1994). This is evident in light of the high concentration of vocational training and prison industry programming (Burton-Rose & Wright, 1998; Williford, 1994). Other educational programs are based on “a medical model, which sees education as instrumental in curing the offender, and a cognitive deficiency model, which seeks to correct deficiencies in problem-solving, interpersonal, and social skills” (Williford, 1994, p. viii). These models are evidenced by courses such as anger management and victim’s awareness. According to prison education expert Miriam Williford (1994), “[T]hese models may do more harm than good” (p. viii).

**Prison-Based Humanistic Education (PHBE)**

Conversely, ample scholarship has documented the capacity of humanistic educational models (models that involve such practices as critical discourse and praxis, democratic structure, justice-oriented goals, appreciation of nature and art, spirituality, and social/emotional development) to inspire oppressed individuals and groups to emerge from and transform oppression (American Humanist Association, 2010; Brell, 1999; Dewey, 1916; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 1983; Noddings, 1992; Pearl, 1997; Shor, 1992). Though the efficacy of all prison-based education has shown significance in reducing re-incarceration and increasing post-release employment, “[p]rograms with the best track records as measured by reductions in re-incarceration in scientifically designed follow-up studies are those that, on the surface, sound the least vocational and the most humanistic” (as cited in Rafay, 2012, p.11). Unfortunately, most education in prisons stops short of humanistic pedagogy even though research shows that this brand of pedagogy boasts the lowest rates of re-incarceration (Davis, et al., 2013; Esperian, 2010; Frank, Omstead, & Pigg, 2012; Nally, Lockwood, Knutson & Ho, 2012; Palmer, 2012; Steurer, Linton, Nally & Lockwood, 2010; US. Department of Education, 2012; Vaught, 2012; Ward, 2009; Warner, 2007).

Prison-based humanistic education (PBHE) has historical foundations that date back over a century (Gehring & Eggleston, 2007). Today, a variety of PBHE programs are operated—some subversively, and others with institutional support (Bordt & Carceral, 2012; Halperin, Kessler, & Braunschweiger, 2012; Hartnett, 2011; Kilgore, 2011; Larson, 2011; Lee, 2010; Lockard & Rankins-Robertson, 2011; McCarty, 2006; Olinger, et.al, 2012; Rafay, 2012; Shieh, 2010). However, PBHE lacks a cohesive philosophical foundation and vision (Eggleston & Gehring, 2000; Thomas, 2012; Wright, 2004). Although research shows that PBHE is highly effective in reducing re-incarceration rates, very few studies have explored why this is the case. Additionally, few empirical studies have explored the success of PBHE beyond its efficacy in reducing re-incarceration rates. Findings from previous research have found that PHBE has abolitionist potential (Ferreira, 2013; Larson, 2011).

**Abolitionist Pedagogy**

The action research of James Kilgore (2011) explores challenges to abolitionist pedagogy. James Kilgore (2011), a G.E.D. math tutor inside the United States Penitentiary (USP) in Lompoc, California, attempted to incorporate components of abolitionist pedagogy into his instruction. Kilgore admitted, however, that his pedagogy was not radical enough to have significantly benefitted the incarcerated individuals. Kilgore feared, “With such an approach I would not have survived for long…The Federal System had long since figured out how to handle such subversion and make sure it does not spread among the population” (Kilgore, 2011, p. 63). The “subversion” to which Kilgore referred is what prison education expert Shelby Palmer (2012) referred to as “[t]he philosophical divide between the language of liberation [synonymous with abolitionist pedagogy] and the practice of control expressed in the authoritarian environment of corrections” (p. 163, emphases added).

Amidst the challenges, prison-based educator Doran Larson (2011) compelled teachers inside prison to assert a *deliberate* stance as abolitionist-educators. Larson suggested that, by way of the support of abolitionist educators, “citizen-convicts… can be encouraged to peacefully transform/abolish the prison itself” by democratically working alongside prison personnel “to raise local and national solidarity” (p. 11). Scott (2014) further compels prison-based educators to use critical pedagogy to move prison-based education toward abolitionism. Accompanying the authoritarian, mechanistic functioning of prisons comes an institutional coldness and disregard for the essential humanity of incarcerated individuals. Still, prison-based educator and researcher Randall Wright (2004) asserted “care—[meaning intimacy, transparency, and compassion with professional distance]—plays an important role in prison education,” (p. 192). Wright found that the expression of care inside prisons taught healthy relationships, resisted institutional dehumanization, and promoted justice. Wright’s research laid the ideological groundwork of care upon which abolitionist pedagogy may emerge.

Though rare, abolitionist pedagogy does make its way behind bars. Happening inside U.S. prisons, communications expert Stephen John Hartnett (2011) detailed a myriad of prison-based educational projects that are abolitionist in nature. One of these projects—Prison Creative Arts Project—whose participants are comprised of high school youth, incarcerated youth, and adult incarcerated individuals—have created 463 original plays, have given 154 readings of their creative writing, and have participated in more than 80 art workshops “dedicated to practicing resistance to the prison-industrial complex” (p. 151). Each One Reach One (EORO) is another project detailed by Hartnett. EORO, located at the Los Angeles County Juvenile Detention Center, “is dedicated to enabling incarcerated youth to explore life’s possibilities by using writing as a means of self-discovery, group making, and sometimes political organizing” (p. 181). The Theater of Empowerment offered at Racine Correctional Institution offers inmates an opportunity to “challenge dehumanizing stereotypes and daily humiliations of the prison-industrial complex” by way of an ensemble of theater games and exercises” (p. 251). Finally, by way of the creation of a learning community of incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals, the Inside-Out Prison Exchange program “is dedicated to stopping the cycle [of dehumanization that occurs in prison] and is based on the belief that by engaging in dialogue, people on both sides of prison walls can discover new ways of thinking about themselves…society, and the systems that keep us all imprisoned” (p. 253, emphases added). Prison Creative Arts Project, Each One Reach One (EORO), The Theater of Empowerment, and Inside-Out Prison Exchange all offer examples of triumphs in abolitionist pedagogy in which incarcerated students together with caring non-incarcerated individuals engaged in critical dialogue, resisted dehumanization, and envisioned abolition.

**Gendered Institutions**

As explored in previous literature, in the midst of its potential, abolitionist pedagogy faces many challenges. This study seeks specifically to explore the role of gender in abolitionist pedagogy, which has been most salient to my experience. Accordingly, I will now explore previous research surrounding gender and traditional educational settings as well as gender’s role in prison.

**Gender and traditional educational settings.** According to feminist philosopher Jane Rowland Martin (1994), traditional educational settings misrepresent women in the following ways: masculine/feminine subject areas are treated unequally; the school lacks subject matter associated with the home and family; schools fail to teach empathy; hatred of women is learned in school; the school instructs a hidden curriculum of anti-domesticity; and radical revisions to curriculum have not been made. Furthermore, Brown (2005) and Connell (1996) suggested that, in schools, people of all social classes and ethnic backgrounds are forced to repress their true identities as a result of societal pressure to conform to the notions of proper femininity or masculinity.

**Gender and prisons.** State institutions such as the school, the media, and the family perpetuate an ideology of misogyny. Moreover, the prison further compounds this ideology, for “the deeply gendered character of punishment both reflects and further entrenches the gendered structure of the larger society” (Davis, 2003, p. 61). Male criminality is normalized whereas female criminality is deemed insane, as it is unaligned with the domestic, submissive feminine norm. Consequently, female criminality is treated as a mental illness, and rehabilitative programming for women is generally focused on treatment through psychiatric drugs (Davis, 2003). According to prison abolitionist Angela Davis (2003),

the call to abolish the prison as the dominant form of punishment cannot ignore the extent to which the institution of the prison has stockpiled ideas and practices that are hopefully approaching obsolescence in the larger society, but that retain all their ghastly vitality behind prison walls. The destructive combination of racism and misogyny… retains all its awful consequences within women’s prisons. The relatively uncontested presence of sexual abuse in women’s prisons is one of many such examples. (p. 83)

Upon their inception in the United States in the early 1800s, prisons were institutions designed for men by white men as patriarchal institutional structures within the context of a white male-dominated society (Foucault, 1995; Gehring & Eggleston, 2007). With relatively few changes, prisons today have inherited the same 200-year-old racist and misogynistic structures.

**Gender and prison-based education.** The same racist and misogynistic structures undergird prison-based educational programs.This can be demonstrated by way of the dominance of male-dominated vocational and prison-industry programs, such as carpentry, automotive repair, metallurgy, etc. (Burton-Rose & Wright, 1998; Williford, 1994). In women’s facilities, less prison-based educational opportunities exist. Of those that do exist, vocational programming surrounding domesticity dominates (Gehring & Eggleston, 2007).

It is equally important to mention triumphs, though rare, of prison-based education unique to women’s issues. Researcher Donna L. Rowe (2004) found that, when framed through a series of non-traditional narrative venues, women’s prison writing helped incarcerated women become empowered by constructing a sense of self, creating plans for the future, articulating hopes for freedom, and connecting with the outside world.

Similarly, women’s studies experts Lempert, Bergeron, and Linker (2005) documented their accounts of team teaching an introductory Women’s Studies course in a women’s prison in Michigan. The curriculum, which was based on critical race and feminist theories and explored feminist prison abolitionist authors such authors as bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Marilyn Frye, “present[ed] the possibility that… [the] students’ own experiences…[were] relevant to academic discourse and scholarly investigation” (p. 205, emphases added). The course also provided the students with a forum in which to tell their stories, reflect on their self-identities, and form solidarity with other women.

**Summary of Literature Review.**

The benefits of prison-based education are well researched. Prison-based humanistic education (PBHE) demonstrates even greater benefits and suggests abolitionist potential. Resulting from the tension of its radical orientation when juxtaposed with conservative, punitive prison ideology, abolitionist pedagogy is often employed subversively, therefore making it difficult to research. Consequently, few empirical studies have explored abolitionist pedagogy in prison. Even fewer have explored is a discussion of the role of gender in abolitionist pedagogy. Accordingly, this study will serve to address this shortcoming. Qualitative, autoethnographic methods will be employed to answer the following research question: What role does gender play in the perception, implementation, and effects of abolitionist pedagogy?

**Methodology**

**Research Paradigm**

**Pragmatism**. As a prison abolitionist, prison-based educator, researcher, and woman of color working within a racist and misogynistic institution, I have experienced firsthand challenges to my research and practice that are related to gender. Kant referred to pragmatism as “the situation in which knowledge and action are intimately connected (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 6). The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge about the role of gender in abolitionist pedagogy—a problem contributing to the nation’s epidemic of mass incarceration—in order to take action to end the epidemic and, ultimately, abolish prisons, as we know them. The methodological design of this study is driven by Deweyan (1916) pragmatism, which adds that the purpose of educational research should be “finding better, more sophisticated, more efficient, or effective means for achieving educational ends” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 109). Deweyan (1916) pragmatism “proposes neither a specific ‘program’ for the conduct of educational research, nor any specific research methods” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 107). However, pragmatism argues that we are experts of our own lived experience and, through thought experiments and trial and error, we might be able to solve problems related to our lived experience. To that end, this study comprises a wide range of trial and error data related to my experience with abolitionist pedagogy, as interpreted through a critical feminist lens. Given these points, the pragmatic paradigm drives this study’s methodology.

**Autoethnography.** My firsthand experience with the phenomenon in question—gender’s role in and abolitionist pedagogy— also facilitates autoethnographic study. According to Chang (2008), autoethnography uses traditional qualitative social science data collection techniques to combine cultural analysis and interpretation with the narrative of the author. Autoethnography is an especially relevant method when the author is intimately connected to the phenomenon (Chang, 2008). In addition, qualitative techniques are especially appropriate when research has not explored the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Since the role of gender in abolitionist pedagogy is (1) relatively unexplored in the present body of research, and (2) a phenomenon with which I have a depth of firsthand experience, this study will be conducted in the qualitative, autoethnographic tradition.

**Pragmatic autoethnography.** Theoretically informed by Deweyan pragmatism and methodologically informed by qualitative, autoethnographic techniques, this study will operate under a research paradigm specifically conceptualized for its relevance to this study: pragmatic autoethnography—a cultural analysis of gender’s role in abolitionist pedagogy shaped by my personal experience that seeks to solve the problem of mass incarceration.

**Data Collection**

Autoethnography involves two layers of data collection: (1) observational/self-reflective, and (2) external (Chang, 2008).

**Observational/self-reflective data.** The following will comprise the observational/self reflective data collected for this study: entries from my field journal, entries from my personal journal, personal art and personal creative projects connected to the phenomenon, and memos from my experience over the past two years a prison-based educator and researcher that were generated in the autoethnographic tradition.

**External.** The following will comprise the external data collected for this study: texts generated by incarcerated students, in the form of essay assignments, poetry, and letters (from three different courses of incarcerated students: one in women’s medium security and two in men’s maximum security); interviews, field observation notes, and other documents generated from the *All the Way Home* re-entry program study; and personal letters, art, and other incidental documents collected from incarcerated loved ones.

**Data Analysis & Interpretation**

Autoethnographic analysis and interpretation “hinge on data collection, often not prescribed by a rigid research design” (Chang, 2008, p. 67). “Like other ethnographic inquiries, this step in the research process is methodologically nebulous to describe because analysis and interpretation require the researcher’s holistic insight, a creative mixing of multiple approaches, and patience with uncertainty” (Chang, 2008, p. 126). The following two themes have emerged through a holistic, preliminary analysis of the data: (1) gender functions as a barrier to abolitionist pedagogy, and (2) incarcerated students might function as potential agents of change if their voices were not silenced or discredited. That being the case, critical feminist theory—the intersection of critical and feminist theories, which focus on social and economic inequities and promote systems change— will frame data analysis (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008).

Analysis will comprise a three-step procedure followed by two steps of data transformation leading to the presentation of findings (see Appendix 1). First, I will read over the data holistically and keep memos on my impressions as to “repeated topics, emerging themes, salient patterns, and mini and grand categories” (Chang, 2008, p. 131). I will keep these memos and respective data sources organized by way of a data log that labels the data source, content, and analytic memos (Chang, 2008). Second, I will engage in respondent validation (or “member checking”) of emergent themes and respective data sources in order to confirm my analyses (Maxwell, 2005). Third, I will apply a more focused analysis using a number of the following ten strategies suggested by Chang (2008):

(1) search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns; (2) look for cultural themes; (3) identify exceptional occurrences; (4) analyze inclusion and omission; (5) connect the present with the past; (6) analyze relationships between self and others; (7) compare yourself with other people’s cases; (8) contextualize broadly (9) compare with social science constructs and ideas; and (10) frame with theories. (p. 131)

**Validity**

**Triangulation.** “Triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies by analyzing a research question from multiple perspectives” Three types of triangulation will be used in this study. (Guione, L., Diehl, D., & McDonald, D., 2011, p. 1). The first type of triangulation I will utilize in this study is data triangulation. According to Guione, et al. (2011), “Data triangulation involves using different *sources* of information in order to increase the validity of a study” (p.1). Data will be triangulated through multiple sources of collection, including self-inventoried data, data from students, and data from research participants (see Data Collection).

Second, I will utilize investigator triangulation by way of member checking my findings with individuals closely connected to the phenomenon, such as ex-students and ex-research participants (see Data Analysis & Interpretation). Finally, I will use environmental triangulation. “This type of triangulation involves the use of different locations, settings, and other key factors related to the environment in which the study took place, such as the time, day, or season” (Guione, et al., 2011, p. 1). The data was collected over a span of two years, in different semesters, seasons, times, prison facilities, and locations.

**Ethical Considerations**

**Risks to participants.** Especially in light of my tenuous relationship with theprison at which I taught and conducted research,ethical considerations are a top priority for this study. Incarcerated individuals are considered a vulnerable population because they have been stripped of most of their rights and are subject to harsh conditions of which they have minimal control. Retaliation toward participants, especially the most vulnerable, presently incarcerated participants, is a concern. In order to minimize this risk, a variety of confidentiality and privacy measures will be implemented.

**Confidentiality and privacy.** I will protect the privacy of the participants in several ways: (1) I will not hire or solicit anyone else to collect data; (2) I will use pseudonyms to identify participants. In addition the names of programs, city, state, and prison will be changed; and (3) all data will be stored in a locked cabinet, off campus.

**Other ethical considerations.** Preliminary analysis of the data revealed that the incarcerated students and research participants who engaged in abolitionist pedagogy, regularly silenced by institutions, strived for their voices to be heard by a wider audience. Many of my incarcerated students and research participants asked that I use my power as a researcher to amplify their voices. Similar to issues of confidentiality, I also consider this an ethical issue. I am ethically responsible to respect that my students’ voices are amplified. Given these points, I dedicate this study to my students and research participants.

**Fictionalized accounts**

Subsequent to analysis and interpretation, I will transform the findings of this study into fictionalized accounts (see step 4 of Data Analysis and Transformation Procedure in Appendix 1). Staying true to themes that emerge from data analysis, I will create fictional characters and scenarios that explore the emergent themes. The choice to fictionalize findings is twofold. First, Maxine Green (1988) implores us to use imaginative literature and art in the context of educational research. “Fiction, she suggests, can serve us well in the quest for meaning in our lives, ‘in our longing for something better than unacceptable present conditions.’ Good literature causes us to question our values, prompts new imaginings of the ideal and the possible. It can even stir action against the conventional, the seemingly unquestionable, and the tried and true” (Barone, 2001, p. 736, as cited in Greene). Second, in addition to widening the boundaries of educational research, presenting findings as fictionalized accounts ensures the confidentiality of participants.

**Letters from prison**

I will then transform the fictionalized accounts into “letters from prison” (see step 5 of Data Analysis and Transformation Procedure in Appendix 1). I have decided to transform the fictionalized accounts into letters from prison for two reasons. First, the letter from prison may be considered a counternarrative— a genre of discourse that carries the voices of incarcerated people but has been historically devalued by academia (Bamburg & Andrews, 2004; Baszile, 2005). By presenting the findings of the study through the genre of discourse unique to incarcerated people, I hope to amplify my students’ voices while elevating to the academic level a style of discourse that has been traditionally considered non-academic. Second, “Postmodern theory accords literary content a status equal to that of form” (Barone, 2001, p. 737). The climate of danger, mistrust, and paranoia associated with prison prevents incarcerated people from authentically expressing themselves publicly. For this reason, the letter is a genre of discourse through which incarcerated people express themselves privately and authentically. Considering this, through letters many of my students communicated to me information they did not want to communicate publicly. According to Chang (2008), “what makes autoethnography ethnographic is its intent of gaining a cultural understanding” (p. 125). As such, I hope the form of this study, just as the content, will offer readers an authentic, cultural understanding of the role of gender in abolitionist pedagogy.

**Preliminary Findings**

Preliminary data analyses suggest two themes: (1) the gendered culture of prisons and, similarly, (if we consider prisons microcosms of greater society) the gendered culture of society act as barriers to the perception, implementation, and effects of abolitionist pedagogy; and (2) incarcerated people, through their experience, possess expertise surrounding prison issues in general, and, more specifically, gender’s role in abolitionist pedagogy. From the first theme, I will now exemplify the technique of transforming the data to a fictionalized narrative and, successively, a letter from prison.

**Gender as barrier to abolitionist pedagogy.** The following fictionalized narrative and letter from prison surround the first emergent theme.

***Mindy’s story: A fictionalized narrative.*** I will now explore the characters, setting, and plot of Mindy’s story.

*Characters.*There are two main characters in this story: Mindy and Pablo. Three supporting characters are Mindy’s daughter, mother, and her mother’s boyfriend. Thesender of the letter is Mindy, a 21-year-old Puerto Rican woman who was living in a poor, urban community in the Northeast of the US at the time of her incarceration. Prior to moving to the United States, Mindy, her mother, and her mother’s boyfriend lived together in a violent *caserio* (public housing projects) in Puerto Rico. From an early age, Mindy witnessed domestic violence against her mother by her mother’s boyfriend. Mindy also endured sexual abuse by her mother’s boyfriend as well. At age sixteen, when she met her now-estranged husband Pablo, she dropped out of high school and moved with him to the United States, where she had no family or support system. The second main character is the receiver of the letter, Pablo. Pablo is Mindy’s thirty-year-old estranged husband; they have a two-year-old daughter together, and Pablo has custody of the child while Mindy is in prison.

*Setting.*Mindy received a twenty-five-year sentence for the murder of the woman with whom her estranged husband was cheating. She is presently incarcerated in a state-run maximum-security prison for women.

*Plot.*Mindy is taking a poetry class that is pedagogically abolitionist. However, gendered barriers from inside and outside of the institution (such as her history of sexual violence/trauma, psychiatric medication prescribed to her, and logistical problems resulting from the hierarchal/patriarchal structure of the prison) prevent Mindy from truly reaching her transformative potential in this class. Mindy’s example serves as a micro-case of the gendered barriers preventing one individual’s transformation. Mindy’s story is not unique, but rather serves to demonstrate barriers to abolitionist pedagogy that generally exist.

***From Mindy to Pablo: A letter from prison.***

*Hey Papi,*

*How are you? How’s the baby? I hope you are doing good. I know you probably hate me, and you probably fuckin’ with someone else by now, but I want you to know that I still love you, and I will never do you wrong the way you did me. My mom hates me, and she won’t write back to me, so I ain’t got nobody else to write to. And I can’t trust none of these bitches in the joint. You’re all I got.*

*You know I’ve always been good with words, so I started taking this poetry class here. It’s pretty fly, but sometimes I don’t go ‘cuz they got me on these meds to calm me down, and I can’t focus on what we be doing in class when I take my meds. And if I don’t take my meds, they will throw me in seg ‘cuz they’re scared I’m gonna kill myself or something. On the days that I am feeling good enough to go to class, these C.Os be cancelling class anyway. They say they cancel class because of staffing issues, but I think it’s bullshit. I think they just scared. They don’t want us learning too much ‘cuz maybe they’ll be out of a job if we get too smart.*

*Anyway, I was able to go to a couple of these poetry classes and I wrote something, but I don’t trust anyone to share it with besides you. I hope you like it.*

*Dark nights and endless days*

*I imagine the world so immensely*

*Intoxicated by stereotypes and judgments*

*Brought upon by insecurities*

*Too shallow to be swallowed;*

*I stare out a window covered on all*

*Sides by walls*

*Waiting to be broken down*

*By misunderstood minorities, outcast*

*By a world who feels no chances*

*Are necessary*

*Who rather give up on you*

*Than feed you an opportunity of freedom*

*And change;*

*No matter where I look I’m surrounded*

*North, South, East, and West*

*All sides, all angles*

*How do they want better from me*

*When I can’t breathe anything*

*Different, see anything different*

*But I want it, I need it, yearn for it*

*When? Where? How?*

*Is it even possible*

*Or do I remain stuck in this world*

*Clouded by society’s indiscretions*

*We are not just animals roaming*

*In our cages*

*We are not just murderers, thieves and junkies*

*We are more than our crimes*

*We are human beings*

*Who still deserve a chance*

*But to society I am just a monster,*

*A nobody*

*Just another number*

*And just another paycheck*

*Why should I be defined by what*

*Mistake or mishap I made*

*And why do I not deserve to feel*

*Grass under my feet*

*Or open a window to breathe the same air as they do*

*Instead I am only allowed to stare*

*At a ceiling surrounded by nine foot walls*

*To be degraded and disrespected by*

*Another person who bleeds the*

*Same blood I bleed*

*Inhumane treatment should not*

*Be the only thing I have a choice*

*In tolerating*

*And only if they knew that one day*

*The could easily become me,*

*And you, and us!*

*I will love you forever. Can you please write back to me, and send me some pics of the baby?*

*Your wife,*

*Mindy*

**Discussion**

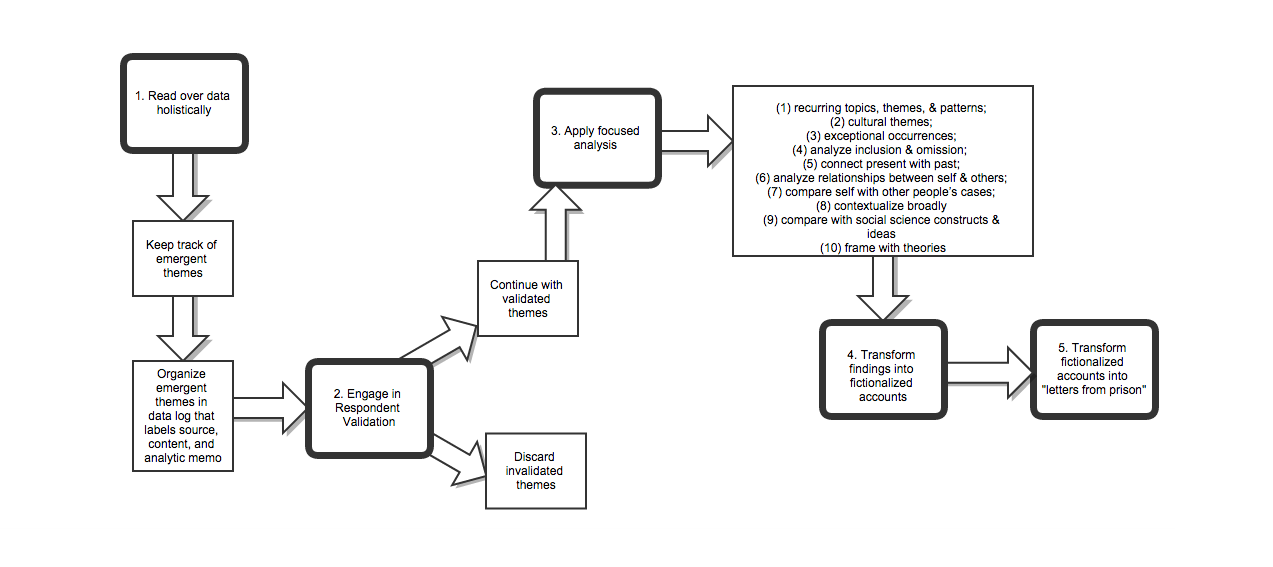
Abolitionist pedagogy shows great promise in its potential to transform the epidemic of mass incarceration presently facing the United States. Research shows that Americans are committed to supporting the transformation of prisoners (Williford, 1994); therefore, the aim of prison-based educational programs must adopt an explicitly abolitionist position. The choice *not* to adopt this position only serves to further perpetuate the epidemic of mass incarceration.

Mindy’s story sheds light on the fact that the challenge to adopt an explicitly abolitionist position on the part of prison-based education will first require careful consideration of the gendered barriers to abolitionist pedagogy. The myriad stakeholders— incarcerated people, prison personnel, and educators— involved in prison-based education must confront such a challenge, with special consideration given to incarcerated people, whose voices are often excluded.

The scope of this study is limited to the role of gender in abolitionist pedagogy within the context of one prison in the Northeast of the United States. Future research should consider the role of gender in abolitionist pedagogy in other geographic locations. Moreover, future research might critically consider the role of other factors in abolitionist pedagogy, such race/ethnicity, economics, or the intersectionality of multiple factors. Furthermore, future research might consider the practical implications of gender’s role in abolitionist pedagogy. How might educators use knowledge of the role of gender in prison-based education in order to better align with an abolitionist vision? In light of this study’s findings, scholars and practitioners might consider the creation of cohesive theoretical and curricular aims that speak specifically to gender’s role in abolitionist pedagogy.

*Appendix 1*

Data Analysis and Transformation Procedure



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