



The Center for Justice at Columbia University and The Confined Arts presents

# FROM THE INSIDE OUT

**MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTISTIC RESPONSE TO THE  
DEHUMANIZATION OF PEOPLE IMPACTED BY THE U.S. CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM**

CENTER FOR  
**JUSTICE**  
AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

*The Confined Arts*  
Isaac's Quarterly

This project launched successfully in 2018 with an artist talk and solo exhibition by Pastor Isaac Scott at the Delaware County Community College in Pennsylvania. The research for this project is being conducted at the Center for Justice at Columbia University and the strategic engagement aspects of the project will be organized in partnership with The Confined Arts. Thus far, this project has engaged in community events and initiatives disseminating existing research and project goals to the public.

# PROJECT SCOPE

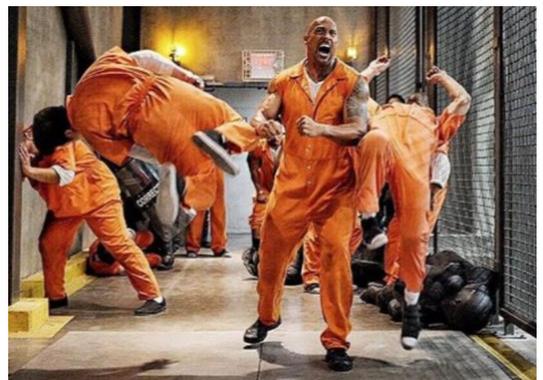
## Changing perceptions about people impacted by the Criminal Legal System

*From the Inside Out* is an action-research-based multidisciplinary project integrating research and strategic, artistic, public programming to advocate for humane treatment, humanizing language, and representative imagery and depictions of people in prison. The project aims to decrease punitive triggers in the criminal legal system as well as improve and preserve the social quality of people impacted by this system through changing negative narratives of the presently and formerly incarcerated.

The primary goal of *From the Inside Out* is to collaboratively deconstruct degrading and inaccurate narratives by showcasing the true lived experiences of directly impacted people. By providing a platform for impacted individuals to express themselves, we hope to dispel misrepresentations and reframe the conversations surrounding people in prison and our present carceral state. If the public is better able to understand the malpractices of the prison system and view the incarcerated as people rather than criminals, these individuals will have an easier time reentering society and working towards personal development. If the public is informed of and better understands malpractices of the prison system, they are more likely to view the incarcerated as persons rather than criminals. This will facilitate their reentry into society, as well as their efforts at personal development.

### **Full project goals include:**

- 1) Widely disseminating research findings.
- 2) Facilitating discourse about misrepresentative depictions of those impacted by the criminal legal system.
- 3) Exposing the power of dehumanizing treatment throughout the justice system.
- 4) Influencing policy in the criminal legal system.
- 5) Educating the public regarding the realities of the justice system using research findings.
- 6) Providing opportunities for graduate and undergraduate level research and strategic community engagement.



## The Social Dynamics of Prison

People in prison, including those suffering from mental illness, are victims of dehumanizing mistreatment including violence due to the use of excessive force and severe neglect in the form of moral exclusions and disengagement by prison guards and other staff (Haslam, 2006; Blackler, 2015; Gullapalli, 2015), as per correctional policy. This maltreatment is not favorable to successful reintegration into society. It is important to understand what social support is, and the role this type of support plays in the lives of incarcerated people who are isolated from society and stigmatized through public narratives. Social support is defined by the Vision Journal as that physical and emotional comfort that we receive from our family, friends, co-workers and others who help us navigate our day-to-day living.

Due to the isolated, hyper-regulated, largely single-sex nature of the prison environment, the dynamics of the prison are so radically different from the outside world that we should consider “the prison as a society within a society and a society in itself” (Sykes, xii). Because prisons are communities with hundreds of individuals working, eating, sleeping and living together for long periods of time, “such aggregates enduring through time must inevitably give rise to a social system” (Sykes, xii). This social system is not only the social order imposed by the prison staff, but also arises from relationships between people in prison, which we will refer to in this research as peer relationships. Because people in prison are isolated from free society, are geographically distanced and may be emotionally distanced from family as a result of their incarceration, considering peer relationships that are formed within prison is a critical part of understanding what social support means for people in prison. At the same time, for some people in prison, family serves as a constant link between their life in prison and free society and acts as a constant source of support in helping them get through prison time. This is especially true for those persons who are parents, those with strong family ties, and those who had family members who depended on them before incarceration (Fairbrother, 2011; Hairston 2001).

There are four major ways that we generally receive social support from the people in the world around us. They include: Emotional Support, Direct Help, Sharing Points of View, and Sharing Information. These four methods of receiving successful social support for healthy daily living is undermined by NYS correctional policy, thereby paralyzing the social development of people who are incarcerated, both young and old.

These four major forms of social support are defined and briefly contextualized within the prison as follows:

1. **Emotional Support** is given when we express direct love, care and concern for other people. An example of this would be if you suffered the loss of a loved one and a friend called every day after for a month just to check on you so that you knew that they cared about you. Emotional support is not easily attainable for people in prison because there is an abundance of rules within the NYS prison directives that discourage opportunities for family preservation and limit peer to peer bonding for people serving time together.
2. **Practical Help**, which are gifts, monetary and other direct provisions that we receive from other people. For people in prison, getting this support from preexisting relationships is incredibly difficult, as DOC policy places unreasonable financial obstacles and discouraging limitations on visitation, telephone usage, and U.S. mail options for people in prison to retrieve the practical help that is necessary for years of living behind bars and away from loved ones. This requires people in prison to rely on practical help from their peers in prison, which often takes the form of exchanging a resource another needs for something they need.
3. **Sharing Point of View** can be understood as the different perspectives and understandings we receive from other people about the same situations. This support is most beneficial as it relates to troubleshooting difficult life circumstances and learning new innovative strategies for managing conflict and stress. Because of the limited and untimely access to consulting professionals and close family and friends, when facing immediate strife or uncertainty, people in prison are limited to the different perspectives of other people doing time with them, who are in similar situations, also seeking similar counsel about the very same issues.
4. **Sharing Information** is a form a social support that is most beneficial to us when friends, family or even expert professionals give us accurate and factual information that we did not have about a specific

topic. This can be as simple as providing directions to a lost patron or warning a person about a road closure. One example for a person in prison is when a new person has been recently admitted to a prison facility and seeks help from peers to learn more about the process for signing up for meals, recreational options, and/or medical services.

As outlined above, the rules and regulations of the prison environment make it immensely difficult for people in prison to receive or provide social support within prison. As support is critical in helping us overcome challenges and develop healthy ways to rationalize and manage ourselves in hard times, it is no wonder that research suggests that incarceration has negative psychological effects on people in prison, such as:

- A dependence on institutional structure and contingencies.
- Hypervigilance, interpersonal distrust, and suspicion.
- Emotional over-control, alienation, and psychological distancing.
- Social withdrawal and isolation.
- Incorporation of exploitative norms of prison culture.
- Diminished sense of self-worth and personal value.
- And post-traumatic stress reactions to the pains of imprisonment (Haney, 2001).

All of these harms can be reduced and/or completely circumvented with adequate social support programming targeted specifically towards family preservation, mentoring, and counseling during incarceration as well as with policy modifications for those regulations which undermine advantageous social support programming.

During incarceration, people in prison are subject to the arbitrary authority of prison officials and share a diminished social status with other people serving time in prison. These imbalanced power dynamics—implicitly and explicitly—may cripple a people in prison's ability to positively engage with other people, and consequently impede their ability to meet social obligations, in prison or post-incarceration. In focus groups held at the Center for Justice at Columbia University, formerly incarcerated men and women reported that because prison relationships must exist within the context of imbalanced power dynamics, incarceration often alienates people in prison from sources of support, negatively influences self-perception, and causes people in prison to carry an internalized status of subservience with them when they rejoin free society post-incarceration. Formerly incarcerated individuals typically cited daily mistreatment from prison staff and limited communication with the outside world as punitive methods used to disfigure their self-esteem and increase their levels of social alienation.

This mistreatment is not conducive to a successful re-entry back into society. The US rate of recidivism in 2014 was 76.6% compared to Norway's 20%. This difference is attributed to Norway's implementation of the concept of "restorative justice" (Sterbenz; 2014). This concept prioritizes the humanization and rehabilitation of people in prison. Acknowledging their humanity and treating people in prison as people instead of irredeemable and unworthy of acceptance (Dreisinger; 2016). Despite the above research, existing information, and efforts made by activist and organizations lobbying against these conditions, the inhumane treatment continues to occur (Blackler, 2015). This would suggest that a larger constituency remains compliant with, and/or ignorant to, these abuses.

### **The role of Popular Media in dehumanizing people in the criminal justice system**

Secondly, widespread pejorative labels and depictions of individuals impacted by the criminal justice system—in real-life and the media—dehumanize incarcerated populations. This dehumanization contributes to punitive attitudes, abusive penal policies, physical and sexual abuse of prisoners, general desensitization to such abuse and reluctance to societal reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals. The role of popular media in dehumanizing people in the criminal justice system undeniably influences the general public's pervasive negative perception of those incarcerated. This negative misperception of prisoners actually encourages the public's willingness to legitimize or ignore prison injustices and to countenance the dehumanization of people in prison. According to the A.C. Nielsen Co., the average American watches more than 4 hours of TV each day. According to the Television in American Society Reference Library, watching television influences viewers'

attitudes about people from other social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Watching TV also influences the way people think about important social issues such as race, gender, and class. Not only does television, movies and other shared media actively shape attitudes, but they also condition people to respond to things in a collective way, to develop shared feelings of ill-will and hatred, and to react impetuously without further thought or self-examination. Forms of media such as TV and film actively (p)redefine and engineer negative subconscious beliefs about people who go to jail or prison. These beliefs then feed into emotional responses, allowing information to bypass any conscious thought.

**The public's perceptions of PIP are influenced largely by stereotypical mainstream media portrayals of:**

**The average TV viewer is not presented with honest representations of:**

**prison threats,**

*i.e. Dialogue such as "If you go to jail something violent and sexual will happen to you."*

**The humanity of people in prison,**

*i.e. Parents and students vs. murderers and drug dealers.*

**prison situations, and**

*i.e. New person enters a violent facility where assaults, rapes, and stabbings take place.*

**how time is spent in prison, and**

*i.e. Self-advocating, creating programs inside, maximizing limited resources for professional development, and physical care*

**physical characteristics of people in prison.**

*i.e. Tattoos, baldheads, huge muscles, and big-black-mean.*

**the potential for self-development.**

*i.e. College in prison, skills building projects, and transitional support.*

**These (mis)representations manipulate public attitudes to fit within a particular frame, which necessarily excludes all that does not fit within its given parameters.**

### ***The role of Punitive Attitudes in the criminal justice system***

The importance of public attitudes towards people in the criminal justice system cannot be denied. In modern democracies, the legitimacy of the criminal justice system depends on the willing participation of members of the public (Viki & Bohner, 2008). The public's willingness to support the criminal justice system depends strongly on their attitudes towards the criminal justice process (Viki, Culmer, Eller, & Abrams, 2006; Wood & Viki, 2004). As is well known, the USA has increasingly become more punitive and exclusionary over the last thirty years. According to some scholars (Yeomans, 2010), this recent focus on punitiveness and social exclusion has resulted from the interconnections between the media, public opinion and legislative changes. One important aspect of understanding such interconnections is the tendency to dehumanize (Haslam, 2006) people who get involved in criminal justice and in the prison system.

Dehumanizing language and misrepresentative imagery are often used to address and describe people in prison and those formerly incarcerated. The spectacularization of criminal trials, together with false depictions of institutional life in and by the media has provided a misleading and individualistic image of people touched by the criminal justice system, by depicting them as "bad" individuals who willingly break the law and harm

others for the sake of their own interest or pleasure. Such misrepresentative imagery has fueled subconscious negative beliefs about people who go to jail or prison within public opinion.

Altogether, the dehumanization and, derivatively, the mistreatment of people in prison largely impedes their rehabilitation, and is not conducive to their successful reentry back into society. If criminality is viewed in essentialistic ways and people in prison are regarded as irredeemable criminals and unworthy of acceptance (Dreisinger, 2016), then public attitudes are likely to be negative about their actual social rehabilitation and reintegration

# ACTION RESEARCH

## Exploring dehumanization in the criminal legal system

Because there continues to be an “eclipse” in the prison ethnography since incarceration rates began to rise in the late 1970s (Wacquant, 2002), more research on people’s social relations during and post incarceration is needed to understand the psychological and broader social impact of dehumanizing prison conditions. As social beings, human identity cannot be understood as distinct from the social world. Psychological and sociological theories on the development of identity stress how societal moral authority is continuously balanced against personal desire in governing a person’s actions and how they view themselves. A person’s identity is constantly being reshaped throughout their lives, as their interactions with their external environment define how they perceive themselves and find meaning in their lives (Freud, Mead, Durkheim, etc.). For this reason, it is critical to examine the dynamics of people’s social environments when trying to understand human development behind bars. In the era of mass incarceration where millions of people are being imprisoned each year (Prison Policy Initiative, 2015), it is crucial to understand how the prison environment can reshape how people view themselves and how they relate to others. We have begun to investigate the social impact that incarceration has on pre-existing relationships, relationships developed in prison, and post-incarceration relationships. Of particular interest is a person’s capacity to develop and sustain healthy coping skills and relationships within prison and to navigate various social obligations post-incarceration.

This project incorporates the mission of the Center for Justice at Columbia University, which is committed to reducing the nation’s reliance on incarceration and advancing alternative approaches to safety and justice through education, research, and policy. By strategically and artistically disseminating research information, this project expands the scope of The Confined Arts (TCA), an art-based initiative founded in 2014 by Pastor Isaac Scott. TCA is a platform that illustrates and showcases the talents the creative voices of currently and formerly incarcerated artists. TCA has a two-part mission to: 1) Change narratives that are commonly associated with individuals, both in prison and formerly incarcerated; and, 2) Create a consistent stream of public, research-based education. Through the novel integration of public outreach campaigns, art-based programming, and public media, this project goes beyond earlier efforts to educate the public and criminal justice professions about the detrimental effects of social dehumanization of prisoners. In researching, producing, disseminating and exhibiting evidence regarding these effects in three different contexts, public opinion, judicial process, and prison settings, this project aims to sensitize others through a multi-faceted approach to the negative

consequences that dehumanizing labels and misperceptions have on the lives of those who are or have been impacted by incarceration.

### **Part 1: Research & Studies**

Through empirical studies and the artistic dissemination of their results in publications, through public outreach campaigns and art-based programming, and through media this project aims to produce and exhibit evidence about the detrimental effects of dehumanizing language and misrepresentations of people in jail/prison in three different contexts: public opinion, judicial context, and prison settings. In so doing, this project ultimately aims to sensitize public opinion and criminal justice professionals about the negative consequences that dehumanizing labeling and misperceptions have on the lives of those who are or have been impacted by incarceration.

The research conducted in this project is divided into two parts. First, a statistical analysis of whether negative and dehumanizing stigma attached to the language used to describe people in prison (**Language of Dehumanization Project**). Second, an investigation into what role prison has on social relationships (**Social Dynamics of Incarceration**).

### **Language of Dehumanization Project**

- 1. Historical Reference:** The History of Language Project aims to produce a historical reference of how media and language has been used to shape perceptions of people in prison. It will analyze the manner in which law, policy and popular discourse has shaped punitive attitudes. The study constitutes a longitudinal assessment of attitudes towards crime and people in prison both in the legal system and the media. It will utilize historical research and literature review to assess how the media representation of people in prison intersects with and is reflected in the policy and law of the day.
- 2. Label Impact Study:** The study evolved from a body of research which identifies that people in prison are widely perceived as dangerous and manipulative and are therefore dehumanized by way of severe neglect in the form of moral exclusions and disengagement by prison guards and other staff (Haslam, 2006; Blackler, 2015; Gullapalli, 2015). Despite this accumulated knowledge of abuses in a prison context, mistreatment continues to occur. The study hypothesized that widespread dehumanization of the prison population through the language used to describe people in prison and the stigma this language carries could be one reason why a large proportion of society remains silent in the face of mistreatment of people in prison.
- 3. Television Research:** This research demonstrates a sense of the urgency to facilitate discourse around dehumanizing labels and stereotypical representation of people in the criminal justice system and to understand how the general public forms perceptions of different groups of people based on the common labels used to reference them. Labels carry stigmas and stereotypes. They allow us to acknowledge social, cultural, or physical differences amongst one another. Labels also inadvertently influence our perceptions of one another depending on the social significance of the label that is attributed to a person. In one study students who were labeled as "bloomers" were perceived by teachers to be more cognitively adept than their peers, even if their capabilities were the same. This effect was so strong that some teachers gave increased levels of support to students labeled as capable, which resulted in concrete differences in educational performance. In a 2010 poll conducted to gather the approval rates of gay men and lesbians in the US Military, approval rates for including gay people in the military were higher when the words "Gay Men & Lesbians" were used instead of "Homosexuals" Finally, people who are directly impacted by the criminal justice system reported, using stigmatizing language to reference them is the first step in "dehumanizing them".
- 4. (De)humanizing Language in the Courtroom:** This study aims to examine the impact of dehumanizing language on punitive attitudes both in lay people and legal experts and to assess whether specific linguistic choices that are commonly used in courtrooms (at the sentencing stage) to describe people who are on trial influence the perception of these people and, consequently, the emotional and punitive attitudes towards them.

## Social Dynamics of Incarceration

Because people in prison are isolated from free society, are geographically distanced and may be emotionally distanced from family as a result of their incarceration, considering peer relationships that are formed within prison is a critical part of understanding what social support means for people in prison. This study will investigate questions such as: (1) what impact does prison have on social relationships? How does it have this impact? (2) do the rules and regulations for people in prison within NYS prisons impede healthy relationships for people serving time? And if so, how? (3) does the social environment of NYS prisons impact how people feel about their personal role in society (during sentence and post-incarceration)? And if so, how?

## ARTISTIC RESPONSE/STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

We will carry out our goals through the following objectives: 1) Present research findings at the inaugural annual justice conference with 50 percent of attendees working in the areas of law, policy, education, and journalism. The other 50 percent of attendees will be made up of people who are directly impacted by the criminal legal system. 2) Present research findings to two community groups before the conference. 3) Host two community fundraisers where research is presented before the conference. 4) Present research findings through weekly social media posts. 5) Produce two video projects relating to the research topic. 6) Produce film and media content that is informed by true, lived narratives 7) Present research findings through written publications.



Throughout 2018 and the beginnings of 2019, this project has hosted collaborative artistic exhibitions including those at the Community Church of New York, NY, the Art for Justice Forum at Columbia Law School, the Beyond the Bars Conference at Columbia University, and more. Over the past year, through these events, this project has engaged over a thousand people. This past year, The Center for Justice's social media audience increased to: newsletter: 13.7K Subscribers; Facebook: 2.3K-Followers; Twitter: 6K-Followers; Instagram: 700+-Followers. We will continue to share pertinent content over these social media platforms, which serve as a pillar for our engagement strategies. We are currently working with professional statisticians developing and implementing pre and post surveys, which measure the project's collective impact. Over the project's duration, we will continue to work with both new and experienced artists, policy-makers, researchers, journalists, lawyers, community activists, and directly impacted individuals to deconstruct widespread misperceptions about incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals in order to create counter-narratives where their humanity is understood and honored.