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## Islamic Conversion Confined: A Look at Why Black Men Convert to Islam While Incarcerated and the Effects Conversion has on their Processes of Reentry

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# **Islamic Conversion Confined:**

A Look at Why Black Men Convert to Islam While Incarcerated and the Effects  
Conversion has on their Processes of Reentry

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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## **Abstract**

Based on ten in-depth interviews with Black men who converted to Islam while incarcerated, this project serves to better understand why Black men in prison convert to Islam, the effects conversion has on their prison time and on their reentry processes. In this paper, I argue that conversion to Islam among Black men in prison allows them to construct a new conception of self, which further allows them manage their prison time. I also argue that the presence of conversion to Islam in prisons helps to influence inmate culture and leads to the formation of a new masculinity within the prison that challenges the dominant form. Lastly, I consider Islam and the personal narratives it provides the men with as a way in which they are able to construct post-prison citizenships, while engaging in processes of reentry. Islam serves as a resource, which helps the men re-develop a bond with society and gain a level of control over their conditions.

## Acknowledgements

This project is for the men and women who have been stripped from their families and placed into cages. This is for the thousands and thousands of Black faces who are trapped behind the bars of a system designed to bury them. This is for the families whose lives have been destroyed, whose family portraits remain incomplete, and whose loved ones are casted out of society and relegated to the cells of Americas prison system. This is for the young Black men who have been robbed of their freedom and of their dignity, whose faces have been beat beneath the boots of racist police officers. This is for the men on corners, and the boys with graduation caps who everyday fight to exist in a world that has given them every reason to give up. This is for the single young mothers who work their asses off to take care of their children despite the reality of having to do it all alone. This is for the young Black men who could not live to be fathers to their children because they were murdered in the name of white supremacy. This is for the young Black boys and girls who died for playing with toys guns, or for carrying skittles and iced tea. This is for every Black man who has been systematically stripped from fatherhood. This is for every woman who had to give birth while chained to the arms of a hospital bed. This project is for those who society would rather forget, cast out, and leave to die. This project is for every revolutionary fighting to end this institution of slavery and this system of racial casting, this is for the prison abolitionists.

To my advisor Allison, thank you for telling me on my first crit sheet freshman year that I had a great sociological imagination, you continue to inspire me to pursue sociology.

And to my Kai Kai, everything that I do is for you. You are the son which lights up my sky. I carried you in my belly the first nine months of my college career, and you have acted as a motivation to continue and to pursue my dreams ever since. You give me reason. You are my purpose.

Lastly, this project is in memory of the late Malcolm X, whose words have ignited fires of passion in my soul.

*“By Any means Necessary.”*

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# 1

## Welcome to the “Uncaging of Black Men”

*“This is probably as big a single worry as the American prison system has today—the way the Muslim teachings, circulated among all Negroes in the country, are converting new Muslims among black men in prison, and black men are in prison in far greater numbers than their proportion in the population.” - Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, 1965.*

The life story of Malcolm X demonstrates the transformative and positive impact conversion to Islam can have on a Black man in prison. His story has been highly publicized and recognized through a number of media depictions, articles, books, movies, and documentaries. His autobiography tells the story of how he went from an every-day street hustler in Harlem to one of America’s most powerful, prominent and controversial men, through conversion to the Nation of Islam while in prison. The transformative powers of Islam are brought to life in the narrative of Malcolm X’s life. While in prison Malcolm developed a desire for spiritual and intellectual growth. Somewhere along this journey he learned about the Nation of Islam and began exchanging letters with Elijah Muhamad. After having accepted the Nation of Islam, Mr. Muhammad wrote to Malcolm stating, “The black prisoner, symbolized white society’s crime of keeping Black men oppressed and deprived and ignorant, and unable to get decent jobs, turning them into criminals” (Alex Haley, Malcolm X, 1965). From this moment forward Malcolm viewed Islam as the religion that would “uncage” Black men from their oppression and awake them from their ignorance of that oppression.

Within the confines of the Norfolk Prison, his acceptance of the Nation of Islam served as a moment in which he felt the most mentally free and as he indulged in learning more about the world and its history, he broke free from the constraints which blinded

him from his reality. Later in life, Malcolm cut his ties with the Nation of Islam and began his own religious organization, The Muslim Mosque Inc. (Marble, 2011). Malcolm went on a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia later that year and marveled at the diverse appearances of the population of Muslims in the Middle East. In his letter from Mecca (1964), Malcolm stated, “I am and will always be a Muslim. My religion is Islam.”

The incredible story of Malcolm X and his journey of conversion behind the four walls of his prison cell not only depict his experience but illustrate the reality of many Black men in American Prisons. There currently exists a very scarce amount of academic research on the phenomena of Black men converting to Islam in American prisons. This project seeks to investigate why African American male prisoners convert to Islam while incarcerated. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the effects Islamic conversion within prisons has on the convert’s prison experience and their reentry into society.

In our current era of mass incarceration, approximately 2.2 million Americans are living behind the bars of our prison system (Federal Bureau of Prison Statistics, [bop.gov](http://bop.gov)). As of 2014, an estimated total of 6,851,000 persons were under adult correctional systems, this includes offenders supervised in the community under the authority of probation or parole agencies, and those held in the custody of state and federal prisons or local jails (Sentencing Project, [sentencingproject.org](http://sentencingproject.org)). It is no secret that dramatic and historic increases in incarceration rates disproportionately affect African Americans. According to the NAACP, nearly 1 million of the 2.2 million people incarcerated are African American, as African Americans are nearly six times more likely to be incarcerated than whites (Western 2006). In our current era of mass incarceration, African American men still remain the demographic population most heavily



incarcerated. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, an estimate based on data from 2001, reveal that the lifetime likelihood of imprisonment for United States residents in 2001, are one in nine men, one in seventeen white men, one in six Latino men, and one in three black men (Sentencing Project, [Sentencingproject.org](http://Sentencingproject.org)). According to the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics ([bjs.gov](http://bjs.gov)), non-Hispanic Blacks accounted for 39.4% of the total prison and jail population in 2009, (841,000 black males and 64,800 black females out of a total of 2,096,300 males and 201,200 females). These statistics prove that whole segments of the African American population are being warehoused in prison facilities around the nation and this is especially true for Black men in the United States.

Much research and discussion surrounding mass incarceration focuses heavily on the causes and consequences it has on individuals, communities, and larger society but fails to properly capture the experiences of the individuals incarcerated. The grand percentages of people who are incarcerated mask the reality of individual experiences and the ways in which lives have been disrupted or cut short due to the pervasiveness of the systems of mass incarceration, which disproportionately affect economically deprived communities of color. More research should be geared toward understanding the lives and experiences of the populations of people who are most affected and targeted by systems of mass incarceration (i.e. Black men). This research seeks to not only understand why Black men are converting to Islam while incarcerated, but it seeks to investigate the effects conversion has on their time in prison and on their lives outside of prison. More research should focus on how Black men manage prison time and should consider the outlets they turn to in order to survive prison and decrease their likelihood of returning. With these large segments of the American population incarcerated it is crucial

to better understand how imprisoned individuals survive and manage their time behind bars.

We often discuss the numbers and percentages of people going into prison and coming out of it, but what happens to the men while inside of prison? How are their lives changed? How are their perceptions of themselves altered? How do they manage to deal with the isolating and confining nature of the prison while being detached from their previous social roles and relationships? This study's goal, then, is to begin to answer these questions by focusing on the role of Islamic conversion among incarcerated Black men and in order to better understand the effects conversion has on their prison time and lives outside of prison. Highly publicized and discussed stories of conversion to Islam in prisons, such as the stories of Malcolm X and Muhamad Ali, only offer us a slight glimpse into why Black men convert to Islam while incarcerated and the effects it has had on their lives. More research should consider the lives and experiences of everyday people who are casted out of society and warehoused in prison facilities throughout the nation.

Although there are no reliable statistics regarding how many men in prison are converting to Islam, estimates suggest that 35,000-40,000 inmates convert to Islam each year (Spear It, 2013). Nationwide, it is estimated that 15 percent of the United States prison population is Muslim, or as much as 350,000 current inmates identify as Muslim (Spear It, 2013). According to the Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life and based on a 50-state survey of prison chaplains, they claim that Islam is the fastest growing religion behind bars (pewforum.org, 2012). Among chaplains who reported that conversion occurs within the correctional facilities where they work, about half (51%)

report that Muslims are growing in number (pewforum.org, 2012). The limited statistics that are available to the public demonstrate that there is a growing presence of Islam behind bars as more inmates are deciding to convert. It is important to note that little information is publicly available about the religious lives of the individuals behind the bars of the United States prison system. There are no estimates regarding the racial backgrounds of the inmates converting to Islam. However, based on the limited statistics we do have, we see that conversion to Islam within prisons is becoming increasingly more common and more research needs to focus on who is converting, why they are converting, and the effects the prevalence of Islam has on prison life. This paper does not seek to answer these larger general questions regarding conversion to Islam in prisons nor does it seek to explain why large inmate populations are converting to Islam behind bars. It does, however, seek to understand the individual experiences of ten Black men who converted to Islam while incarcerated and to examine why they converted and how it affected their prison time and processes of reentry.

In order to understand this I conducted ten in-depth, life-history style interviews with men who identify as Black American and who at some points in their incarceration time converted to Islam and are now out of prison. My findings illustrate conversion to Islam as an extensive personal and intellectual process which leads to the formation of a new sense of self. I consider conversion to Islam as a mechanism the men utilize to find meaning and re-gain a level of control over their lives in prison. I argue that conversion to Islam among inmates leads to the formation of a collective identity among the group of Muslim men in the prison that forms, which acts as a resistance to the racial and social structuring of the facility. I also consider Islam as a resource used by the men in order to

develop and display an alternative form of masculinity that challenges the dominant hyper-masculine form of masculinity of the prison. Lastly, I consider the effects conversion has on individual processes of reentry and its ability to provide the men with a narrative that helps them construct a post-prison citizenship. The following section will briefly review previous sociological literature that focuses on the effects and costs imprisonment has on the individual and the ways in which they manage ‘doing time’.

### **Doing Time: A Review of Goffman and Sykes work on the effects of Imprisonment**

While there has been an extensive amount of research pertaining to the institution of the prison, its development, and its effects on the individuals who are confined to them and society as a whole, Goffman’s (1961) early research on total institutions has been particularly influential to our current understandings of the effects imprisonment has on an individual. Goffman (1961) discusses prisons as existing as what he coins, a “total institution.” When people enter prisons or other total institutions they are stripped of their previous social roles and relationships. In *Asylums*, Goffman (1961) asserts that upon a person’s entry into a total institution they undergo a “mortification of self,” which can be understood as a series of “abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations” that the self undergoes leaving it almost entirely destroyed. This means that when one enters prison, they are forced to abandon whatever previous social roles, relationships, or attachments to society they may have had and instead have to adhere to the demands of the institution.

The work of Goffman presents the intense and severe effects an institution such as prison has on the self and on a person’s perceived role in society. Upon entry into prison the inmates are immediately identified as a number and not a name and are under

constant surveillance and control, removing them from any social role or relationship they may have once maintained. Goffman also discusses role dispossession, which refers to the separation between an individual and the outside world, and the total institutions ability to radically shift a persons' "moral career" because they are detached from the social contexts, identities and relationships, which through processes of socialization inform ones conception of self. For Goffman, prisons and other total institutions significantly change an individual's beliefs about one's self and significant others. Prisons physically separate and disconnect an individual from the larger outside world and this is the first step in the process of curtailing the self.

Goffman's work demonstrates the oppressive and threatening environment of a total institution and develops the concept of "secondary adjustment" to help articulate how people manage their time and confinement. A "secondary adjustment" can be defined as anything people learn to do to get around the institution or mechanisms developed in order to sustain a sense of self despite the efforts and controls of the institution, which work to mortify any sense of self the men enter with. Deviating from the norms of the institution, including behaving in a way or viewing one's self in a way that is not defined by the institution is a means of dealing with the control of that institution and can be viewed as a means of coping with ones time in the institution. It is useful to consider the frameworks developed by Goffman in his work, *Asylums* (1961) to help understand religious conversion as a part of this process and as a "secondary adjustment," a means in which men in prison can articulate their experience and redefine themselves while incarcerated.

Sykes (1958) discusses the pains of imprisonment and asserts that the first and foremost severe deprivation that prisoners experience is the confinement by the institution and by confinement within the institution. Sykes describes the physical, mental, and emotional deprivations men in prison experience, from not having autonomy to being restricted from engaging in heterosexual relationships. Sykes (1958) goes further to discuss how men in prison go about dealing with or mitigating the “pains of imprisonment” and states that although they are not able to physically escape, few men in prison are able to psychologically withdraw from the reality of imprisonment. However, Sykes argues that few men are actually successful in using psychological or physical methods to escape the deprivations experienced while incarcerated. Sykes suggests that inmates could attempt to overthrow or change the organization and governing structures of the institution through acts of revolt or rebellion. Prisoners may also write letters or be in contact with someone from the outside world to communicate their complaints or issues with the conditions of imprisonment. Sykes (1958) concludes that the pains of imprisonment cannot be completely eliminated and an inmate must inevitably endure the conditions and length of his sentence. Inmates can find means of mitigating these pains through social interactions with other inmates.

Sykes identifies two ways in which inmates can utilize social interactions with other inmates to manage prison time. Men can join the other inmates in an effort to foster solidarity with them based on their shared experience incarcerated and set themselves in opposition to the prison officials. While other men may choose to alienate themselves from other prisoners and set up one’s self in opposition to other inmates and prison officials. Although men are alienated and stripped of whatever social roles or

relationships they may have had in the outside world, they are able to mitigate the oppressive conditions of prison by adapting new roles and relationships through their social interactions with other inmates and prison officials. The findings and arguments presented in Syke's work are useful for understanding processes of religious conversion among Black men in prison in an effort to understand how conversion allows inmates to find solidarity and form a collective social group within the prison and redevelop an individual definition or understanding of self. The current literature on the conditions of imprisonment and how inmates manage their time does not primarily focus on the role of religious conversion and its effects on the prisoner's experience. This research will further explore the relationship between religious conversion and managing prison time.

### **Prison Masculinities**

While Goffman (1961) and Sykes (1958) work focuses on the ways in which imprisonment has a severe effect on an individual's sense of self as it works to abandon them from their previous social roles and relationships, there exist an extensive amount of literature on the masculinities that get formed and maintained within prison, (Sabo et al., 2001, Karp, 2010, Messerschmidt, 2001). Current research on prison masculinities focuses on the hyper-masculine form of masculinity that becomes intensified within the context of prison (Karp, 2010, Jewkes, 2005). Other research has focused on the complex and nuanced processes and social interactions that occur in the context of prison, which allow for multiple masculinities to be formed, maintained, and encouraged (Messerschmidt, 2001). In his research, Messerschmidt argues that masculinities are formed and based on the socially constructed ideals of masculinity that are reproduced through particular practices. The forms of masculinity that are available, encouraged, or

allowed depend on an individual's social context, class status, racial or ethnic background, and sexual preference (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2001).

A majority of literature on prison masculinities emphasizes the importance of material resources in the process of forming or achieving any form of masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2010, Jewkes, 2005, Karp, 2010). The form of masculinity one performs is based on their immediate social conditions and the resources they utilize to achieve it and prove to others that they are masculine. Men who are from lower or working class backgrounds do not have the financial or social capital needed to prove to others that they are masculine and dominant men (Jewkes, 2005, Karp, 2010). They cannot turn to traditional resources, such as money or other material things in order to display their dominance and masculinity. Instead, lower-class men may turn to alternative resources as a means of achieving masculinity, which include turning to crime, aggression, or violence. Within the context of prison, the masculinity that is dominant among lower-working class men is only intensified as the men become even more limited to resources that are needed to achieve masculinity (Jewkes, 2005, Karp, 2010).

However, within prison there is still a demand to perform masculinity in a way that proves to others that one is tough and 'manly'. Messerschmidt (1993, 2001) argues that prison is a space that allows for a variety of masculinities to emerge and be performed. He further contends that the only way men in prison are able to perform masculinity is through their behavior and their appearance and that the form of masculinity they choose to embody is heavily based on their direct social actions, circumstances, and relationships (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2001). The formation of particular forms of masculinity are typically understood as an individual process but it is



important to consider it as a social process as well because it is shaped by one's immediate social context and interactions, as well as by larger institutional forces. Messerschmidt also notes that prison is a site where one's masculinity can change and he offers the example of Malcolm X to illustrate the significant changes of self, one can undergo while incarcerated. He argues that Malcolm was able to reformulate his masculinity in prison because living the life of a street hustler no longer constituted an available resource for performing masculinity within the context of prison. Based on the political ideologies of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm was able to construct a new "Muslim Masculinity", which emphasized the struggle of the Black man living in a society dominated by the white man. Within the context of prison, men have to turn to other resources in order to "do" masculinity and this may often times lead to the construction of a new form of masculinity, one they may not have had the resources to construct prior.

In conclusion, prison can be seen as a site in which the hyper-masculine form of masculinity that is typically associated with lower-working class men becomes intensified (Jewkes, 2001, Karp, 2010). It can also be understood as a site in which a variety of masculinities are being formed, maintained, and encouraged depending on the resources that are available and the immediate social circumstances one is in. Lastly, prison is a space in which men can change their masculine practices and come to embody a new form of masculinity, one that is distinct from the dominant, hyper-masculine form. It is important to consider prison as a space in which processes of self-transformation are occurring. Islam should be further explored as a resource utilized by the Muslim inmates to achieve a new form of masculinity, one they did not have access to prior to their incarceration or conversion. If prison can be understood as a place in which men undergo

severe transformations of the self and are also exposed to a variety of different forms of masculinity, how does this affect their lives leaving prison? How do the men who have gained a new understanding of self, navigate the outside world differently than they did before?

### **Leaving Prison, What Now? : Considering Processes of Reentry among Men of Color**

Popular research and debate surrounding mass incarceration tends to focus on the consequences and the effects on larger society when considering the thousands of people which filter through the American penal system a year. While much discussion is centered on the vast amounts of people entering prison it is necessary to consider the thousands of people who are leaving prison every year and who must reenter society. According to the United States Department of Justice, more than 10,000 prisoners are released from America's state and federal prisons every week (bjs.gov). There are over 650,000 people leaving prisons each year in the United States and who must reenter their community (U.S. Dept. of Justice, bjs.gov). Majority of the existing literature on issues of reentry tend to focus on recidivism as opposed to the difficulties former inmates face or their experience transitioning back into society. Many of the individuals released from prison leave with medical, social, and economic problems and lack stable familial support, and they must now face the stigma of being ex-offenders, which only serves to further intensify their obstacles. In addition to understanding how people do their time in prison it is equally important to consider how individuals transition from prison back into general society through processes of reentry.

There is a generous amount of research that focuses on individual experiences throughout the process of reentry (Martin, 2013, Trimbur, 2009, Fader, 2013). It is important to consider the current research surrounding reentry because this project also seeks to understand the effects conversion to Islam had on men throughout their reentry process. It is important to understand the role Islam plays in the lives of the men I interviewed both in and out of prison because leaving prison, men may face social, financial, medical, and familial issues, which can prohibit their reintegration or lead them to return to engaging in criminal activity (Martin 2013, Trimbur, 2009). The following literature on reentry considers the role of race in processes of reentry and discusses the structural barriers men face when leaving prison and transitioning back into society.

Martin (2013) argues that because of the symbolic association between race and crime, reentry inevitably exists within a universe framed through race and should be analyzed as such. Martin argues that issues of reentry stem from the problems which exist in our larger social reality, particularly within hyper-marginalized, under-resourced, poor, urban communities of color. Martin extends Wacquant's (2001) argument that the prison and the ghetto have become increasingly indistinguishable and reinforce one another as they both function to exclude African Americans from general society in his approach to understanding reentry processes. Wacquant coins the term, "hyper ghetto" to articulate the relationship between prisons and marginalized communities of African Americans and the way in which these communities have become extensions of institutions of punishment and imprisonment and the reverse. Martin (2013) is concerned with the communities that are excluded from general society because these are often the communities in which Black men are born into, taken from while incarcerated, and

forced to return to when they are released. These communities are so heavily excluded, surveilled, dominated and re-defined by systems of mass incarceration that those living in these communities remain 'captives' to the state. Martin argues that we must not address issues of reentry without first addressing the issues of our social reality. Martin concludes by saying policy proposals and reforms regarding reentry and reentry programs will be unsuccessful, especially by agencies of criminal justice because they ignore the larger structural and institutional issues that are present in our society outside of prisons and within them as they only work to further foster, perpetuate, and manufacture these social issues. His research is significant to this study because all of the men I interviewed identify as Black and are from low-income minority neighborhoods and return to the realities of these structural barriers because of their race and because of the communities they are from which are under resourced and heavily surveilled. It is important to consider how conversion to Islam may help alleviate some of the barriers the men are inevitably up against when leaving prison.

Fader's book, *Falling Back*, offers a new layer to the discussion surrounding reentry among men of color because she documents young men's transition to adulthood along with their processes of reentry from imprisonment, which she coins a "dual transition" (Fader 2013). Fader's research points to the difficulties young men of color face when leaving prison because they must navigate the conditions of probation, avoid disputes with the police, reestablish familial relationships, and assume masculine adult roles (Fader 2013). Fader concludes that despite the efforts and hopes of these young men to "fall back" from crime and make a positive change in their lives upon release they were all still met with barriers from various social institutions. Faders argues that the

problem of reentry stems from the pre-existing fragile relationships that these men have with social institutions including the labor market, schools, the criminal justice system, police, and their families.

Fader's conclusions are important to consider because she suggests that even men who strive to have successful processes of reentry and who actively try to refrain from engaging in criminal activity are still met with structural barriers that could potentially hinder their progression and complicate their transition. The fourth chapter of this project will look at the effects conversion to Islam has had on the actual outcomes of Black men's transition and reentry processes as a potential way to combat the structural barriers Fader's (2013) and Martin (2013) point to. It will also consider the significance Islam had on shaping their perceptions and attitudes toward reentry and its ability to help them refrain from engaging in criminal activity despite the strong social forces that generate them toward turning back to crime.

Trimbur (2009) found similar issues regarding reentry processes among men of color in her ethnographic research of newly released prisoners based at a New York City boxing gym. Trimbur discusses the difficulties men of color face in trying to find employment due to anti-black discrimination practices in hiring and the ways in which these difficulties are increased when a man of color has a criminal record. Secondly, Trimbur discusses the social policy changes which swept postindustrial New York City and resulted in the decrease and elimination in social welfare benefits and the expansion of crime control which disproportionately affects men and women of color. Trimbur concludes by understanding reentry from prison in three approaches, one which men leaving prison have no plans to refrain from criminal activity and immediately engage in

criminal activity after being released. Trimbur found that a second group of men are hopeful for their futures and are able to use self-discipline practices in order to actualize their hopes and remain distant from criminal activity. Lastly, Trimbur found that a third group of men are defeated by their socioeconomic statuses and the consequences of the post-industrial landscape of New York City. These men demonstrate that despite their efforts at self-discipline and their motivation to reintegrate, reentry processes are not always contingent on an individual's desire or wishes to succeed because they are heavily shaped by the racial and class hierarchies which govern society. Trimbur finds that for men reentering and who decide not to engage in criminal activity are able to actualize their goals through disciplinary practices or techniques. Trimbur found that men who have religious loyalties tend to take long – term approaches to achieving their goals and remain committed to not returning to crime.

Considering the findings and conclusions of Martin (2013), Fader (2013), and Trimbur's (2009) research, this project seeks to understand the role of Islam in processes of reentry among men who converted while incarcerated. Trimbur found that men who remain faithful to a religion throughout their transition from prison back into society remain more positive and hopeful. I wish to further explore the relationship between the Islamic religion and processes of reentry among Black men. How does conversion to Islam among Black male prisoners affect their experiences of reentry and does an individual's level of commitment to Islam affect how they view reentry?

Maruna's (2001) research explores the narratives of ex-offenders, who work to re-build their lives through processes of reentry and emphasizes the importance in men telling their stories about their experiences incarcerated and their lives after incarceration

because of its capacity to transform lives. Maruna's (2001) research on reentry has had a significant impact on the field of criminology and the general study of crime because of the approach he used to research and understand processes of reentry among men and the mechanisms they utilized to desist from crime. Perhaps one of Maruna's most important conclusions is his emphasis on the importance of letting men who are undergoing processes of reentry tell their story and having people who will listen.

As opposed to focusing on the men who return to crime after being released from prison, Maruna suggests that we look to the men who were able to desist from crime and lead productive lives outside of prison. This framework for researching and understanding processes of reentry is important because it focuses on the voice and perceptions of the men who are actually undergoing these processes. In chapter four I look at the effects conversion to Islam has on the men's reentry processes through analysis of their personal narratives. I utilize Maruna's (2001) framework in order to understand how Islam has helped shaped their perceptions of reentry and of themselves. I seek to investigate how Islam acts as a mechanism by which the men desist from crime because of their narratives as Muslim men, which helps them construct a post-prison citizenship and develop a worthy sense of self.

### **Development and Spread of Islam within American Prisons**

There is currently little to no other research that specifically looks at conversion to Islam in prisons or among Black men in prisons. A quick google search on the internet will only direct you to online articles that discuss the growing 'problem' of Islamic conversion within United States prisons and the fear that behind the walls of the American prisons system Islamic radical terrorists are being bred. This indicates the lack

of academic research done on the topic and the critical need for more research to be done that does not perpetuate Islamophobia or negative stereotypes that generalize for a whole population of people. The lack of academic research out there and the readily accessible online articles that perpetuate false assumptions regarding conversion to Islam within American prisons speaks to the necessity of this project. Speaking with Black men who actually underwent processes of conversion to Islam helps provide us with a glimpse into the first-hand accounts and experiences of men who found Islam while incarcerated to better understand why they convert, what about Islam appealed to them, and the effects conversion has had on their lives in and out of prison. It is only through the telling of their stories that we can begin to listen and deconstruct the assumptions and stereotypes surrounding this phenomenon.

Based on data from 2011, the Pew Research Center estimated that Muslims made up 9% of the inmate population of federal and state prisons in the United States (pewforum.org). This indicates that the Muslim populations within American prisons are growing as more inmates are turning to Islam (pewforum.org). As noted earlier, based on a 50-state wide survey of prison chaplains conducted by the Pew Research Center, prison chaplains claim that Islam is the fastest growing religion among inmates (pewforum.org 2012). This suggests that the prevalence and spread of Islam within American prisons is growing as it is appealing to more and more inmates. This section will explore the current literature relevant to conversion among Black male prisoners in order to provide a framework for my research and findings. It will begin with looking at the development of Islam within American prisons and will then review the literature that seeks to understand why these men are converting in prison and how processes of conversion affect how they



manage their jail time. There is no current research on the effects conversion to Islam among Black men has on their processes of reentry but this question will be further explored in my own research.

Although there is not much academic research on the development of Islam within American prisons, the literature does include one useful study which examines the internal conditions that contributed to the development of Islam within American prisons. Dix's research (1997, 2002) focuses on the development of Islam within prisons and considers the intersections of race, religion, and inmate culture to better understand why conversion to Islam has become increasingly more popular and common among inmates. Dix's (2002) research considers the larger social forces that have contributed to the development and spread of Islam in American prisons which include, court intervention, the influence and reality of race in America, the role of religion in the lives of Blacks in America, and the inmate culture that forms in prisons. She identifies these factors as keys to understanding how Islam has situated itself within the confines of the American penal system. She argues that as a result of the extreme growth of Blacks in prisons in the 1980s and 90s, Blacks have become the majority population within the context of prison and this has affected the overall inmate culture. Many Black men who are in prison view their incarceration as a result of the racist and discriminatory practices of the criminal justice system and crime control policies. In prison, a space which only serves to intensify these feelings of oppression and inequality, a religion such as Islam appeals to them because it addresses concerns regarding economic, social, and political inequalities. As the population of Black inmates continues to increase, Islam further finds a place for itself behind the walls of United States' prisons.

Dix (2002) further argues that Islam appeals to inmates because of its ability to have rehabilitative and positive impacts on those who convert. Islam becomes a legitimate means of addressing the oppressive and unique circumstances of someone who is in prison and allows for men to transform their experiences in prison. Islam promotes characteristics such as, morality, personal responsibility, productivity and a desire to engage in processes of spiritual and intellectual growth which have positive impacts on men in prison. Islam provides them with a way to take control over some aspects of their lives and to articulate their conditions and feelings of oppression. The findings and conclusions of Dix's (1997, 2002) research are useful for my own research, as I will further investigate the narratives of men who converted to Islam while incarcerated to better understand why they chose to convert, what about Islam appealed to them, and the impact conversion has had on their lives.

### **Conversion as a Tool for Self-Empowerment: Why Black Male Prisoners Convert:**

The current literatures on the different theories behind why black men in prison choose to convert to Islam view Islamic conversion as a form of self-empowerment through the resistance of dominant ideologies. This project will analyze the narratives of men who have converted in order to see if the findings presented in the literature align with the findings of my data. The differences between the explanations in the literature are that they each describe different reasons why Black male prisoners seek self-empowerment through the same means of converting to Islam. Hamid Kusha (2009) argues that conversion to Islam among African-American male prisoners allows these men to pose a powerful challenge to the current American penal ideology. It becomes a rehabilitative process because Islam offers a social justice message which conflicts with

the historically constructed Christendom and Juedo-Christian ideologies that have dominated America's penal system. Christianity differs from Islam in that it often perpetuates the image of a white male as God, and while both claim to view race equally, passages of the Christian Bible have been used to justify slavery in America. Similarly to Dix (2002), Kusha (2009), argues that Islam appeals to Black men in prison because it recognizes and speaks against race based inequalities allowing men to align their realities and conditions with a spiritual framework.

Wohlrab-Sahr in *Conversion to Islam: Between Syncretism and Symbolic Battle*, uses the term "symbolic battle" to explain why people convert to Islam. Wohlrab-Sahr argues that because of "symbolic battle" (i.e. conflict between an individual and their social circumstances), conversion to Islam can be viewed as a means of articulating one's own disintegration within a particular social context. This realization allows for the symbolization of being able to distance oneself apart from the social context in which they exist. For example, becoming Muslim may allow a Black male prisoner to distinguish himself from other Black males within the prison and conceive of his situation in an alternate manner.

A popular culture explanation is developed in *God Behind Bars: Race, Religion, and Revenge*, when author Spear It (2007) argues that converting to Islam is increasingly popular among Black male prisoners because it offers an alternative culture that challenges the physical environment of prison. Through conversion prisoners are able to transform the violent, oppressive nature of prison's setting into a metaphysical gateway. While Spear It (2007) sees the ability of prisoners to construct and redefine their own space and personal narrative as a source of self-empowerment derived from Islamic

conversion, Wohlrab-Sahr contends it is a matter of recognition of one's situation. Kusha on the other hand is more concerned with the aspects of the Islamic faith that allow for a new way of thinking which conflicts with American penal ideologies and reveals its faults. For each explanation an underlying similarity is that Islamic conversion allows for prisoners to regain control over one's self, one's ideologies and one's situation. The current literature on explanations behind why Black male prisoners convert to Islam while incarcerated is a useful framework for my own research and can be used in comparison to my own findings.

### **Considering Religious Conversion among Inmates**

There is general agreement in academia that religious conversion among prisoners has positive effects on the inmates who convert. O'Connor and Perreyclear (2002) assert that religious conversion is a rehabilitative process for inmates. They identify a relationship between higher rates of religious conversion and a decrease in the number of inmates with infractions. Spalek and El-Hassan (2007) have similar findings and argue Islamic conversion has a positive effect on prisoner's behaviors and attitudes towards their prison stay. It results in improved behavior because Islam provides a moral framework. This moral framework mimics key Islamic principles; such as helping one another and the equality of races, which offers prisoners a mechanism for coping more positively, allowing them to rebuild their lives. For Maruna et al. (2006) religious conversion allows inmates to construct their own narrative and reconstruct their own social identity, similar to Spear It's (2007) explanation for why prisoners choose Islam. Maruna et al. (2006) goes further to argue that religious conversion among prisoners offers a lifelong moral framework that enables improved behaviors both inside and

outside of prison. Review of current literature demonstrates agreement that general religious conversion among prisoners is positive because it allows prisoners to better cope with their incarceration and can provide them with individual tools for self-restoration, which can be useful throughout processes of reentry. The presented literature also provides a framework for understanding the effects conversion may have on prisoners, which will be helpful for understanding more specifically, conversion to Islam.

### **Sociological Theories on Religious Conversion:**

Over time Sociologists have debated how to define religious conversion, who defines religious conversion, and how one should approach analysis of religious conversion. Rambo (1993) contends that conversion takes place when a person or group is connected to relationships within a religious community; one's immediate setting plays a role in one's sense of self, thoughts, feelings, and actions. Rambo considers how one's macro context, such as the larger structural institutions and systems in relation to one's micro context, such as the immediate world of a person contributes to both the availability of the factors that allow for an individual to religiously convert and the effects it has on the convert.

While Rambo focuses on socialization as a main factor that contributes to religious conversion, Snow and Machalek (1984) use a role theory to understand conversion as a transformation of an individual's role. They argue that not only does religious conversion mean the taking on of a new religion but with it there begins a transformation of one's role in society. Snow and Machalek argue that conversion involves complete change and transformation in how one operates, structures, and organizes their life (Snow and Machalek 1984). The four key properties that they use to

identify this change include, biographical reconstruction, adoption of a master attribution scheme, suspension of analogical reasoning, and embracement of a master role. They combine four key properties to argue that they allow for a shift from an “external to an internal locus of control,” a newly established system of perceiving one’s self and one’s social role.

In a more recent article, Gooren (2007) critiques conventional approaches to the study of religious conversion. Gooren extends Snow and Machalek’s (1984) role theory to argue that conversion can be viewed as a way to break away from one’s social role in an attempt to embrace new ones. Rather than viewing individual role transformation as an effect of conversion, Gooren views it as a causing factor to conversion as well. Gooren combines Rambo’s theories of socialization with Machalek and Snow’s role – learning theory and contends they are both heavily influenced by cultural patterns and social control. The presented literature helps to define conversion and what it means to people and will be used to approach conversion among Black male prisoners throughout this process. Conversion can be defined as a transformative, extensive process which involves a transformation of one’s social role, one’s conception of self, and one’s relationship to social institutions.

### **Methodology:**

To accurately and appropriately better understand why Black men in prison convert to Islam I conducted life-history style interviews with ten men who identify as Black American and who were formerly incarcerated and who converted to Islam while incarcerated. I conducted eight out of the ten interviews over the phone, the other two interviews I conducted in person. The ten men I interviewed were each of different ages

and had spent their time incarcerated at various different jails and prisons in various different states and cities. I have used pseudonyms for each of the individuals I interviewed and whose narratives I include in this study. All of the men I interviewed self-identify as Black or African American and their ages range from 22 years old to 76 years old. Majority of the men fell between the age ranges of 42 to 50. All of the men were from the United States. Four of the ten men were from New York City and spent majority of their incarceration time at prisons in Upstate, New York or in Pennsylvania. Two of the ten men were from Pennsylvania and were incarcerated in the state of Pennsylvania as well. Three of the men were from the state of Illinois and were incarcerated in a state prison there. The last participant was from the state of Mississippi and was incarcerated in a Mississippi state prison. Prison sentences for each man I interviewed varied and began with the shortest incarceration sentence being two and a half years and the longest incarceration sentence being 25 years. Majority of the men spent over 5 to 10 years incarcerated.

Three of the ten men identified as belonging to the Sunni sector of Islam, while one identified as belonging to a small sector known as the Black Muslims of Harlem, the rest did not identify with belonging to a specific sector of Islam.

These over the phone and in person, in-depth interviews serve as my main data from which I draw conclusions from. The main goal of my project is to investigate the different reasons or factors that contribute to a Black male prisoner's decision to convert to Islam. In speaking to individuals who underwent this religious transformation first hand while incarcerated, I will also be able to speak of the effects conversion has had on these individuals and their lives post incarceration.

To begin my interviews I started with reaching out to a family friend who was previously incarcerated and converted to Islam while in prison and who remains a practicing Muslim. It was useful beginning with someone I am personally connected with because I was able to get access to their network, which included other Black men who converted to Islam while incarcerated. Majority of my sample was found through ‘snowball’ sampling of my first interviewee. I was also able to connect with individuals through my own personal networks because a friend of mine has family who converted to Islam while incarcerated and I was able to get in contact with two participants based on that network. Lastly, through online research I reached out to a reentry organization that specifically works with Muslim men and is based in Chicago, Illinois. I connected with a coordinator from the program who then connected me with individuals who were willing to participate in an interview.

It is important to note that the sample size used for this research is significantly small and includes men who have had relatively successful processes of reentry and are at a point in their lives where they feel comfortable about discussing their experiences incarcerated and converting. I was only able to gain access to a limited network in order to get in contact with Black men who converted while incarcerated. These are men who have remained committed to Islam even after incarceration so their narratives speak heavily of the good Islam has brought to them because they are still practicing Muslims and identify as such. Also, the ten men that I interviewed were each incarcerated at different points in their lives, converted at different points in their incarceration time, and have been out of prison for different lengths of time which can affect the findings of my data. Another limitation of the sample for my research is that majority of the interviews



were conducted over the phone and while I was able to record the interviews, I was unable to personally meet them and observe their manners or appearances.

I developed a list of questions for the interviews which were asked to each participant. The life-history interviews consisted of a range of questions beginning with their incarceration, how and why they converted to Islam while incarcerated and their experiences after prison. Interviews also included questions regarding their age, where they are from, the year and the amount of time they were incarcerated, what facility they were in, what they were in prison for, how they were introduced to Islam within prison; how they feel conversion has affected their lives, and more (See Appendix 1). After transcribing and reviewing the content of the interviews, I was able to identify general patterns and themes that were common among the interviews. I decided to focus on the process of conversion and how it acted as a mechanism for managing prison time. I also decided to focus on the performance of gender in prisons and the ways in which Islam allowed the men to embody an alternative form of masculinity. Lastly, I focused on the ways in which Islam affected their transition back into society and contributed to their lives outside of prison.

## 2

### Doing Time:

#### Why they Convert to Islam while Incarcerated & Managing Imprisonment

*"America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered white - but the white attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color." – Malcom X, Letter from Mecca, April, 1964.*

Taj recalls that his lowest point throughout his nearly thirteen year prison sentence was when he was in a maximum security facility. Taj spent eleven months in a max facility and stated, "It felt like living under a dark cloud 24/7 and it plays with your spirit and psyche." Taj is articulating the "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1958) that he underwent while incarcerated. The effects of imprisonment for Taj extended beyond just the physical aspects of being isolated and confined but also included an attack on his psychological and emotional well-being. Taj searched for ways to get through all the idle time that came with being incarcerated. He began to read and study a lot and while incarcerated he received his first Quran. Taj had a hard time fully understanding the Quran and it was not until he was transferred to the maximum security facility that he picked up the Quran again and he started connecting with and understanding its content more. As a result, Taj became more curious to learn about Islam and decided to attend a meeting ran by the Muslim men in the prison. Taj began joining them regularly and attended a lot of classes and Iman sessions that taught him about Islam and the prophet. Taj had been incarcerated six years and had been studying Islam for a couple of years before he decided to convert. Taj considers studying and interacting with the Muslim men

in the prison as the reasons he became interested in Islam. Attending the classes allowed Taj to become acquainted with the Muslim men in the prison as he grew attracted to the discipline and solidarity they displayed.

Taj discusses how his intellectual and spiritual journeys prompted his interest and eventual conversion to Islam. It answered questions he always had that no other religion he had studied could answer. For Taj, accepting Islam was a positive process because he noticed an internal transformation that allowed him to re-think his circumstances and find content with himself and with his prison sentence. The narration of Taj's introduction and eventual conversion to Islam demonstrates the extensive process one undergoes when choosing to convert to a new religion. The isolated and confined conditions of imprisonment leave incarcerated individuals with extensive amounts of idle time. Taj utilized his idle time in a manner that led him to become curious about Islam, which then led him to interact with the Muslim men already present in the prison. Taj's experience and narration of his experience is one process of conversion that will be explored in this chapter.

The men I interviewed each provided details into their own individual experience in prison and how they came to the decision to convert to Islam while incarcerated. During our interviews, each man described how they became introduced to Islam, their experiences converting, and the ways in which conversion changed their behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of themselves, of others, and of their incarceration. Islamic conversion provided incarcerated Black men with a way to effectively manage and get through their prison sentences as well as form new social roles and abandon previous ones. Conversion caused a radical shifting in the men's way of life because of its ability

to provide them with a new moral framework, one that informed their approaches to social interactions with others.

This chapter will further investigate the experiences of Black men who converted to Islam while incarcerated in order to understand why they are choosing to convert and how they are becoming introduced to Islam. Secondly, this chapter will analyze the narratives of the men in order to understand Islam as a mechanism by which men take control over their lives despite their status as inmates. In doing this, we will discover what about Islam appeals to incarcerated Black men and how and in what ways this affects their prison experience.

When asking the participants why they converted to Islam they each described an individual, intellectual process geared through the search for spiritual guidance. Conversion for some men was articulated as an intellectual journey that required them to read and study literature on multiple religions, including Christianity and Judaism. They describe this intellectual and spiritual journey as what led them to finding, and eventually accepting Islam. Taj, whose conversion experience I introduced earlier, expresses the effects conversion to Islam had on him when he states:

“It was a great process accepting Islam, it was beautiful, almost like a transformation, like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. You start slowly changing and doing different things, your thought process changes. I wasn’t filled with so much anger and hatred, I started loving life again. When you are incarcerated it is easy to forget about the little stuff, when I converted to Islam I began seeing and admiring the little things in life.”

Taj was able to narrate his experience differently through a voice Islam provided him with. For Taj, finding and accepting Islam while incarcerated was contingent on his intellectual journey, which could also be understood as a journey of discovering the self. This intellectual journey began when he decided to engage in intense studying where he

critically thought and reflected on the world around him and on different religions. Prison leaves inmates with extensive amounts of idle time and with little to no options for how to get through the time or ways to make it more productive. Taj expressed that incarceration took a huge toll on him mentally and emotionally. He began reading and studying religion as a way to make use of his idle time and as a way of trying to answer lingering questions he had. In the process of trying to fulfill time, Taj began learning and reading about Islam. Taj made the decision to connect with the other Muslim men in the prison leading to his decision to fully convert to Islam. His decision to convert should be looked at as the moment in which he decided to regain control over his life and his thoughts. It should also be considered as a moment in which he was able to change the narrative of his story. He knew that he was not content with his life and being in prison heightened and intensified those feelings. He was figuring out how to best navigate and manage his prison sentence.

Prison is a space that limits and confines one's ability to think for their selves or to question the circumstances and realities around them because of the rigid schedules the inmates must adhere to and the disciplinary consequences they may face if they should do or think differently than they are told to. Within the walls of the prison, Taj was no longer an individual person, rather he was another inmate numbered and processed like everyone else. Taj's intellectual exploration and his conversion to Islam serve as examples to the way in which men in prison are able to take control over their situation just by choosing how to spend their time in there.

Through Islam, he also gained the ability to be the narrator of his own story and further consider where the rest of his story would go. Conversion specifically was also a

moment when Taj decided how to lead his life and who should be the guide of it. For example, instead of viewing his life in prison as being ruled by the prison officials and being dominated by the standard rules of the prison, he lived and behaved in accordance to the Quran and based on his relationship with God. Islam provided Taj with the ability to view life through a different lens and articulate a new narrative of self, based on his identify as a Muslim man. It also allowed him to become his own self critic and become more aware of his behaviors, his emotions, and his circumstances. Conversion to Islam allowed Taj to reverse or better deal with the negative psychological and emotional effects prison life was having on him. What was most important for Taj was recognizing a visible change in him-self and in regards to his feelings toward his incarceration. This realization that an internal transformation had occurred was crucial for Taj during his incarceration because it helped him navigate the emotional and psychological tolls imprisonment had on him as an individual as it offered him a sense of relief.

A second interviewee, Jelani who converted to Islam in 2002, at the age of 29 when he was about nine years into his 20 year prison sentence, also describes his conversion to Islam as a transformation of his sense of self. Jelani and almost all other participants described conversion to Islam as an answering to questions they always had and a reaffirmation to the values and beliefs they felt right leading their lives by. Overall, the interviews conducted confirmed that religious conversion while incarcerated was a positive experience because of its life changing effects and particularly because of its ability to alleviate the struggles one faces while incarcerated. It offered the men converting a mechanism by which they could get through their prison sentence, occupy idle time, and focus on transforming themselves as individuals. The act of being able to

narrate their own stories also helped to point to the influence Islam had on their lives while incarcerated and on the formation of their sense of self. For every man interviewed, they speak of conversion as a life changing experience, particularly because of its ability to provide them with a second chance at leading a life that felt productive to them. Islam allowed men to see past their incarceration and to develop hopes and aspirations for life after prison as well as work towards achieving a better relationship with God.

Sociologists, Snow and Machalek, discuss religious conversion as more than just the taking on of a new religion but also as a transformation of one's role in society (Snow and Machalek 1984). The men incarcerated converting to Islam discuss conversion as a transformation beyond just the shift in their understandings of their role in society, but also as a framework for how to conduct themselves, how to interact with others, and how to navigate difficult situations or circumstances. The process of conversion gave incarcerated Black men the chance to transform how they thought about themselves as they gained new perceptions of self, of their incarceration, and of their lives post incarceration. Islam also provided them with a lens for which to narrate their experiences and discuss the transformations of self they underwent.

Gooren (2007) discusses religious conversion as a process in which one breaks away from previous social roles in order to embrace new ones. This is a meaningful framework for understanding Islamic conversion among incarcerated Black men because they associate conversion to Islam with a change in their behavior and attitude toward themselves, their circumstances, and others around them. The men disassociate themselves from aggressiveness, violence, deviance, and engagement in criminal activity because Islam offers them a framework that allows them to live their lives with peace,

humility, discipline, and positivity. This framework based on the principles of Islam, acts as an outline for how Muslims should live and emphasizes the necessity to present oneself in a way that is respectable to others and to the world around them. Conversion to Islam is not only a means of embracing new social roles, but it is also a way in which incarcerated men take on new approaches to their daily lives and relationships. Jamal, an interviewee who converted to Islam when he was 27 years old, after having served time in and out of prison since he was 17, stated:

“Islam helped me realize you don’t have the answer for everything you do, Islam made me more conscious about the things I do. You need something to believe in, you reap what you sow. Islam slowed me down a lot. I used to be arrogant and have a bad temper now I am conscious about my actions and the consequences. Islam humbled me.”

Jamal describes conversion to Islam as a moment of realization. He mainly associates converting to Islam with his ability to become more critical of his behaviors and attitudes and to change them in a way he perceives to be positive. Conversion to Islam also served as a process of self–reflection for Jamal because he was able to think about his past behaviors and the emotions he used to react to particular situations or people. Having something greater to believe in, something more than just himself or his reality as an incarcerated individual contributed to him gaining a new mind-set, one he perceived to be more practical and essential to his reality. Jamal made a commitment to Islam, something that he cared for and believed in. Islam provided him with a certain level of agency and responsibility and it was his job to find a balance between the two. Through conversion to Islam, Jamal gained a new sense of responsibility to a God and to Islam, in order to fulfill his responsibilities as a Muslim man he had to reclaim a sense of responsibility and accountability over himself and his actions. Deepening his relationship with God and



Islam required Jamal to deepen his relationship with himself in a more critically profound and reflective way.

Jamal juxtaposes his previous behavior from his behavior after converting as he disassociates from behaviors fueled by anger and embraces a new approach to his conduct, which he bases off of key principles associated with Islam, particularly humility and peacefulness. When Jamal states that “Islam slowed me down,” what he is saying is that Islam provided him with a lens for which to view, criticize, and understand his own behaviors and attitudes, allowing him to feel a certain level of control over his life and his decision making. It is a regaining of control over one’s life and over the thoughts of ones future. Jamal associates conversion to Islam as a moment in which he let go of previous behaviors and chose to embrace new ways of behaving and viewing himself. Islam exposed him to an alternate way for how one can communicate and conduct themselves. Many of the men I interviewed spoke strongly about the role Islam itself played in reshaping their lives and their approaches toward living it.

### **Conversion as a Rational Choice & Resistance to Social Control**

During our interview, Taj discussed his own sentiments on conversion to Islam among incarcerated men and what he perceives Islam offers an individual, stating:

“Incarcerated brothers choose Islam because it’s not always an emotional thing, it’s an intellectual and rational standpoint, how to think reason and speak and not feel good for moments, not an emotional drawl its teaching you how to think and how to act, teaching you how to control yourself and your anger – its ok to be angry but what you do with your anger is another thing – Islam teaches you discipline, teaches you the proper care to other human beings.”

For Taj, conversion to Islam is greater than just an outlet to express oneself emotionally, it is a guide for how one should think and act. Taj and many other men who were

interviewed describe the changes Islam had on their lives, particularly on the changes it caused in their behavior and attitudes. They repeatedly identify converting to Islam as the moment in which they broke away from previous behaviors that they view were formerly dominated and controlled by their emotional state. Islam provides them with a rational framework for how to conduct their selves based on the principles that are in accordance with God and the Islamic faith. This transformation in their behaviors and attitudes stems from their ability to make decisions and respond to situations based not on emotions, such as anger and pride, but instead based on the core principles and values Islam has instilled in them. In other words, Islam allows Taj to think rationally and make decisions based solely on that as opposed to acting in response to what he is going through or feeling emotionally. This is significant because within the confines of prison men are unable to express themselves emotionally and are often left to deal with or suppress their feelings on their own. Islam provided Taj and other men who have converted with a new framework for which to understand and base their behaviors and actions off of, which did not require their individual emotional influence but instead were in accordance with the principles of Islam. The process of conversion was simultaneously a process in which men let go of particular controls of their life and placed it in their belief and commitment to God but also gained particular levels of control over their life because of their new found sense of self.

Islam and the process of accepting it is also a moment in which an individual accepts their own form of self-discipline and control based off of their personal relationship with God as opposed to the institution they are confined within. Islamic conversion through this viewpoint is liberation from other forms of social control to an

individualized accepting of self-discipline and refrainment from previous behaviors or attitudes. In prison, the incarcerated individuals must adhere to very rigid and specific guidelines for how to behave, where to stand, how to walk through the halls, etc. They are constantly being told what to do and how to do it; it is a space dominated by discipline and requires extensive amounts of self-control. Islam provided Taj, Jelani, and Jamal with a framework for how to regain control over their own predicaments, attitudes, and conduct, while still adhering to the demands of the prison. They looked for discipline but rejected the idea of having to be fully controlled or surveilled by the institution in which they were contained and bounded to. Islam provided them with a new found sense that they could have agency over their actions and attitudes and define discipline for their selves based on the authority of a God and faith they believed in and had a relationship with as opposed to an institution they were confined in. It also helped them become able to articulate their experiences of managing prison and coping with the conditions.

Spalek and El-Hassan (2007) have similar findings in their own research on Islamic conversion among incarcerated men as they contend that Islam provides men with a moral framework, one that mimics key Islamic principles, such as learning to help one another and an emphasis on humanity and equality. This moral framework, based on the principles and values of Islam is significant for their lives in prison because it allows them to gain some level of control over their own behaviors through self-control techniques. It is also a resistance to the dominant forces of social control that are present within prisons. Of the men interviewed, Taj and many others attribute converting to Islam as a process in which they learned to control and deal with the emotional toll imprisonment had on them in order to see past their circumstances and provide them with

the ability to make rational choices when it came to their future behaviors and attitudes. In many ways conversion to Islam is essentially acting as a guide for how incarcerated Black men could get through and survive prison while refraining from engaging in any deviant or obstructive behavior. Even more importantly, conversion to Islam acts as a way in which Black men can undergo transformations of the self in ways that are meaningful to the men converting.

### **Racial Segregation in Prisons and the Adoption of a Color Blind Rhetoric among Black Male Converts**

Of the men interviewed for this study, all of them used a color blind politicization and rhetoric when discussing their conversion to Islam and the brotherhood of Muslim men in general. Going into my research I suspected that race would be a huge factor in an African American man's decision to convert to Islam while incarcerated. The racial order and segregation within the prison is reflective of the existing racial segregation in general society. Goodman's research (2008) demonstrates the way in which institutional practices and policies racially segregate inmates in California's prison reception centers. The racial disproportionately of arrest and incarceration rates is clearly visible within prisons and affects the social landscape of the institution. Within the prison inmates are either institutionally segregated by race or self-segregate based on different racial and ethnic groups and gang affiliations. Within the confined and isolating perimeters of the prison, inmates are exposed to an extremely racially segregated atmosphere.

According to the Federal Bureau of Prison statistics, ([bop.gov/about/statistics](http://bop.gov/about/statistics)) approximately 37.8% of the prison population as of December, 2015, identify as Black in comparison to 58.8% of incarcerated individuals who identify as white. Together, African

American and Hispanic inmates make up 58% of the prison population in the United States. As of 2001, one in six Black men had been incarcerated. These statistics demonstrate that there are a disproportionate number of Black men incarcerated in the United States in comparison to any other racial or ethnic group. In his work on mass incarceration and its correlation to the perpetuation of racial and class inequalities, Western (2006) articulates the increasing disproportionality of incarceration rates among Black men, primarily those from low socio-economic backgrounds. In 1997, it was reported that more than 90 percent of prisoners were men, and incarceration rates for Blacks were about eight times higher than those for whites (Blumstein and Beck 1999, Western 2006). Western contends that due to the higher rates of incarceration among Blacks in the 1990s, whole segments of the African American population have been incarcerated at some point in their life and this has had larger detrimental effects on American society and the labor market. Western (2006) concludes that mass incarceration has pervasive effects on society as a whole. These effects have had a disproportionate impact on African American lives and communities to the extent that incarceration has emerged as a new stage in the life course of young, poor, Black men. This is significant to note because it reveals the effects incarceration has not only on individuals, but on communities and society as a whole. It also points to the reality of racial and class based inequalities, which are continuing to be manufactured and perpetuated through systems and processes of incarceration.

Similarly, Wacquant's (2001) research focuses heavily on the hyper-segregation of the prison and its relationship to the urban ghetto. Wacquant argues that the primary identity marker within the prison is race and it influences nearly every aspect of daily life.

He asserts that prison is a space that is heavily segregated and defined by racial and ethnic lines of difference which work to create and perpetuate divisions and friction among the inmates. For Wacquant, there is little to no room for interracial relationships or interactions among the inmates as he argues that most altercations within the prison have shifted from a dynamic between inmates in opposition to prison officials to issues among different ethnic and racial groups among the inmates themselves. This distinction is important to note as Wacquant is identifying a shift in the order of the prison, as he argues that the inmate's lack of solidarity amongst each other is a result of the intense racial and ethnic structuring of prison life, to which they find themselves in opposition with each other, more so than in opposition with prison officials.

Based on the interviews I conducted, the men's narratives of their individual experiences work to challenge and expand the findings and arguments of Wacquant. For them, religion was a primary marker of distinction among the inmates, particularly among the Muslim inmates who were made up of all different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Islamic conversion acted as a resistance to the hyper racialized and segregated reality of the prison and allowed inmates to share a commonality. Conversion to Islam and the solidarity that it fosters is a reaction against the racial structure of the prison, one that is anticipated in Wacquant's own research and findings. Also, as Wacquant suggests, the inmates are not challenging the guard's, rather they are challenging the behaviors of the other inmates and social groups that form in the prison. The Muslim men in the prison adapt certain behaviors and present themselves in a manner that allows them to separate and distinguish themselves from the other inmates,

particularly those in gangs, which are predominantly formed by racial and ethnic lines of difference.

This section will further explore the narratives and first-hand accounts of Black men who converted to Islam while incarcerated to demonstrate the ability Islamic conversion has to act as a resistance to the prison's racial order. Also, it will explore Islamic conversion's ability to foster solidarity amongst inmates, one that is not in opposition to prison officials, but instead, allows for peaceful communication and interaction between the two. This section will also analyze the color-blind rhetoric used by the men when discussing their conversion to Islam and their observations of the Muslim men in the prison. The men view conversion to Islam as a process that many individuals choose to undergo while incarcerated regardless of their racial or ethnic background. As a result, a variety of men in prison are choosing to convert to Islam regardless of their race and consequently, the groups of Muslim men that form within the prison are made up of men from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The men interviewed expressed that Islam is based on principles of humanity and equality and reject the idea that one's race or skin color plays a significant role in one's decision to convert or one's commitment to Islam. Their narratives express that religious markers diminish the significance of racial markers within the context of prison. The color blind rhetoric used by the men interviewed displays a resistance to the racial order through their emphasis on humanity and a refraining from violence and race based inequalities. The use of color blind rhetoric has been heavily critiqued and is most often associated with white people's attempt at maintaining white supremacy and 'color-coded' inequalities through the use of a language that suggests they do not see color and operate

insisting that race is no longer pertinent (Bonilla-Silva, 1962). The critique of color blind rhetoric is not particularly useful within the context of this research because the men who are utilizing it are Black and are operating under a system dominated by white supremacy, which is only heightened under conditions of imprisonment. This research does not look to criticize the colorblind approach and rhetoric used by the men interviewed in their understandings and experiences of incarceration and conversion to Islam. It does however seek to understand how or why Black men converting to Islam while incarcerated have adopted a color blind approach to considering and narrating their conversion and their identity as Muslim men. This section will further analyze the colorblind rhetoric that was used in every interview in order to understand it as a resistance to the existing racial structures both in and outside of prison.

During our interview, when asked about the different people he observed choosing to convert to Islam in prison, Malachi, age 41, stated, “There were always a lot of Muslims in the prisons I was in. There were white Muslims, Asian Muslims, all races really. In America there are a lot of African American Muslims because they make up majority of the people in prison, they make up majority of Muslims in prison.” Malachi’s observations point to the disproportionate number of Black men incarcerated in comparison to other racial groups and challenges the misconception that conversion to Islam among inmates is solely a phenomenon among Black men. Men from all different races are choosing to convert to Islam while incarcerated and this should be understood as resistance to the hyper segregation and racial order within the institution because it breaks down the existing racial structure of the prison and allows for the development of



a group of men who share a common religious identification as opposed to a shared racial or ethnic identification.

Another interviewee, Jermaine responded to the same question stating, “There was a mixture of races, Blacks, Hispanic Whites, all different races of people converting or identifying as Muslim. It wasn’t like California prisons, wasn’t as segregated. We were brothers regardless of race, it’s about humanity.” Jermaine was incarcerated in a prison in Illinois and also identified Islam as a major identity marker and did not associate the brotherhood of Muslim men in the prison with a particular racial group. Jermaine’s narrative emphasizes his and other Muslim men’s views toward race as not being a determinate factor in how they choose to view people or who they interact with. As a Muslim man, who you associate with is based more on a person’s religious identification or presentation of self as opposed to the color of their skin. In prison, Black, Muslim men were able to interact with a variety of men from different racial and ethnic backgrounds because they shared a common understanding and identification.

In a third interview, Jamal, 45, also described the dynamics of race and Islam within the prisons he served time in when he stated:

“There were Black, Hispanic, and White Muslims, even Africans from overseas. The Department of Correction is racially divided. Blacks hang with blacks Whites hang with Whites. When in Somerset, Pennsylvania serving a nine year bid, the prison was more racially integrated. I also did four years in New York which was racially segregated; they kept you separate it was way more diverse in Pennsylvania.”

Jamal was well aware of the racial segregation within the prison and the ways in which it was encouraged by the prison officials. He was also able to identify a difference in the racial order and dynamics between the two prisons he served time in. The social groups that formed within the prison were very much based on racial identity. However, for

Jamal when serving time in a Pennsylvania prison he noticed that there was far more diversity amongst the general inmate population in regards to race in comparison to the New York State prison he had served time in, which he identified as being a lot more separated by racial divisions. Jamal is observing that the severity of racial segregation in prison is in some ways connected to the population percentages and the racial and ethnic make-up of that facility. However, in both prisons Jamal identified Muslims who belonged to many different races. Despite the intensity of the racial order within the prison, Islam acted as a form of resistance against the existing racial segregation that was both enforced and normalized within the institution.

Rambo's socialization theories (1993) and Machalek and Snow's role – learning theory (1984) presented in the literature on religious conversion contends that the decision to convert is heavily influenced by larger patterns of social control and culture. The findings of the interviews conducted support the theories articulated in Rambo and Snow and Machalek's research. The inmates converting to Islam were on some level informed by the larger structural institution of the prison system in terms of the racial segregation and the isolation. The inmate's decision to convert is also on some level influenced by their individual micro contexts, in terms of their immediate social interactions and relations with other inmates, and their perceptions of other inmate's behavior and presentations of self. It also may have helped to inform their color blind understanding and acceptance of Islam because they were in a space in which a diverse set of men were converting. This allowed them to be able to expand their immediate network and interact and form bonds with men from other races.

**Appeal to Islam: Understanding Why Incarcerated Black Men are Choosing Islam**

Islam is perhaps greater than just an individual change in behavior and attitude; it is also a mechanism used by inmates to find bits of solace in an incredibly isolated, segregated, and violent place. Dix's (1997, 2002) research looks at the internal factors and social relations among the inmates to conclude that race and inmate culture have influenced the development of Islam in America's penal system. In her own research, Dix (1997, 2002) focuses specifically on conversion to Islam and argues that it has become a popular non-traditional religion among African Americans in and outside of prisons because it offers messages of equality and speaks against injustices similar to those imposed upon Blacks living in the United States. As Black men in prison continue to turn to Islam, a culture within the prison is developed and influences other men to convert to Islam as well.

The men interviewed for this research did describe a particular culture in the prison, one in which men either continue to engage in deviant or criminalized behavior, which includes getting in or maintaining involvement with street gangs, while many other men religiously convert in order to achieve changed behavior or to disassociate themselves from the general inmate population. Each man that I interviewed discussed their struggle with religion and decided to study multiple religions in order to better situate their selves and their spiritual beliefs. Through this search many of the men turned to Islam because, as Dix (1997, 2002) contended, it offered them a message of equality, one in which they were unable to find in other religions, particularly in Christianity or Judaism. The key principles of Islam and the messages of equality that it offered helped to perpetuate a culture among the Muslim men in the prison that became visible amongst the entire inmate population. However, some of the men explained that the Muslims

within the prison separated themselves in terms of presentation and behavior from every other social or religious group within the prison, including other religious groups. An example of this is articulated in my interview with Jelani, 42, who stated:

No, conversion to Islam wasn't so popular in the prison I was in; it was more men converting to Christianity, overall there were more Christians in the institution. I would say ten Christians for every two Muslims. Even though the Muslims were the minority in the prison, the behavior of the Muslims made them stand out even more than Christians. Because they walked the walk and talked the talk. Their actions and their words were the same. The Christians inside would preach one thing but their actions didn't follow."

In his narrative, Jelani states that although conversion to Christianity was more popular in the prison he was in, the group of Muslim men that did exist separated themselves through more than just a different religious identification but through their actions and behaviors as well. For Jelani, Islam appealed to him more because of the consistency and commitment he observed from the Muslim men in the prison. Jelani discussed that although many men in the prison claimed to have converted to Christianity, their actions and behaviors within the prison towards the other inmates and prison officials contradicted the principles and teachings of their religion. The Muslim men in the prison were reliable in their conduct and interactions with others. All ten of the men I interviewed, described conversion to Islam as more than just a religious following but also as a turning point for the way in which they act, think, and present themselves. Jelani came to associate the Muslim men in the prison as "real" and having traits he too would want to embody and remain true to. For Jelani being "real" meant acting and presenting oneself in a reliable and consistent manner, a manner that was in accordance with the faith one claimed to follow. What Jelani and many of the other interviewees were describing was a particular culture that evolved from the development

and prevalence of Islam in prisons and among inmates. For the inmates in the facility and the prison officials, the culture that emerged among the Muslim inmates was visible. Islam not only informed the Muslim men on how to present themselves and interact with their fellow Muslims but it also provided a framework for how they would interact with prison officials and other inmates and they based all interactions on the principles of respect and mutuality for everyone. This is significant because these principles have incarcerated men acting against the racial and power structures of the institution.

Wohlrab-Sahr (1999) develops the term, “symbolic battle” for understanding conversion to Islam as a means of articulating one’s own disintegration within a particular social context. This realization allows for the symbolic battle of being able to distance oneself apart from their existing social context. Based on the interviews conducted, the men do view conversion to Islam as a way in which they were able to distinguish themselves apart from the prison and apart from the other non-Muslim inmates. Becoming Muslim allows Black male prisoners to disassociate themselves from the conduct of other Black men and to conceive of their situation in a different manner. Black men converting to Islam in the prison are able to establish their selves as individuals who have some level of control and discipline over their actions and attitudes even within the confines of prison. Becoming Muslim in prison also meant becoming a part of a collective identity, one that they perceive to be positive. In our interview, Taj 39, stated:

“People are attracted to Islam especially those locked up because it is visual in the prison. They see a group of brothers that’s together and they stand for something. They see the strength in them how they conduct themselves, how the guards talk to them (guards talked to Muslims differently than they talk to other inmate). We are respectful and do what we are supposed to do so guards know that and like that. Brothers see the discipline and

the love and solidarity they have for one another. Love and unity is what attracts brothers to Islam – you're in a room full of darkness, and you see the light from the Muslim group of brothers who exert positive energy. They exert a different kind of strength, their presentation of themselves is different, they respect everybody.”

Taj also speaks to the visibility and influence of the Muslim men in the prison; their presence and mannerisms could not be ignored in the confined space of the penitentiary. Taj expressed an appeal to the presented unity and solidarity amongst the Muslim men and their ability to come together in a space so heavily confined, divided and isolated. This collective and perceived culture that emerged among the Muslim men within the prison became admirable to some of the Non-Muslim inmates. It helped perpetuate the development and prevalence of Islam within the prison as it began to appeal to other inmates and even encouraged their interest in Islam.

Through their mannerisms, performance, and unity, the Muslim men in the prison offer an alternative culture that challenges the physical conditions and environment of the prison. The conditions and arrangement of prison life is situated in a way that emphasizes isolation of inmates, division among inmates, and confinement, both physically and mentally. The process of converting and accepting Islam challenges these conditions because it allows men to form solidarity amongst each other, resisting the prescribed divisions of the prison. It also allows men to develop a relationship with God, which helps men deal with and escape the confinement of imprisonment. Lastly, it challenges the isolating conditions of the prison as men begin to socially interact and bond with one another through discussions, prayer sessions, and lessons all connected to Islam.

This finding is supportive of Spear It's (2007) research which offers a very similar alternative culture argument for understanding the appeal Islam has to Black male

prisoners. Spear It (2007) views Islamic conversion within the prison as a metaphysical getaway as inmates converting are able to transform the violent and oppressive nature of the prison into one of unity and peace. While the men acknowledged and spoke of the positive, transformative effects conversion and the presence of Islam has on challenging the conditions of imprisonment, Spear It has a much more idealistic view than the men I interviewed disclosed. The men discussed that while Islam served as a mechanism for challenging the conditions of imprisonment and re-shaping their individual experiences in a positive way, they were still met with the forces of social control that dominate prison life. Despite the individual changes of one's behavior and attitudes, the violent and oppressive nature of prison still persists because the inmates are in a space where they hold little to no power and are constantly subjected to the realities of being an inmate in prison.

While Muslim men do cultivate and maintain an alternate culture in the prison, they are also met with other cultures (i.e. gang culture) which continue to persist and are maintained by other Non-Muslim inmates. Conversion to Islam among incarcerated individuals should be looked at as a mechanism in which men are able to alleviate the "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1958). The culture developed among Muslim men does have positive effects on the overall conditions of imprisonment. However, conversion to Islam and the presence of Islam within prisons does not fully transform the prison into a space of peace and unity because the alternate culture that is formed among the Muslim men is still operating against the dominant culture of the prison. Muslim men in prison still have to struggle with the reality and oppressive conditions of imprisonment as well as with the racial and power structures that are inherent to the institution. Despite the

debate in the literature on why Black male prisoners convert to Islam, each explanation views Islamic conversion as a means in which prisoners are able to regain control over one's self, one's way of thinking, and one's circumstances. The narration of their experiences serves as a prime example for how they were able to regain control, simply through the ability to tell their own stories in a way that was meaningful to them.

### **Conversion Narratives as a Regaining of Self Control**

The men interviewed expressed conversion as a positive transformation of themselves and of their lives because they were able to develop a direct relationship with God and were given clarity through the studying and acceptance of Islam. The men emphasized their relationship and conversations with God and spoke about gaining control of their lives through the act of giving control and authority to God. In prison, the men knew that they were being controlled and surveilled by the conditions and rules of the facility, which were heavily enforced by prison officials. Converting to Islam was a moment in which they were able to make a choice and give control and authority over to a God they had developed a relationship with and a deep belief in. Islam also provided them with a framework for how to govern their selves, allowing them to regain some level of control over their own actions and attitudes. For many of the men interviewed it was not a matter of abandoning all forms of control or discipline, rather it was a matter of who was in control and having the agency to decide for oneself and give authority to a chosen entity, in this case to God.

During our interview, Samir, 72, stated, "Islam saved my life, Islam taught me to be truthful and to always ask your maker and thank him for all the time he has given you. I smile because I am saved and I know it is all because of god. Islam is the common sense



religion.” Samir attributes his development of a relationship with God as the turning point in his life. He also perceives the good things that have come into his life after converting to Islam as blessings from God and as a direct result of his conversion and commitment to Islam. This suggests that conversion to Islam is more than just a regaining of control over one’s life because it also involves them giving up a level of control and authority over their own lives and circumstances and placing it in their faith and commitment to Islam and God. In another interview, Jelani, 42, spoke of a different form of control that he gained after converting to Islam, stating:

“Christianity teaches you to turn the other cheek, Islam teaches you that you have the right to defend yourself but it would be more pleasing to God to be more forgiving. But Islam gave me the option to make that choice for myself. I had the choice to forgive based on my relationship and conversations with God. I was strongly against having to be forced to turn the other cheek.”

Throughout his interview Jelani drew comparisons between Islam and Christianity because he was raised in a Baptist household and felt as if Christianity was forced upon him. Jelani expresses that Islam offered him a direct relationship with God and offered him the ability to have control over his actions. Through communication with God, Jelani was able to take control over his life in a way he had never been able to prior to his conversion to Islam. The freedom of choice in his actions and reactions to other people and things around him was a sense of liberation and control, which he gained through acceptance of Islam. The ability to make choices for ones’ self, especially on how one reacts or feels based on a private relationship with God is a resistance to the oppressive conditions of incarceration and a reclaiming of agency over ones choices in a space with deters any sense of personal agency or choice.

Dix's (1997, 2002) research suggests that many African American men in and outside of prison are turning to Islam, a non-traditional religion because of its emphasis on equality and justice. Dix also suggests that Black men reject Christianity because of it being historically used to justify slavery and the forced conversion many African slaves underwent. Jelani's own rejection of Christianity and decision to accept Islam was influenced by the messages of equality and of social justice that are found in key Islamic principles. He also was familiar with Christianity and based his decision off of his previous experiences growing up in a Baptist church, where he said he observed a lack of consistency between what Christians around him said they did and how they actually led their lives. Jelani also noticed this inconsistency among the Christian inmates in the prison who would only attend church on Sunday's but would lead sinful lives every other day of the week. In an extremely restrictive and oppressive place and as a Black man, it makes sense why Jelani would reject Christianity in acceptance of Islam, which emphasizes equality, justice, and freedom for everyone. Jelani was attracted to Islam because he was exposed to the positive effects conversion to Islam can have on other inmates like himself. Islam provided Jelani with the opportunity to engage in the process of re-narrating the self, in an effort to distinguish himself from his previous identity as a Christian.

### **Conversion Narratives as a Means of Managing Prison Time**

Examining conversion to Islam among incarcerated Black men and looking into the explanations for why they choose to convert to Islam in conversation with the existing literature, challenges and expands our (mis)conceptions of prison life and how people manage prison time. This section will further discuss the (mis)conceptions of prison life

and managing prison time through analysis of popular research on the subject (Goffman, 1961, Sykes, 1958) While conversion to Islam among Black men is an individual process, which results in a transformation of the self and of one's life and outlook, it is also based on the formation of a collective identity. The men interviewed immediately speak of their initial encounter with Islam via their witnessing of Muslim men in the prison. The visibility of the performance and presentation of the Muslim men in the prison and the culture they generate are what attract the inmates to learning more about Islam and prompt them to interact with them.

In the context of prison, researchers and sociologists tend to look at the oppressive conditions of imprisonment and the ways in which prison strips individuals of their sense of self and of their previous social roles (Goffman 1961, Sykes 1958, Foucault, 1975). Examining why African American men convert to Islam while incarcerated works to support, challenge, and expand previous arguments, which suggest that being incarcerated means a loss of self, of social roles, and estrangement from past identities (Goffman, 1961). Through interviews with Black men who have converted, their narratives reveal that incarceration can lead to a regaining or redefining of self and of one's social roles that extends beyond their incarceration. Conversion to Islam does involve an abandonment of one's previous identities and roles, but also includes a production of new ones. Not only are men undergoing "degradations of the self" (Goffman, 1961), they are also producing new identities and understandings of one's self. This section of the chapter will look at conversion to Islam amongst incarcerated Black men as a means of coping with the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes, 1958) and as a reclaiming of one's self in unity with the other Muslim men in the prison.

The men interviewed described their experiences incarcerated as isolating, depressing, and rigid. Within the confines and isolation of imprisonment, these men are forced to rid themselves of their previous social roles and for the most part their engagement in criminal activity as well. While in prison the men have to follow a rigid schedule and are constantly having to adhere to the rules and pleas of the prison and the correctional officers, but are also allotted massive amounts of time in which they have nothing to do (Foucault, 1975). When asked to tell me about his experience while incarcerated, Tramel, 37, stated, "Incarceration is tough, it's all a mental game. I was isolated, confined, I was tested." Another participant responded stating:

"Prison was a unique experience within itself, it's an environment where the strong survive. You have to either be a "lion or a sheep sort of speak." I grew up hanging out in the streets so adapting to jail wasn't hard. The hardest thing for me was being away from family or freedom. I didn't have a problem in the sense of worrying about the physical aspects, in the sense of protecting myself. I was good on that. (Jelani,42)."

The men spoke of their incarceration experiences in terms of having to protect oneself, while still having to navigate and survive the isolating conditions. Prison was an environment in which the men had to constantly be guarded and maintain their own mental and physical façade that displayed their strength. Jelani compared prison to the streets he grew up on and felt that because of how or where he was raised he felt prepared to deal with prison and the other inmates. For Jelani and Tramel, prison meant being estranged from the outside world and having to navigate the conditions and environment of the prison. Tramel spoke about the mental aspects of incarceration, while Jelani spoke about the physical components and attributed it to having to constantly defend oneself physically. While all men interviewed described being incarcerated as a tough

experience, they each spoke of their focus on having to get through it and survive it. This section will further look at conversion to Islam as a means of getting through the experience of incarceration.

Current literature on prisons and how incarcerated individuals manage their time and deal with the psychological and emotional toll of imprisonment discusses the possibility for psychological or physical methods used to escape the realities of prison life, but do not consider religious conversion as a spiritual or intellectual escape from prison and its deprivations (Sykes 1958). Sykes argues few men are actually successful in using psychological or physical methods to escape the deprivations experienced while incarcerated. Sykes suggests that inmates could attempt to overthrow or change the organization and governing structures of the institution through acts of revolt or rebellion. Prisoners may also write letters or be in contact with someone from the outside world to communicate their complaints or issues with the conditions of imprisonment. Sykes concludes that the pains of imprisonment cannot be completely eliminated and an inmate must inevitably endure the conditions and length of his sentence. Inmates can find means of mitigating these pains through social interaction with other inmates. Sykes identifies two ways in which inmates can utilize social interactions with other inmates to manage prison time. Men can bind themselves to other inmates and foster solidarity between them and their shared experience incarcerated in opposition to the prison officials. Other men may choose to alienate themselves from other prisoners and set up ones' self in opposition to other inmates and prison officials.

Conversion to Islam can be understood in the context of social interaction among inmates because it requires some degree of inmate interaction in order to convert to Islam

and connect with the other Muslim men in the prison. The men interviewed each described various ways social interactions (i.e. conversations, free classes on Islam, and the sharing of the Quran) led to their introduction to the Islamic faith and thus influenced their decision to convert. During the interview, I asked each man to explain to me how they were introduced to Islam, seven out of ten of the participants discussed a particular social interaction, typically with another inmate that led them to find and learn about Islam. In an interview, Jamal, 45, stated:

“An older dude in the prison who was doing eight to sixteen motivated me to go to the classes they were offering on Islam. It was about the basic fundamentals of what Islam is about, debunking the misconceptions of Islam. It was open to all people, even people who weren’t Muslim. We were taught the, who, what, where, and what about the religion of Islam. The basic concepts like worshipping one God. I wasn’t buying the concepts of Christianity. Islam made sense to me.”

Through a social interaction with another inmate who was Muslim, Jamal was able to be introduced to classes that would expose him to the basic fundamentals of Islam allowing him to gain an understanding of it. The Muslim men in the prison did not encourage any of the inmates to convert to Islam but they provided them with the resources and literature needed to gain knowledge of Islam to be able to make the decision for their self. All of the men interviewed explained that their decision to convert was based on their own intellectual and spiritual journey, but recognize that it all began with a simple interaction or conversation with another inmate. Another interviewee describes his introduction to Islam when he states:

When I was about 16 or 17 I read Malcolm X biography and that was my first introduction to Islam. While I was in county I received my first Quran but I didn’t fully understand it so I put it down. When I got to the max facility my cell mate was Muslim and we would always talk so I ordered me another Quran. This Quran had a clear translation and as I started to study it more it began to make sense. Then I went to the medium facility and I

started talking with other Muslims in there and went to their study sessions. An outside Iman would come in and them about Islam and the Prophet. I went to a lot of classes and sessions with the Iman and I was sure I wanted to revert back to Islam because everyone is born in the state of Islam, born to submit your will to God. I was in prison six years when I finally decided to convert.”

Taj’s story of how he got introduced to Islam was brought up at the beginning of this chapter but this above quote demonstrates in detail his personal reflections of that experience. Taj is explaining the way in which his communication with a Muslim inmate greatly contributed to his decision to continue studying it and eventually his decision to convert. Although Taj had been exposed to the idea of Islamic conversion while incarcerated prior to his own incarceration when reading Malcolm X’s autobiography, he was not able to fully grasp the fundamentals of Islam through his reading of the autobiography or the Quran initially. Through conversations with his cell mate he was encouraged to pursue his interest in Islam and he began to take classes and utilized the resources available to him in the prison. The fact that there were classes in many of the prisons the men were in that were on or about Islam, as well as had resources, including the Quran and Iman’s who would come in and teach, speaks to the prevalence of Islam within the prison. It also demonstrates the sub-culture that emerged within the prison as a result of the development and prevalence of Islam among inmates and the demand for these resources and services. Attending the classes, which were open to all inmates helped to perpetuate knowledge of Islam among the prisoners and helped to incite their interest in the religion. Furthermore, the openness of the Muslim men in the prison to provide these services and offer these resources demonstrates the larger collective identity and unity that came with identifying as Muslim. It also spoke to their open and non-discriminatory approach to disseminating information about Islam to the other inmates and providing the space and resources needed for any inmate to convert.

Conversion to Islam also allows individual inmates to become part of a larger social/religious group. Men who identify as Muslim generally stay together in the prison and are known for their solidarity and unity with one another. The groups of Muslim men in various prisons were willing to engage and interact with other inmates who were interested in Islam. Conversion to Islam allows incarcerated Black men to belong to a group based on religion as opposed to belonging to a group based solely on racial identification. The prison is a racially segregated place and reflects the racial segregation that exists outside of prison as well. However, in life outside of prison one's religion can often be hid or not known to others unlike one's race, which is typically deciphered by the color of one's skin. Men entering prison have to adhere to the existing racial and social structures and hierarchies that exist amongst the inmates. As discussed earlier, Islam can be seen as an identification that focuses on the uniting of inmates in the prison and is not restrictive or limited to particular races, which challenges the racial order and segregation of the prison as a whole. It also allows the men to develop and embrace new social roles and form relationships with other men in the prison.

Although men are alienated and stripped of whatever social roles or relationships they may have maintained in the outside world, they are able to mitigate the oppressive conditions of prison by adapting new roles and relationships through their social interactions with other inmates and prison officials. One man interviewed described the relationship between Muslim inmates and prison guards as peaceful and respectful, especially in comparison to the prison official's interactions with other Non-Muslim inmates. This challenges Sykes argument because the solidarity and unity that is fostered among the Muslim inmates is not in opposition to the prison officials they are directly



interacting with. The unity among the Muslim men within the prison did not arise in their mutual opposition to prison officials; rather it was based on an understanding of brotherhood and a shared experience among the men. Muslim men in the prison exhibited respect for the prison officials and refrained from engaging in any obstructive or deviant behavior which helped to establish mutual respect on the part of the prison officials in relation to the Muslim men because of their peaceful and “behaved” mannerisms. The Muslim men in the prison focused on their relationship with God, which helped to provide a framework for how to deal with or maintain relationships, especially with inmates and prison officials.

Based on the interviews conducted with Black men who converted to Islam while incarcerated and review of the existing literature on the topic, the findings support and expand Goffman’s assertion that prison completely leaves one’s previous self, almost entirely destroyed. Goffman (1961) develops the term, “mortification of self” to articulate the processes by which an individual who is in a total institution, such as prison is forced to undergo as series of “abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations,” eventually leaving the self they came in as completely destroyed. Men entering prison do undergo transformations of the self and personal narratives on conversion experiences support this claim as men identify abandonment from previous behaviors, attitudes, and social roles and are able to re-narrate their individual sense of self. Goffman’s work highlights the intense and severe effects prison may have on a person and research on Islamic conversion expands Goffman’s (1961) work to demonstrate the ability for incarcerated men to embrace a new understanding of self and embody new identities. Through an intellectual and spiritual journey, the incarcerated men are able to develop a

relationship with God, allowing them to manage or combat the constant surveillance and control of the institution. Goffman's development of the term "secondary adjustment," is useful for understanding the role Islamic conversion among incarcerated Black men may play in the management of their prison time. Secondary adjustments refer to the things people learn to do to get around the institution which do not directly challenge the institution or its officials but which allow inmates to acquire satisfactions or objectives that are not generally permissible in the prison.

Islamic conversion among incarcerated men should be seen as a secondary adjustment for it is a means in which incarcerated men are able to articulate their experience and redefine or re-develop their social role and relationships with others. Upon entrance into the penitentiary, Goffman explains that the individual undergoes severe processes which work to mortify the self and estrange one from his previous understandings of self, as well as separate one from their previous lives and relationships. Secondary adjustments have previously been referred to as various practices or techniques, such as knowing the ropes around the prison, conniving games, gimmicks, deals, manipulative behavior, etc., but the concept can be expanded to include positive forms of dealing with incarceration time and conditions which have not yet been explored. Religious conversion to Islam is an example of a resistance to the processes of mortification that one undergoes upon entrance into the institution as it allows them to embrace a "new" self and become embedded within new social relations. This embracement of a new understanding of self and a narration of that sense of self is significant because it challenges the conditions and consequences of the institution. Incarcerated men who convert are able to get through their prison sentences while

focusing on bettering themselves and their relationship with God. Islam provides the incarcerated men with a particular peace and freedom that was systematically stripped of them by the institution. Conversion to Islam can be viewed as an adaptation or resistance to the mortification processes that an inmate inevitably undergoes.

Conversion to Islam offers incarcerated Black men an alternative to the conditions and enforced segregation of the institution. As discussed throughout the chapter, Islamic conversion is far more than a means of managing one's prison time because it offers incarcerated men with a moral and spiritual framework for understanding themselves in relationship to society, and larger structures and institutions, including prison. Islamic conversion among incarcerated Black men should be looked at as more than just an individual, metaphysical getaway that limits the pains of imprisonment and should be further considered for its ability to act as a form of resistance to the oppressive, segregated, and confining conditions of imprisonment. Also, as a way in which a new culture is formed and perpetuated throughout the prison, one that differs from the dominant culture and social groups in the prison. Personal narratives should be used and explored because they tell the stories of individual experiences of being incarcerated and converting to Islam. Presenting personal narratives and analyzing the use of the language included to describe their experiences and observations, provides us with an alternate approach for understanding how we view or understand methods of "doing" time. We also uncover mechanisms developed by inmates who converted, which have helped them manage and survive their own prison time. Islamic conversion among incarcerated Black men can be seen as a form of resistance to the social and racial order of the prison and a means of regaining and reclaiming control over one's life and one's circumstances. This

phenomenon is significant because it produces a new collective identity and a new masculine identity which will be further explored in the following chapter.

### 3

#### **Redefining Manhood:**

##### **The Embodiment of an Alternate Masculinity and Performance of Self through Islam**

*“I still marvel at how swiftly my previous life’s thinking pattern slid away from me, like snow off a roof. It is as though someone else I knew of had lived by hustling and crime. I would be startled to catch myself thinking in a remote way of my earlier self as another person.” – Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, 1965.*

When entering prison incarcerated individuals inevitably undergo degradations of the self and detachment from previous social roles (Goffman, 1961). As discussed in previous chapters, prison is a physical and mental removal from one’s previous life, relationships, and social roles. However, when men enter the penitentiary they become exposed to social, racial and religious groups that form in or out of the prison and continue to exist within. Particular social, racial, or religious, groups that exist outside are replicated in the prison but are tailored to the circumstances and conditions of imprisonment. Men in prison are in a space that while limited and confined, still allows for them to identify with or become a part of various social or religious groups. Within the prison and among the inmates, incarcerated men are also able to form new social roles, ones they may not have been exposed to prior to incarceration.

There are not just processes of self-mortification that are occurring for incarcerated individuals, especially for those who are serving lengthy sentences. Prison is also a space in which men form and maintain performances of masculinity. The process of forming masculinity is personal, social, and institutional. The various masculinities formed within prison are not separate from an individual’s lifestyle,

socioeconomic status, or cultural background outside of the prison (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2001). However, once in prison an individual's conception of masculinity is typically challenged, changed, or intensified.

This chapter will explore Islamic conversion as a process in which Black men regain a new understanding of their social role, form new relationships, and embody new understandings of identity and alternative performances of masculinity. Religious conversion, specifically to Islam is a means in which incarcerated Black men form new collective identities as well as individual ones. The intersection between being a man, being incarcerated and identifying as Muslim serves as a resistance to the hegemonic or dominant presentations of masculinity within the prison. The alternate performance of masculinity that Muslim men in prison come to embody is also a means in which incarcerated Black men are able to align themselves with the valued forms of masculinity relevant to the larger, outside culture. This chapter will review literature on hegemonic masculinities within the prison and its relationship to hegemonic masculinities outside of prison, specifically among lower working class men. The literature (Messerschmidt, 2001, Karp, 2010, Jewkes, 2005) focuses on the hyper masculinity that is often associated with prison and inmates and its relationship to aggression and violence. It also primarily discusses hyper masculinity as the hegemonic form within men's prisons. Even further, it discusses the ways it has become normalized among inmate male populations, existing as a code within the prison that men adhere to in order to stay protected and affirm their own masculinity.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1983, 2005) and the existing accounts on the formation of prison masculinities are useful for understanding Islamic

conversion within prisons, the alternative performance of masculinity it helps to form, and the ways in which it complicates or expands the existing literature on prison hegemonic masculinities. Lastly, this chapter will explore the relationship between presentations of self and the formation of identities through a close analysis of personal narratives, based on the interviews I conducted.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity and the Formation of Prison Masculinities**

Our social understandings and definitions of masculinity are deeply connected to the operations of larger social institutions and structures (Carrigan et al. 1985, Connell 1983, 2005). The forming of one's own masculinity is a collective process and significantly correlated to the dominant masculine "culture" of one's environment. In other words, masculinity and the forming of masculinity is not solely an individual process but rather a complex process that must consider social and institutional factors. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been considerably influential in academic discussions surrounding gender, men, and social hierarchy (Connell 2005). "Hegemony" refers to the ability to influence, shape, and define other kinds of masculinity (Connell, 1983, 1985, 2005). The 'hegemonic' is the dominant of something within a particular social context; the concept of hegemonic masculinity should be understood as the dominant performance of masculinity within a particular social setting, in this case, within prisons. However, within the same social context there simultaneously exist other forms of masculinities, which can be defined as "subordinate masculinities" (Connell, Carrigan et al. 1985). A hegemonic masculinity can be identified based not only on its dominance within a particular context or setting but also because of its ability to define the other masculinities that simultaneously form and exist. Therefore, subordinate masculinities can and many times do exhibit elements that make up the hegemonic

masculinity within a particular context (Connell 2005). The concept of hegemonic masculinity is useful for understanding how particular groups of men claim positions of power and develop social relationships that help to legitimize, replicate, and maintain their dominance (Carrigan et al. 1985).

Dominance and heterosexuality are the features most commonly associated with masculinity. Dominance and its association to masculinity are typically understood through men's connection with the subordination of women and with men existing in a patriarchal society. Heterosexuality is also connected to a man's relationship with women but on a more personal and individual level as opposed to an institutional one. However, dominance can also exist on personal and individual levels as well, as men may take on different forms of masculinities as a means of asserting or performing their power.

Hegemonic masculinity is closely associated with dominance and heterosexuality because these features are so closely linked to our understandings of what constitutes a masculine man. It is useful to apply this understanding of masculinity, as being both connected to dominance and heterosexuality when exploring the masculinities that develop within the context of a prison setting because it will help situate the subordinate form of masculinity that is formed and maintained by the Muslim men in prison and its relationship to the dominant form.

It is also important to note that prison is a homosocial space, a space in which only men exist, which has an effect on the masculinities that get formed, maintained, and performed in prisons. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been used in previous academic research on prison masculinities (Jewkes, 2005, Karp, 2010, Ricciardelli et al., 2015). This literature tends to focus on the hegemonic form of masculinity among lower-



working class populations of men and the ways it is similar to the hegemonic form of masculinity present among inmate populations of men. This hegemonic form of masculinity is commonly associated with aggression and violence. The following section will briefly review relevant literature on prison masculinities. The existing literature can provide us with a framework for understanding the role Islamic conversion has on the formation and maintenance of alternate forms of masculinities that develop among the Muslim men and work to challenge the dominant masculinity of the prison.

### **Prison Masculinities:**

Past and current academic research has discussed the multiple masculinities that are formed and constructed within the homosocial institution of prison (Sabo et al., 2001, Karp 2010). In *Unlocking Men, Unlocking Masculinity, Doing Men's Work*, Karp (2010) notes that while prison is a space in which multiple masculinities are formed, the dominant construction is an intensification of several elements and features of the hegemonic masculinity most commonly associated with low and working class men outside of prison (Karp, p. 66). In *Masculinities, Crime, and Prison*, Messerschmidt (1993) also identifies prison as a space in which a variety of ways of doing masculinity are present. Messerschmidt argues that specific forms of masculinity are contingent on an individual's social situation, race, class, and sexual preference. These factors contribute to the accessibility, encouragement, and approval of particular forms of masculinity an individual could or should perform. During our interview, Kareem discussed his observations of the different groups of men that were formed, stating:

“The guys in there stick with the guys who share commonalities. Like the guys who attended the GED program and stuff they stick with each other so they can study. The guys in gangs stick with the dudes in they gang and they always hooting and hollering trying to get some attention. Then you got the men who

stick to themselves and don't say a word. And then you got the young ones who got something to prove. You got the men who always figuring out a way to work out even when we don't got yard. And then there's the Muslim men, the smart and peaceful ones, who stick to themselves but together as a group."

Kareem's statement supports Messerschmidt's claims that there are a variety of masculinities being formed and maintained in prison. Also, that men utilize different resources in order to perform masculinity within prison. Kareem's quote also demonstrates that the activities a man is engaged with will affect how he spends his prison time, who he interacts with, and how he affirms his masculinity. Karp (2010) asserts that there is a dominant masculinity within the prison and an exaggerated performance of masculinity among the men in prison because they are confined to a homosocial space, are unable to work, have little to no money or income, have a low status in society, and are unable to engage in heterosexual relationships. The 'hyper-masculinity' in the prison is a norm or a 'code' for the prisoner's because of the limited resources available that are needed to affirm their masculinity in a material or economic way. This hyper-masculine performance of masculinity develops among outside populations of men from working and lower class backgrounds. In society, there is a pressure on men to be the dominant and bread winning members of the household. In the event that a man is unable to financially support himself or his family, either because of his socio-economic status, or because he is in prison and cannot make money, he often turns to other physical means of performing and asserting his masculinity (Karp 2010).

Messerschmidt (2001) discusses the way in which crime serves as a resource for performing masculinity in a way that demonstrates to other's that one is a "manly" man. For men who lack other material resources as a result of their social conditions, they turn to specific types of crime as an alternative resource for achieving gender and affirming a

particular type of masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1993). Many men entering prison have achieved gender by turning to crime as a resource for performing and affirming their masculinity and enter with a specific understanding of what masculinity is and how it should be portrayed and accomplished. In prison, the circumstances of one's confinement and the severe limitation of one's resources provoke men to engage in an intensified performance of masculinity. The performance of masculinity that is formed, maintained, and even encouraged, is commonly associated with physical forms of domination and power. A man's ability to protect himself from the other inmates and to defend himself if an altercation should abruptly requires men in prison to constantly put on a façade that demonstrates their strength as opposed to their vulnerability.

The formations of masculinities are also based on social action which changes in reaction to unique circumstances or social conditions (Messerschmidt, 2001). There are multiple forms of masculinities which can develop in a given context and they develop in reaction to social circumstances and relationships. In prison, incarcerated men self-regulate their behavior and base their choices off of specific prison contexts (Messerschmidt, 2001). Inmates construct multiple masculinities based on their individual and specific social interactions within the larger context of prison life. Messerschmidt (2001) states, "These different masculinities emerge from practices that utilize different resources" (Sabo et al., 2001 p. 71).

In the context of prison and within the social group of Muslim men, a new form of masculinity is developed and maintained because of the practices and resources the men utilize in order to achieve it. For example, the Muslim men in the prison use practices and resources related to Islam, such as the Quran and the teachings of the

Prophet, in order to form, achieve, and maintain a particular form of masculinity that distinguishes them from the other inmates. Their religion becomes the main resource and practice needed to achieve this particular form of masculinity and it becomes the accepted and expected form of masculinity among the population of Muslim men in the prison. The inmates who are not Muslim and who do not interact with the Muslim men in the prison utilize different resources for achieving masculinity and consequently they develop another form of masculinity that operates within the same context (i.e. the prison) but among different social groups.

Previous scholars have argued that because of the limited resources and the confinement of prison life, “an extreme construction of masculinity as an identity position is the most universal response to the imperative to conform to the lower-working class dominated prison culture” (Jewkes, 2005, p. 61, Karp, 2010, p. 66). The hegemonic masculinity within the prison often reflects the culturally accepted hegemonic masculinity outside of prisons, specifically among lower working class men. This hegemonic masculinity is closely associated with aggression and violence and is not formed within the prison but outside of it among populations of lower class–working men who do not have the cultural, social, or economic capitals typically used to reaffirm one’s masculinity to oneself and to others. However, within prison this process of maintaining a hegemonic masculinity intensifies as men are constantly engaging in two forms of emotional endeavors , one that is internal and the other that is external (Craib 1998). The internal is a process of coping with the circumstances of imprisonment, including dealing with conflict, fear, and disorientation (Jewkes 2005, p. 54). The external is a process of reconciliation between what is going on in the inside and the need to construct and

maintain a culturally acceptable masculine identity that is visible to others within the prison (Jewkes 2005, p. 54).

Jewkes (2005) applies Goffman's (1959) concepts of "frontstage" and "backstage" to draw a distinction between one's private sense of self and one's public presentation of identity. Jewkes (2005) makes a distinction between the self and identity, whereas the self emphasizes difference and requires prisoners to draw on their own relationships outside of the prison as well as their cultural preferences to distinguish themselves from other inmates. Identity, on the other hand, emphasizes similarity and requires inmates to look for similar outlooks and resources that allow them to participate and integrate with the dominant inmate culture. This distinction between self and identity is a useful framework for understanding conversion to Islam among Black men in prison and the way in which it works to construct an alternative to the hegemonic masculinity that is maintained in the prison. It also allows them to re-narrate and construct themselves as belonging to a distinct group within the prison, one that affirms their masculinity through the embodiment of what constitutes a faithful Muslim and also, based on their commitment to the principles of Islam.

Looking at conversion to Islam among inmate populations challenges the idea that only hyper masculine forms of masculinity are being formed and maintained within prisons and expands our ideas concerning the resources and practices one could use in prison to achieve other forms of masculinity. Based on the narratives of the men interviewed, this chapter will also look at how conversion to Islam allows men to develop a sense of self, as well as form a collective identity, one that is positive to and for them. The literature presented above focuses on the "tough façade" men in prison have to wear

and maintain in order to protect their selves and uphold their masculinity. The following section will look at the narratives of men who have converted to Islam while incarcerated and their first encounters with the group of Muslim men in the penitentiary.

### **First Encounters: Conversion to Islam as an Alternative Performance of Masculinity**

Throughout the interview process, when asked why they chose to convert to Islam, every participant first spoke about their immediate survey of the prison life and the various groups of men that made up the prison. The group of Muslim men stuck out the most because of the unity they displayed, their attitudes, and their presence. In our interview Taj stated:

“People are attracted to Islam especially those locked up because it is visual. They see a group of brothers that are together and they stand for something, they see the strength in them. It’s how they conduct themselves, how the guards talk to them; they talked to the Muslim brothers differently than the others. They had a better relationship with the guards because they are respectful; they do what they are supposed to do so guards know that and like that. Brothers see the discipline and the love and solidarity they have for one another. Love and unity is what attracts brothers to Islam – you’re in a room full of darkness, and you see the light from the Muslim group of brothers who exert positive energy. They exert a different kind of strength, their presentation of self, they respect everybody.”

Taj speaks of the attraction to Islam in a general way, a way that should make sense to anyone entering prison and encountering Muslim men and their performance of collectivity. The presentation of the group of Muslim men in the prison was visual and appealed to some of the men entering the prison. Taj not only identified the appeal in the way the Muslim men collectively conducted themselves, but he also noted the positive relationship the guards maintained with the group of Muslim men in the prison. The ability for the Muslim men to remain positive in light of their physical conditions and circumstances acts as a symbol of strength for the men looking in. Taj identifies a

difference in the attitudes, behaviors, and presentation of self, displayed by the group of Muslim men in the prison, which distinguishes them from any other group of individuals in the facility. What distinguishes the Muslim men in the prison from the general inmate population is not their religious identification; rather it is their performance of masculinity, which could only be achieved through practice of the Islamic faith. The Muslim men use the key principles of Islam to inform their behavior and their choices.

These behavioral and attitudinal differences derived from the teachings and following of Islam are crucial practices needed in the formation and maintenance of an alternative masculinity formed among Muslim men in prison. These key differences in behavior and attitude allow for a new masculinity to form within the context of prison and allow other inmates to envision an alternative to the dominant culture and performance of hyper-masculinity. The Muslim men in the prison display and prove that other resources could be used to achieve a particular form of masculinity. The embodiment of an alternate masculinity that forms among the Muslim men helps widen understandings of how one can perform manhood and displays a performance of masculinity that has not yet been discussed or considered in academic literature on prison masculinities. Also, the Muslim men incarcerated resist the hegemonic form of masculinity in the prison because it does not align with the teachings and practices of a faithful Muslim. Islam acts as more than a religious following because it also teaches its followers “how to be a man” in a way that is pleasing to God and to society as a whole.

As discussed earlier, the hegemonic masculinity within the prison is closely associated with acts of violence and aggression. Prison is a space with extremely limited resources so men turn to physical acts of aggression or deviant behavior as a means of

affirming to themselves, the other inmates, and the prison officials that they are ‘manly’ men. Taj’s experience and observations of the group of Muslim men in the prison allude to another form of masculinity that is formed. The Muslim men refrained from engaging in acts of violence or aggression and instead used their voice to politely communicate with the guards and express their concerns. The prison guards were more susceptible to listening to the group of men who talked as opposed to those who acted out or used vulgar language to voice their frustrations. Taj used the words respectful, strength, and discipline in order to describe the behavior and presentation of the Muslim men who were in the same prison as him. This is significant because previous research on prison masculinities or prison life in general focuses on the performance of hyper-masculinity as a means of coping with the discipline and rigidity of prison, whereas for Taj and the group of Muslim men in the prison, discipline was a core value of theirs.

Respect is also a significant word used in Taj’s response because discussions of masculinity within prison focus on the exertion of domination, power, and aggression, used by the men in order to gain respect from the other inmates. Respect is also something the men expect to receive back from the other inmates and prison officials. Here, respect is discussed as something Muslim men give to the other inmates, each other, and the prison guards as a means of maintaining peace and non-violence. Islam offers social justice messages which emphasize the necessity for peace and non-violence. The Muslim men incarcerated mimic these values and utilize them to achieve an alternative masculinity and to inform how they interact and respond to other people, as well as to their immediate social contexts. The hegemonic masculinity within the prison



is challenged as a result of the consistent performance of masculinity demonstrated by the group of Muslim men in the prison, one that is visibly different from the dominant form.

Similar to Taj, many of the men interviewed discussed the association between identifying as Muslim and incorporating discipline in one's daily life. In our interview when asked about the popularity of conversion to Islam within the prison, Amir, 50, stated:

“At lot of people aspired to the discipline and sense of brotherhood that the Muslims presented, especially in the face of issues with the officers. They stood together and spoke out against that. They had ability to use diplomacy, rectify these problems, and bring changes. They were a respected group in prison. Gangs stood together but they were not proactive in bringing any change.”

Amir speaks of the appeal Islam has on incarcerated men and the ways in which the unity displayed by the group of Muslim men in the prison attracts the other inmates.

Conversion to Islam among incarcerated Black men provides them with a new framework for how to think, behave, and interact, which leads to the formation of a particular form of masculinity within the prison that becomes associated exclusively with the group of Muslim men. Amir is speaking about the ability for the Muslim men in prison to not only display unity but to act as a group in a collective effort to achieve change. The unity and the performance of masculinity that the Muslim men in prison display not only attract other inmates but also foster a mutual respect between them and the other inmates, as well as the prison officials. Amir suggests that the group of Muslim men in the prison do not just offer the other inmates an example of how to present oneself but they offer an alternative to dealing with particular situations especially in dealing with the prison officials.

Like all participants interviewed, Amir was attracted to the solidarity that existed among the Muslim men and their ability to stand together in the face of opposition. The group of Muslim men's ability to remain peaceful and repair these issues displays an alternative to the "hyper-masculine" response, one that is dominant within the prison setting. Amir draws a distinction between the collectivity that forms among the Muslim men in the prison and the groups that form based on gang affiliation because of the differences in their behavior, their respectability, and their inability to create effective change in the facility. Amir is alluding to a resistance to the hegemonic masculinity within the prison, particularly on the part of the Muslim men. They offer a visual example of a particular form of masculinity that does not require men to perform it through the use of physical violence, aggressiveness, or anger. The Muslim men utilize different resources as a means of achieving their own particular form of masculinity that allows them to display it in a new way. Islam provides the men with a new narrative for discussing and understanding manhood and what that means.

A common theme among the men interviewed and their perceptions of what Islam had offered them was a sense of individual control and discipline. The prison is a place governed by extreme forms of rigidness and discipline in which the inmates have to deal with and adhere to on a daily basis. The groups of Muslim men however, are able to adopt their own methods of self-control and discipline while adhering to the regiments of the institution. Some of the men interviewed spoke about the positivity that discipline has brought to their lives, especially in comparison to their lives outside of prison. During our interview, one man described his life prior to incarceration, stating, "People tend to run the streets and your mind is on the streets, it's like being on a never ending merry-go-

round, and you don't realize anything until you get off of the merry-go-round. Getting incarcerated and then finding Islam takes you off of the merry go round." Here, he is re-narrating his own relationship to masculinity as he is able to articulate and identify these changes in himself. For Jamal, prison was an interruption to his previous lifestyle, one he associates with being on the streets, and lacking discipline for himself while having little to no control over his actions. For him, prison and conversion were the moments that he was forced to get off of the "carousel" and look at the situation that confronted him. It was also a moment in which he was able to resist his previous performance of a 'street masculinity' in an effort to embrace a new form. Getting off of the carousel for Jamal meant embodying a new form of masculinity, one that required self-discipline and control. Conversion to Islam provided him with the tools and resources needed to achieve a new form of masculinity. Prior to his incarceration, Jamal lived in a low-income minority neighborhood and as a young, Black man he turned to crime and aggression as a means of affirming his masculinity. One's immediate conditions and resources greatly contribute to the formation and embodiment of their masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2001). Becoming exposed to Islam and utilizing the resources provided by the Muslim men in the prison, allowed Jamal to take on a new form of masculinity and transform his behaviors, attitudes, and his understanding of what constitutes a man and how to achieve masculinity in an alternate way.

This metaphor is significant in the conversation surrounding masculinity within the prison because it implies that entrance into the institution may offer individuals a moment of reflection and also forces the individual to break away from previous lifestyles and behaviors. It also speaks to the difficulties men face in the outside world

and the societal pressures they deal with having to constantly prove their masculinity, regardless of the resources they have to do so. These lifestyles and behaviors are directly linked to the way men interpret performances of masculinity or what constitutes a 'masculine man'. Prison is also a space in which men are pressured to adhere to specific forms of masculinity as they constantly have to prove themselves as 'manly' men by putting on a façade that demonstrates their toughness. When entering the prison, men become exposed to the prisons' hegemonic masculinity, which in many ways mirrors the dominant form of masculinity that was present in their lives and communities outside of prison. Upon entrance into prison, men become exposed and made more aware of the various masculinities that are developed, maintained and encouraged by the other incarcerated men. Becoming exposed to an alternate performance of masculinity that is dominant and visible among the Muslim men in the prison is an opportunity in which men are able to visually see a different performance of masculinity that is both present, and accepted in the context of prison. The Muslim men utilize different practices and resources as a means of adopting an alternative form of masculinity that is distinct from the hegemonic form, both in their lives both inside and outside of the prison. Ending up in prison and being removed from the carousel, allowed Jamal to begin researching and studying, leading him to finding and eventually accepting Islam. The Muslim men in the prison offered an alternative performance of masculinity, one that he could envision himself embodying. Conversion to Islam for Jamal allowed him to remain off of the carousel and envision a better life for himself outside of prison. Conversion also meant taking on a new form of masculinity that was based on the principles of Islam and

required Jamal to regulate himself in a way he had not been able to do so before. We should understand conversion as the formation of Jamal's identity as a Muslim man.

Majority of the men interviewed drew a clear distinction between the group of Muslim men within the prison and the streets gangs. The behavior and ways of life for the men involved in gangs within the prison was a performance of masculinity the men who converted to Islam wanted to disassociate from. They associated gangs with the street life and with the hegemonic form of masculinity that existed both in their communities and within the prison. The form of masculinity that the Muslim men came to associate the gangs with in the prison, was not a form of masculinity that they had not been previously exposed to; in fact it was a form of masculinity they each embodied at a point in their lives prior to conversion. Narrating their experiences allowed them to distance themselves from that identity in an effort at achieving and maintaining a new sense of self. Islam provided them with a moral framework, a guide for how to behave, how to interact, and how to "be a man" in a way that did not require them to exert physical or emotional violence and aggression. Mimicking the key principles of Islam in their daily lives led to a transformation, one that allowed them to become self-disciplined, respectful, humble, and peaceful as opposed to performing the dominant form of masculinity, which constituted acting with aggression, violence, defensiveness, and anger. Islam gave them a new understanding for what being a man meant and allowed them to affirm their masculinity through their commitment to Islam and based on their relationship with God.

Jewkes' (2005) development of the concepts of 'self' and 'identity' are useful for understanding the contributions conversion to Islam has had on re-shaping these men's

understandings and relationship to their own presentation of self and identity. Even greater, it actually allowed them to re-establish a new sense of self and identity, which required them to break away from previous forms. Narrating this process of embodying a new sense of self is a way they actualize this sense of self and articulate it as a meaningful self. The men drew on differences between themselves and the other groups of inmates, while emphasizing the similarities they share with the established group of Muslim men in the prison. They are engaging in a dual process of re-shaping their presentations of self through a disassociation from the hegemonic masculinity within the prison by emphasizing their differences from the other inmates, while drawing on similar outlooks that make up the dominant culture of the Muslim men in the prison. The men also needed to distance themselves from the other forms of masculinity in the prison in order to achieve their own form of masculinity and better align themselves with the principles of Islam, as well as with the other Muslim men. They are breaking away from a previous form of masculinity, and associating the masculinities that are dominant among the men in gangs as being similar or identical to the masculinity they previously embodied prior to converting or being incarcerated. Furthermore, Islam offers the inmates an individual relationship with God and this contributes to their understandings of self in relation to the larger inmate population.

Islam provides incarcerated men with a framework for how to conduct their selves, how to treat other people, and offers them an incentive to not sin and do good for the greater community. This framework is developed through the men's reading and studying of the Quran and its core principles, doctrines, and directions, which provide a guide for every sphere of human activity. These principles and doctrines include honesty,

perseverance, firmness, justice, forgiveness, punctuality, tolerance, and generosity. Men converting to Islam and who remain committed to it must keep the word of God, which includes implementing these principles in their everyday lives and allowing these principles to act as a blueprint for how to become a man. Incarcerated men utilize these practices and embody these principles providing them with a new understanding of their role as men. Performing masculinity becomes a matter of remaining true to the teachings of the Prophet and the word of God as opposed to having to affirm it through the use of violence, aggression, or criminal activity. In a second part of our interview, Jamal, 45, stated:

“Muslims do not fuck with gang in or outside of prison; I hate the association with Muslims and gangs. Islam makes me better worship Allah. It provides me with a framework for my behavior and to know what to do and what not to do. Committing sins, you may get away from it in this life but not in the long run, not in your after-life.”

Jamal is again emphasizing the significance of Islam, particularly in his development of self, reformation of masculinity and in the restructuring of his moral framework. He clearly disassociates from the label and behavior of the gangs both in and outside of prison and perceives it as negative and different from his own identity or presentation of masculinity. It is important for Jamal to emphasize his disassociation from the gangs in the prison because they reflect a form of masculinity that goes against the word of God. After converting to Islam, the men gain a new sense of responsibility and commitment to their behavior and presentation of self. Jamal comes to see himself as a part of a larger collective identity and as belonging to a brotherhood of Muslim men.

As discussed earlier, and as shown in the narratives of the men interviewed, the groups of Muslim men that form within the prison stick together and demonstrate

solidarity with one another. This is significant because not only are the men forming an individual presentation of self and identity, they are also becoming a part of a collective identity, one based on similar behaviors and outlooks. The men also act as resources for one another and help to maintain this alternate form of masculinity and perpetuate it amongst other men who have converted or who are contemplating conversion. Lastly, this new form of masculinity that gets developed among the Muslim men in prison, allows them to establish better relationships with each other, with themselves, with the other inmates, and with the prison officials.

A common theme throughout the interviews was a changed perception of self, as a result of converting to Islam. We can understand the process of converting to Islam as an individual search for a new conception of self. All the men identified a shift in their behaviors, attitude, outlooks, and perceptions of themselves. The men who converted to Islam incarcerated shared a common faith and this helped to foster a shared experience and bond with one another. In a space with limited resources, the Muslim men found resources that were connected to their faith, as well as developed social networks within the group of Muslim men as a means of achieving a new form of masculinity. The Quran and other Islamic readings provided the men with a framework for how to conduct themselves, how to “become” a man, and how to find alternate means of dealing with difficult situations or people. Greater than teaching them how to become a man it expanded their perceptions of what a man is or could be and what his social role in society is. Even further, the Muslim men in the prison acted as resources for one another as they constantly encouraged each other to engage in positive behaviors and to maintain manners that were consistent with the word of God. Free classes on Islam, as well as



meditation and prayer sessions were available to the men who converted or who were interested in converting courtesy of existing Muslim men in the prison. While the men incarcerated lacked material or financial resources, they were able to form and maintain their alternate masculinity because of their access to other resources associated with their faith.

In our interview when asked if conversion to Islam changed his perception of himself in any way, Kareem, 42, responded:

“Yeah, I used to have a more aggressive personality and Islam made me more humble. I learned how to deal with people and that’s what I was looking for, to reclaim my soul – Islam allowed for me to do that. Now I am not so aggressive in how I deal with other people. Islam allowed me to become more open when dealing with other people.”

The men’s narratives provide us with a glimpse into another masculinity that is formed within prison that differs severely from the commonly discussed form. It also helps reveal that there are multiple masculinities being formed and maintained within prison and are heavily based on one’s social group or immediate relationships. Through acceptance of Islam, the men break away from their previous aggressive behaviors and attitudes to embrace behaviors and attitudes that align with the key principles of Islam. Kareem alludes to a change in how he finds himself dealing with other people. He gained a new found awareness of his actions and reactions to particular situations, allowing him to continuously resist older forms of masculinity he previously identified with. Islam and particularly the Quran emphasize the importance of honesty, tolerance, and generosity. These characteristics can transform one’s understanding of their relationships with others.

Kareem was able to utilize the resources and practices provided to him by Islam and that alone helped to reaffirm his masculinity in a way that his previous form of

masculinity did not allow. Prior to converting, Kareem affirmed his masculinity through the use of violence or aggression as a way of asserting himself as a 'tough' man, one the other men should not interfere with. Through his conversion, Kareem was able to utilize different resources as a way of affirming an alternative form of masculinity that distinguished him from the other performances of masculinity, especially the hegemonic form he once embodied. Kareem and every other participant identified Islam and conversion to it as a means of changing their behaviors and transforming their identity and performances of masculinity. Achieving the alternate form of masculinity is not merely an individual process but a social one as well. Achieving this form of masculinity was contingent on the men's responses to those around them within their immediate social context and based on who they interacted or formed social bonds with.

### **Rejecting an Alternate Masculinity and the Pressure to Conform to the Hegemonic Masculinity**

Conversion to Islam among men in prison offers them new ways to present themselves and perform an alternative masculinity that resists the hegemonic masculinity of the facility. The groups of Muslim men within the prison, together, form a collective identity, one that is visible to the other inmates and the prison officials. They separate themselves from other groups that exist within the prison and exhibit a great sense of solidarity with one another. As a result of the prevalence and visibility of the Muslim men in the prison and their distinguishing behaviors and manners, the other inmates in the prison come to associate converts with particular forms of masculinity. The Muslim men in prison become known for their resistance to violent or deviant behavior and their inclusion amongst each other. In light of this, when men enter prison and automatically

convert to Islam they become labeled as “weak” or “pussy” because conversion to Islam becomes associated with an act of seeking protection from other inmates.

In our interview, Rashad stated, “The young dudes that come through, many of them don’t want to convert to Islam because they see it as the easy way out. They are afraid the other men will think of them as pussy for immediately converting, like they doing it for protection or something.” Rashad speaks to the resistance that young men entering prison face when it comes to deciding whether or not to convert to Islam or express interest in Islam. Many of the Muslim men in the prison are older and have been in prison for a while so the other Non-Muslim inmates come to associate them with being peaceful and disciplined and they are typically well respected in the prison. They assume that the young men entering who immediately convert are seeking protection from the other inmates and look to the older Muslim men because they do not tolerate physical or verbal altercations and maintain unity amongst each other. The other inmates know that if one converts to Islam they will automatically become associated with the group of Muslim men in the prison and the older Muslim men will stick up for them in the case that they are being targeted or provoked. Majority of the men interviewed discussed the association between conversion to Islam and how it becomes perceived by other inmates, particularly those who belonged to other social or religious groups.

In a few of the interviews, other participants brought up the view of conversion as a tactic for protection and a sign of weakness from many of the other inmates, particularly the younger ones. Samir, 76, stated that many of the people in the prison he was in were converting to Islam for protection. Samir stated, “Yes, a lot of people do it for protection. You can easily get killed in prison. Islam teaches you to protect people that are weaker

than you. Many people in the prison associated conversion with protection.” The anti-violence rhetoric used by men who converted to Islam and who in their every day practices utilize anti-violence, are viewed by the Non-Muslim men as using Islam in an effort to find protection and escape the reality of prison life. Converting to Islam in the prison means becoming a part of a larger group, a group that contains many older men who have gained respect from everyone in there and who have served long sentences. They enter a group that refrains from violence and offers to protect anyone who seeks it. This can and many times is perceived by the Non-Muslim men as a weak move on the part of the convertor but can be understood as a means of resisting the dominant form of masculinity within the prison, in acceptance of a new form of masculinity.

In a second interview, Malik, 22, explained the way in which the perception of conversion to Islam as a scapegoat to ensuring protection actually deterred a lot of the younger men in the prison from converting. Some men who were considering converting to Islam decided not to because they did not want to be perceived as being weak and fragile and instead, chose to embody the hegemonic masculinity, one that emphasized individual strength, defense, and aggression. The general inmate population drew a distinction between the older and existing Muslim men in the prison from the young men who enter prison and quickly decide to convert in the eyes of the other inmates. Mailk stated, “I was with the younger guys in the prison and a lot of them said they wasn’t going to convert because that’s what people who can’t hold their own do, they cling on to a group they know going to protect they ass.” As the youngest man interviewed, Malik brings attention to the tensions that develop among the younger population of inmates. They also come to perceive conversion as a means of attaining protection and as an

escape from dealing with the reality and conditions of imprisonment on their own. The younger men are resistant to the idea of converting and view conversion as not an individual process of transformation but instead as a decision to belong to a group on the basis of seeking protection. The younger group of men who decided to convert early on in their prison sentence became associated with a 'weaker', less masculine form of masculinity that distinguished them from both, the other inmates and the existing group of Muslim men.

Although conversion to Islam had the ability of allowing those who converted to adapt an alternate performance of masculinity, one that differed from the street masculinity, there was a social pressure to not convert and to embody the hegemonic masculinity of the prison. This social pressure deterred men from converting because they would be viewed as finding the easy way out and embodying a performance of masculinity that was condemned and completely opposite from the hegemonic form. We see that within prison a hierarchy of masculinities is being formed and perpetuated. Particular social and religious groups and individuals are ranked and treated based on where they exist in the hierarchy of masculinities. However, depending upon which social or religious group one identifies with, the hierarchy may look entirely different. For example, the men who were involved in street gangs within the prison, for them, the top of the hierarchy of masculinity are those who are also in gangs or who exhibit performances of self that emphasize aggression, violence, antagonism, and self-protection. Whereas, among the group of Muslim men, those who identify as Muslim and who practice the core values of the faith in their daily lives are seen as performing a

masculinity that is most socially, religiously and culturally acceptable, one that exists at the top of the hierarchy for them.

Overall, there is a general respect and understanding of the Muslim men within the prison from the general inmate population.

However, it is important to note that men are socially pressured out of converting to Islam and thus, are steered away from the chance of personifying an alternate form of masculinity that differs from the hegemonic form. This is significant because it suggests that the forming and maintaining of masculinity within the confines of prison are influenced by many social and cultural factors. It also opens us to the idea that rejection to converting to Islam can be understood as an initiation into the hegemonic masculinity that dominates the prison.

Through this lens, the Non-Muslim inmates perceive conversion itself to Islam as not a spiritual process but as a strategy for protection from physical or verbal altercations with other inmates. To them, converting to Islam is a survival tactic. Whereas, those who are actually undergoing the conversion process at various ages and stages in their incarceration sentence, view conversion as a spiritual and intellectual process that leads to significant transformations of the self. They also view it as a journey towards discovering a sense of self and then being able to perform and present a self that is worthy and of value to them. For the Non-Muslim inmates, conversion is viewed as an outlet for protection because it connects an individual with a larger group who can potentially act as protectors in the event that a physical or verbal altercation arises. Yet within the community of Muslim men in the prison, conversion to Islam among new inmates is widely accepted and acknowledged as a positive step towards regaining

control over one's life and incarceration and accepting a way of life that is aligned with the word of God.

Becoming Muslim connects you with that religious, social group and as a whole they are viewed as non-violent and respectable. Conversion to Islam in the eyes of Non-Muslim inmates may seem like a deviation from the hegemonic masculinity but for the men interviewed they described it as a process and a choice to embody an alternative performance of masculinity. The men explained that through the process of converting and accepting Islam, they became connected with the other Muslim men in the prison. The Muslim men in the prison as a collective are able to form an alternate masculinity, which becomes the hegemonic form of masculinity among them. This alternate form of masculinity is one that is visual and allows for the perpetuation of it among other inmates.

When explaining their initial encounters with the Muslim men in the prison, they described that they were first attracted to the way the Muslim men presented themselves. They displayed collectivity and solidarity amongst each other and refrained from engaging in any perceived deviant or violent behavior. The men described the presence of the Muslim men in prison as humble, calm, and wise. The men were first attracted to the presentation of self that was exhibited and embodied by the Muslim men within the prison. Prior to incarceration, the men spoke of associating themselves with violence, criminal activity, aggressiveness, and arrogance as a means of "making it" in their neighborhoods and life styles and as a way of affirming themselves as masculine. Their initial encounter with the Muslim men in the prison and their presentation of self, also

serves as a moment in which the men entering the prison engage with an alternative presentation and performance of masculinity that differs from the hegemonic form.

Conversion to Islam allows incarcerated men to access and utilize different resources and practices needed to form and maintain masculinity. The changes that the men identify are directly linked to their internalization of the key principles of Islam. They utilize these principles as a framework for how to conduct themselves, how to lead their everyday lives, and most importantly, for understanding how to perform masculinity in a new and distinct way. The narratives presented provide us with a glimpse into the multiple forms of masculinities that are developed, sustained, and encouraged in the context of prison life. Through conversion, the men were able to break away from previous forms of masculinity and able to embrace a new form. Through this, the men were able to distinguish themselves from the other inmates, as well as from their previous selves.

Former research on gender in prisons assert that prison itself produces hierarchies among incarcerated men and that the restrictive, disciplined, and confining nature of the prison itself shape prison masculinities (Messerschmidt, 1993, Karp, 2010 Goffman 1961, Sykes 1958, Ricciardelli et al 2015). The ‘pains of imprisonment’ (Sykes 1958) shape how masculinities within the prison are learned or produced, as well as imported from the street and maintained in prison. Hierarchies among incarcerated men form and are established within and between the different social and religious groups that co-exist in the prison. In the context of prison, an inmate’s background, immediate relationships and interactions, deeply influence the form of masculinity they will be exposed to or encouraged to perform. For example, the men described the difference in the behavior



and performance of masculinity between the men affiliated with street gangs and the men who identified as Muslim. While the men who were connected to the street gangs often engaged in violent and aggressive behavior towards opposing gangs and prison officials, the Muslim men refrained from engaging in any physical altercations or verbal disputes. The Muslim men spent much of their time together or alone, and occupied their time by studying, praying, meditating, working out, or attending classes. The behavior of the men, including the ways they interacted with prison staff and other inmates and the activities they were involved in, acted as a space in which men entering prison were able to gain exposure to the various forms of masculinities that were present.

Masculinities can look radically different depending on the environment a man is placed in and based on these interviews one cannot say to what extent men carry with them their understandings of masculinity pre-prison into the penitentiary. However, the men described their entrance into prison as an interruption and pause to their previous chaotic and criminally engaged lives. Islam offered them a new set of resources that gave them access to embodying a new form of masculinity, one that they would have otherwise been unfamiliar with or unable to access. These men are resisting a street masculinity, a form that is dominant in their communities, lives, and is commonly associated with prison in acceptance of a new form of masculinity that is based on key Islamic principles.

In conclusion, it is important to investigate the different social groups that are formed or maintained within prisons because it can expose us to other forms of masculinities that are present. The connection between conversion to Islam and an embodiment of an alternate form of masculinity is significant to investigate because it

will affect the lives and behaviors of these men outside of prison. The men interviewed attribute their change in behavior and perceptions of self, as a result of their conversion and acceptance of Islam and all that it has taught them. Islam provides men incarcerated with a framework for how to conduct themselves and how to interact with other people. The following chapter will explore the processes of reentry among Black men who converted to Islam while incarcerated. It will explore the extent to which the men who converted and who embodied an alternative form of masculinity continue to perform this masculinity in their lives outside of prison. It will also look at how a shift in their perceptions of 'how to be a man' and more specifically, a Muslim man, affected their lives, social roles, and relationships outside of prison.

## 4

### **Constructing a Post-Prison Citizenship:**

#### **The Effects of Islamic Conversion on Processes of Reentry**

*“We cannot think of being acceptable to others until we have proven acceptable to ourselves.”-Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, 1965.*

After serving twenty years in prison, Shai was concerned about what life would be like outside of it. At twenty years old he went into to prison and knew that the outside world had changed so much since the last time he had been living in it. About nine years into his prison sentence, Shai decided to convert to Islam and noted that his conversion had a great impact on his perception of himself and on reentry. He knew that he was not the same person leaving prison as he was going into it. Not only had he converted to Islam but he was in there for a substantial part of his young adult life. A major segment of his life had been spent in prison and he was forced to grow up and develop within the confines of imprisonment. Shai had accepted his sentence and was content with knowing that he would have to get through it because he saw it as a result of his own perceived negative conduct. He was ready to reenter society and felt as though Islam provided him with a new sense of purpose; he felt more in tune and in control of his conduct.

First being released and ‘free’ felt very weird and strange for Shai, a lot of things changed but he was prepared to reenter a world that felt unknown to him. He had been so used to doing one thing and living one way for such an extensive amount of time that it was strange for him to think of living any other way. Within the first few months of being released, Shai automatically reconnected with his family. At first there was a disconnect because they knew that he had converted to Islam but his family was Christian and were

at first against him identifying as Muslim. His parent's perceptions of Muslims had only been informed by media and he took the initiative of explaining all the positive changes conversion to Islam had brought him. Through narrating his own experience of conversion to Islam and the changes he was able to make through that process, he was giving meaning to his incarceration and to himself as a newly released man from prison. This narrative was one he wanted to share with his family in hopes that through the telling of his story, they too, would find meaning in his conversion and view him as a changed person. Shai was able to articulate his new understanding of self, giving value to his sense of self, in an effort to demonstrate to his family and to society that he is a being of value and of worth. After showing and explaining the significance of Islam and what it had done for him, his parents were more accepting of who he was and supportive of his decision to become Muslim and agreed that he could live with them.

Reflecting on his own transitional experience through a narration of that experience, Shai stated that he felt he underwent a smooth transition and attributes it to immediately connecting himself with other Muslims. He expressed that his greatest difficulty was becoming grounded in a routine and creating discipline for himself. Being connected with other Muslims served as a source of protection and safety for him, not in the physical sense, but he felt he needed to surround himself with others who led a similar life style and who understood his commitment to his faith. He immediately contacted other Muslim men who were also free, many of who had served time in prison with him and some were men he had met outside of prison. Contacting and connecting with other Muslim men was crucial to Shai's reentry process because it allowed him to establish a shield and navigate society in a way he felt he was supposed to in order for

him to lead a positive life and refrain from returning to prison. It was also significant because he would be able to share his story with other men who would be able to narrate their experience as well.

Shai expressed his struggle with finding employment. Immediately upon his release, he was unable to obtain employment despite his efforts at looking for a job or his perception of employment as necessary to his reentry process and life outside of prison. He dedicated time and effort to the employment search and began to feel discouraged. However, through contact with other Muslim men he was able to find out about and get involved with a community reentry program. It focused on providing Muslim men with services pertaining to reentry, including help with obtaining employment, housing, and receiving counseling. The reentry program provided Shai with what he needed after being newly released from prison. Majority of the people who made up Shai's social network following the first few months of his release were other Black, Muslim men, who too, were previously incarcerated. Shai also remained connected with his family but spent majority of his time connecting with men similar to him, those who understood his experience converting and of being incarcerated. In discussing his experience with me, he attributed his relatively seamless transition back into society to his conversion to Islam because it not only provided him with a moral framework for how to conduct himself but it placed him within a new social network of men who had similar experiences, lifestyles, goals, and most importantly, religious identification.

Through the process of narrating his experiences to me, he was able to communicate the way in which Islam brought meaning to his sense of self and how that

contributed to his perceptions of reentry in a positive way. His immediate social network allowed him to develop and expand his social relationships to include other formerly incarcerated Muslim men, as well as connect him with a reentry program that helped him get back on his feet and reestablish a life outside of prison. Shai was able to define positive reentry for himself, which included remaining committed to Islam, embedding himself in a network of other Muslim men, reconnecting with family, obtaining employment and housing and not returning to prison. Even greater, Shai was able to tell his story and articulate his desires to be a particular kind of a person, one that aligned with the societal norms.

Shai did not discount the struggles and challenges he faced when having to reintegrate back into society, while having to desist from engaging with his previous social networks or falling back into crime. However, he felt significantly more prepared and confident in returning to society because of his strong belief in Islam and the guidance he believed to be receiving from God. The principles of Islam served as his guide for how to become a man, how to become a productive citizen, and most importantly, how to navigate life outside of prison while maintaining a strong sense of self value. Shai's reflection of his reentry process provides us with a glimpse into the struggles Black men face after being released from prison and while having to navigate and situate oneself back into society. His narration of his experiences served as a means in which he was able to discuss Islam as more than just his religious identification, but also as a resource that allowed him to develop a new sense of self and identity. Through the telling of his story, Shai was able to situate himself as a 'good' citizen and convey his

perceptions of himself, as a productive member of society, even after having been incarcerated for a long period of time.

### **Personal Narratives of Reentry: Challenging and Expanding the Current Literature**

Maruna's (2001) research explores the narratives of ex-offenders, who work to rebuild their lives through processes of reentry and emphasizes the importance in men telling their stories about their experiences incarcerated and their lives after incarceration because of its capacity to transform lives. Hearing the stories of men who have personally undergone incarceration and the process of reentry is essential to understanding the challenges they face, the tools they utilize to transition, and the ways in which they come to define a 'positive' or 'successful' reentry. It also helps to challenge assumptions about men who were previously incarcerated and their likelihood to return to criminally engaged lives after incarceration and end up in prison again. Maruna's (2001) research sheds light on the complex psychological and social challenges men leaving prison face. Even further, his research discusses the significance of studying men who have been able to desist from crime despite the strong social forces that work against efforts at trying to make this change. His research was incredibly influential to the study of crime because of its emphasis on the importance of listening to personal narratives as a means of studying and better understanding processes of reentry and the ways ex-offenders manage to desist from crime.

I will utilize Maruna's (2001) approach in order to explore the reentry processes among Black men who converted to Islam while incarcerated, through analysis of their personal narratives. Conversion and reentry are both extensive processes that the men I spoke with have undergone. In different ways, each of the men describes Islam as an

identity resource that allows for the narration of self. It is significant for the men to engage in the process of self-narration as equally important as it is for those to listen to personal stories of reentry. In doing so, we can begin to understand Islam as essential to these men's identity formation and how they come to understand their roles in society. Exploring personal narratives is essential for understanding the complex social factors that affect men when leaving prison and transitioning back into society.

Maruna's (2001) research analyzes personal narratives as a way of understanding how ex-offenders desist from crime and refrain from returning to prison. The use of personal narratives in this chapter is to understand the challenges men face greater than just their individual battles to desist from crime and not return to prison. The use of personal narratives also helps to humanize the reentry process in a way that looking at statistics and numbers does not. For purposes of this research, I will analyze the stories told by the men I interviewed to demonstrate their ability to re-narrate their self in a way that situates them as good, Muslim men who are able to act as productive citizens in society even after their incarceration. Their narratives act as the greatest form of evidence for understanding how Islam allows them to develop a sense of self that is of value to them both in and out of prison. Their narratives also express the struggles they face while trying to align their desires to be a productive citizen with the actual societal norms, despite the structural barriers they are up against. This chapter seeks to explore the different ways Islam plays a role in the process of reentry among the men I interviewed.

First, it is important to note that within the context of this research; not returning to prison is only a fragment of what is meant when we discuss 'successful' transitions. For purposes of this research, successful transitions will be defined by the men



interviewed who have undergone processes of reentry. In each personal narrative, the men discussed a particular set of factors that contributed to their process of reentry and helped shaped their understanding of what constitutes a successful reentry. For the most part, successful reentry is understood by the men as desisting from crime, not returning to prison, remaining committed to Islam and its principles, obtaining housing and employment, reconnecting with family, and becoming embedded in supportive social networks. These factors significantly contributed to the stories of reentry shared by the men I interviewed. Lastly, it is important to take into account that the small sample of men interviewed and included in this study, are men who have been relatively successful in processes of reentry and who have remained faithful to Islam and are willing to discuss their experiences.

### **Desisting from Crime and Managing Reentry Processes**

During our interviews, each man was able to tell their own story of reentry and through that process they revealed the challenges they faced and the ways in which they were able to desist from crime and situate themselves back into society. They also revealed the ways in which Islam specifically, provided them with a framework for how to become a man and a citizen in a way that aligned with society's norms and expectations. This chapter will further explore personal narratives of individual reentry processes to better understand the unique experiences of Black men who have converted to Islam while incarcerated. Listening to their stories will help us understand the role Islam played throughout their reentry process and in their lives outside of prison. It also gives the men a chance to tell their stories in a way that is meaningful to them and emphasizes the role of Islam in shaping their sense of self. This chapter will operate

between two frameworks. One that presents, explores, and analyzes the personal narratives of the men and their experiences to highlight the importance of using personal narratives. Also, in order to understand and study reentry as a complex process and as a way in which men are able to normalize themselves as productive citizens with significant social roles and relationships. Secondly, this chapter will investigate processes of reentry under a more concrete, material framework, one that is typically used to study processes of reentry. It will focus on the men's experiences with obtaining employment, housing, and situating themselves in social networks that offer them ties to these things.

After serving a total of 25 years in prison, four of which were served on death row, where Amir was in complete isolation and confinement, he felt anxiety by the mere thought of being released from prison. Other than ties to his immediate family, Amir had lacked any connection with the outside world he was about to go back into and become forced to navigate. Amir's narration of his own reentry process is one which conveys his resilience, his determination, his commitment to Islam, and his passion to act as an advocate for others. When he converted to Islam while on death row, he was on a journey of self-recovery and wanted to develop a stronger sense of self in order to help him face the reality of his approaching execution date. When narrating the role Islam played in his life at the moment he converted he stated:

“It all starts with reading the Quran and something in your hearts tells you that this is what being a human being is all about. Islam teaches you how to be a better father, son husband, brother, and how to conduct yourself and treat others in a manner that is fair and just. These are the things that appealed to a lot of the men inside. Something missing in all of us, Islam fills that void of emptiness; your breath begins to expand.”

Even while on death row, Amir still turned to Islam as a guide for how to become a better man and navigate the multiple social roles one has to manage in society. At the time he

did not know that he would be exonerated and eventually released from prison. Amir's story of reentry was told in a humorous and joyous tone as he spoke about his excitement to finally be able to eat whatever he wanted from the refrigerator at any point in his day. But even greater, his narrative revealed the way in which conversion to Islam served as a discovery and formation of a new sense of self, one that he saw as necessary to his reentry process.

He discussed how Islam acted as a motivation for him both in and out of prison; it gave him a sense of purpose and a feeling that he could contribute positively to others and to the community in which he lived. Amir discussed the ways in which Islam encouraged him to be more proactive and to speak up about the injustices he witnessed. In light of this, he began to study law, sociology, and anthropology as a way of grounding himself intellectually in order to become an advocate for those who were in similar predicaments as the one he was once in. Leaving prison, Amir felt confident in his return back to society because he envisioned himself as a fighter for positive change and as an advocate for other formerly incarcerated Black men.

When discussing the way in which Islam changed his perception of reentry, Amir stated, "Islam provided me with a vision that upon release I could succeed and that God's will would continue to reveal to me the signs and symbols that I needed to take advantage of and to pursue the advocacy in my life." For Amir, Islam served a significant role in his reentry process because it allowed him to actually envision himself as a member of society. It also expanded his perceptions of what he could do for society and for other people. Islam provided Amir with a narrative for which to tell his story of resilience, one that he knew would help influence and change the lives of other men who were newly

released from prison. Islam also helped him envision and actualize a successful transition from life inside of prison to life outside of it. Reentering the world with a sense of purpose and a confidence in that purpose helped to significantly shape Amir's experience and his perceptions towards that experience.

Islam and its teachings remained with the men throughout their incarceration and through their processes of reentry as it continued to act as a guide for them, especially through their greatest difficulties. During our interview, Jelani identified Islam as helping him during his reentry process even more so than it helped him manage his incarceration time. He discussed his struggle with having to adjust to life outside of prison and his utilization of Islam as a means of creating structure in his daily life. In prison every aspect of his daily life was to an extent controlled by the conditions and demands of the institution and he had gotten used to having to adhere to the strict schedule and discipline of the prison. Leaving prison, Jelani was able to cultivate structure and discipline through his commitment to Islam because he had to arrange the hours when he had to pray and situated himself within the framework of what constituted a good Muslim according to the teachings of the Quran. Islam provided Jelani with a narrative that emphasized his new found sense of accountability. In our interview, Jelani stated,

“You have to go into it with an open heart and open mind. You have to love Islam because it holds people individually accountable. You are accountable for everything you do and you can't blame anyone else. When you take your shahada, you are verbally entering into a contract with God directly and are held accountable for all you do. Islam teaches you to be conscious and to question the things that you are uncertain of. You are allowed to question God and therefore, any other man on the planet.”

Jelani is narrating a new sense of accountability that he feels only Islam could offer him.

This new sense of accountability allowed Jelani to present a narrative that situated him as

an individual who was prepared to do right by society. He began to see his actions as having direct consequences for not only him, but for society at large. His commitment to Islam must be shown through his actions and through his interactions with other people. Islam also helped Jelani gain a particular level of confidence through his relationship with God. He felt more confident to not only go back into society but also to be able to question the world around him or any uncertainties he may have.

Through Islam, Jelani gained a new lens for which to view himself through, allowing him to become more critical of himself and his behaviors. The development of a new self or understanding of self is crucial for men engaging in processes of reentry because they are able to envision themselves as able to take on new social roles. They can imagine themselves reentering society and not going back to crime or returning to the same social spheres they previously existed in. The transformations of self they undergo through conversion and acceptance of Islam, allow them to form narrations that present them as individuals worthy of becoming viewed and understood by others as good citizens, despite their status as ex-offenders. Even further, it allows them to create the structure and discipline they believe is needed to act as a productive member of society and to steer them away from the possibility of returning to crime.

Previous chapters have discussed the ways Islam serves as a means in which incarcerated Black men can abandon previous social roles and embrace new ones, as well as embody a new form of masculinity. But what happens to the men when they leave prison? How does Islam help shape their understandings of their social roles and relationships outside the context of prison? During our interview, Rashad elicited a

narrative of citizenship, one that could be achieved through Islam, even after being incarcerated for a long period of time. Rashad stated,

“Yeah, Islam showed me a new etiquette and way to conduct myself. I became a wiser person; I began to read more and became better at articulating myself, communicating effectively, and being more presentable to society. Islam prepared me to sit in as a legit citizen, to conduct and carry myself respectfully, modestly. I became more caring, more humble, and began to think of others before I think of myself.”

Although men leaving prison have to deal with the stigma of being labeled ex-offenders (Trimbur, 2009), Islam provides them with a narrative which challenges society’s negative perceptions of them and allows the men to construct themselves as a good citizen. Through the telling of his story, Rashad identifies himself as someone who through his experiences incarcerated and converting was able to transform and normalize himself in a way that was conducive to societal norms. He saw himself as not an ex-felon but as a man of worth and value who took seriously his role in society as a citizen and as an individual. Seeing himself in this way was significant to his process of reentry as he worked to align his newly conceived perceptions of self with the norms and rules of society. Without Islam, Rashad would have no other guide to turn to in order to better develop a sense of self and be able to apply that to life outside of prison.

Rashad and many of the other men’s narratives presented are constructing a post-prison citizenship. Islam acts as a guide in so far that it shows them how to be a man, a legitimate citizen, and how to present oneself in a manner that will allow other people to also view them as worthy and respectable. Rashad’s experience is unique because he underwent two separate processes of reentry at different points in his life. Rashad was first incarcerated at the age of 17, and spent 25 months incarcerated. During his first sentence he converted to Islam at the age of 18, and was released from prison soon after.

When he was first released, he was only 19 years old and although he had felt committed to Islam and had the intentions of getting on a better path and finding legitimate employment, he ended up reengaging in criminal activity. Rashad felt that he had a loyalty to his longtime friend, someone who supported him while he was incarcerated. When Rashad was released, his friend who had previously supported him had gotten incarcerated and Rashad became responsible for overseeing his friend's street business.

Within two years Rashad found himself back in prison, this time he would have to serve ten years. During Rashad's ten year sentence he was able to re-develop his relationship with Islam more deeply and also mature as a person. Upon his second release from prison, Rashad had adapted a completely new and different mindset toward reentry and of his role in the reentry process. Rashad discusses the importance of his social role and relationships as a father and husband when he states:

“The second time being released I had my priorities in order. My children and family were my main focus. I knew I was going to stick to the script this time around. When you out you forget the aspects of prison, if you forget all the hardships you go through being in prison it is easier to return. The most important thing I did for myself was mentally eliminate the option of going back to selling drugs. I knew I had to try something else and if that didn't work out I would try something else, anything but going back to the street. I put in over 100 applications and within two months I found a sweat shop job and then landed a job as a maintenance guy at an apartment complex.”

Rashad comments on the role Islam played in helping to shape his understandings of what his duties were as a father and the ways in which Islam helped guide him to become a better father for his children. He states, “There's a huge misunderstanding with many Muslims. In Islamic traditions, the father is usually the one that leads the family, if the father is uneducated and is interpreting the Quran wrong the whole family suffers.” These two excerpts from Rashad's narrative illustrate his struggle to navigate the outside world

and refrain from reengaging in crime. He also identifies his level of commitment to Islam as having a significant impact on his reentry outcomes. After being incarcerated for a second time and having served a much longer sentence, Rashad's relationship with Islam expanded in a way that allowed him to develop a new sense of self and a new understanding of his role as a man and as a father. Leaving prison for the second time, Rashad felt more prepared to take on his role as a father to his children. For Rashad, becoming a productive father for his children meant being able to work and provide an income for his family. It also meant being educated and following the teachings of the Quran and then perpetuating that education onto his children. Islam allowed Rashad to re-narrate himself as a father even after having lost so much time with them because of his prison sentences.

Rashad identifies the characteristics that he developed through the process of conversion and the significance these characteristics will and have had on his reentry. He aligns his new behaviors, attitudes, and etiquette with the societal norms of the larger culture he is transitioning back into. Islam provided Rashad with a new moral framework, one that he perceived to be correlated to the behaviors of a productive and legitimate citizen in society. Rashad and all of the other men interviewed felt more prepared and confident as individuals to go back into society and act as a positive contributor to their community because of the changes and transformations of self, of their behaviors, and of their attitudes that were achieved through conversion to Islam. Rashad noted that conversion to Islam enabled him to develop himself more as an individual, both socially and intellectually. Lastly, Rashad identified a difference in his interactions and attitudes toward other people and the way in which those changes would benefit him as a member



of society because it would allow others to have a positive perception of him based on his immediate behavior and not on his past or status as an ex-offender.

Rashad's processes of reentry support the findings of Trimbur (2009) because when he remained more faithful and committed to his religion, he was able to imagine a more hopeful and positive transition and gained a motivation to work towards achieving those hopes. Islam provided him with the language needed to be able to re-narrate himself as a legitimate worker, a caring father and husband, and a productive citizen. Rashad struggled with many of the issues raised in Martin's (2013) research in that after being released the first time he went right back into his community and reconnected with his friends who were still engaged in criminal activity. Rashad was from an urban, low-income, minority neighborhood and had a limited view on his options for employment and returned to the life he previously knew, and that was one on the street. During Rashad's second transition he faced structural barriers when it came to finding employment but his consistency and patience eventually led him to finding a job. Most importantly, Rashad was able to tell the story of both his reentry experiences and identify the changes he made as an individual, for himself.

### **Challenging Social Stigma and Structural Barriers: The Construction of a Post-Prison Citizenship through Islam**

Personal narratives are used by the men when discussing their experiences incarcerated, converting, and reentering. Their personal narratives articulate the difficulty in finding a worthy sense of self and how this process is especially hard after having been incarcerated and having to transition back into a world in which they face huge structural barriers. As Black men who have a criminal record and who have been in

prison for long periods of time, they are entering back into a society in which they do not have the financial or material resources needed to support ones' self or to survive the outside world. Martin (2013), Trimbur (2009), and Fader (2013) each focus on the role of race in processes of reentry and the way larger structural forces create barriers for formerly incarcerated men of color. Martin's (2013) research alludes to the lack of resources men leaving prison have to help enable their transition back into society and argues that larger structural changes need to occur in order to address issues regarding reentry. Islam should be considered as an alternative solution regarding the issues men face while undergoing processes of reentry because of its ability to provide meaningful narratives for the men facing these challenges.

Goffman's (1963) theory of social stigma discusses how through social interactions we come to categorize and define people based on physical or visible attributes. As social beings, we tend to treat and view people based on the assumptions we have toward their particular physical features or attributes. He develops three primary typologies of stigma, which include abominations of the body (i.e. physical disabilities), blemishes of individual character (i.e. moral failings), and tribal stigma (i.e. race, religion, ethnicity), (Goffman, p. 4). Social stigma can be understood as severe social disapproval of an individual based on particular attributes that indicate their deviance from social norms (Goffman, 1963). The stigmatization of a person is dependent on social interactions and contexts because a person can only become stigmatized if someone else acts as the stigmatizer. Therefore, social stigma should be understood as a social relationship. Once a person becomes stigmatized, that stigma typically overpowers their other attributes, regardless if they align with the societal norms.

Goffman's (1963) theory of stigmatization is significant to the reentry processes of Black, Muslim men because they are a stigmatized population. In reference to the specific population I am discussing, I will apply two out of three of Goffman's primary typologies of stigma to understand how the men challenge their stigmas as ex-offenders through their identity as Muslim men. The first typology of stigma as defined by Goffman that will be applied is, 'blemishes of individual character', which are moral failings because these men are ex-offenders and are already labeled and viewed by society as deviant or criminal. The second typology of stigma I will consider and apply to analyze their narratives is tribal stigma, which includes racial, religious, or ethnic identities, because these men are Black and are Muslim. Their racial and religious identifications are attributes that become stigmatized by society and are many times perceived by others as a deviation from the social norms within the larger culture of American society. It is important to consider the three stigmas these men are operating against when discussing their processes of reentry because how society labels and views them can significantly affect their ability to transition and to reintegrate themselves back into society properly.

In our interview, Jelani's narrative reveals the ways Islam acted as a guide for him in his process of reentry when he states:

"Islam is the best thing I ever done in my life and Islam saved my life because if I wouldn't have converted to Islam, I would have still been engaged in the things I shouldn't have been engaged in. I couldn't put myself in the same situations. I know the long term consequences and long term results. It goes against everything in Islam and who I am as a Muslim. As a Muslim you have a responsibility to man-kind and the planet, if you engage in criminal activity you are violating those things right there."

Islam transformed the way Jelani viewed himself because of his new identity as a Muslim man. Taking on this identity allowed Jelani to be able to narrate his story through a different lens, one that emphasized his new sense of self, as someone who was a ‘good’ citizen. Jelani tells the story of being someone, who through Islam was able to develop a sense of self that he felt, was of value to the outside world he was reentering. His feelings of responsibility to humanity and to the society as a whole stemmed from his view of himself as a Muslim man and his understanding of what that meant in terms of his social role and relationships. From this new perspective, engaging in criminal activity was not only acting as a detriment to his life because of its severe consequences, but it also allowed him to see the ways his behaviors had direct effects on those around him and on his position in society.

Despite the challenges and barriers Jelani would face throughout his process of transitioning back into society, he did not let any structural barriers steer him back on a path of criminality. His identity as a Muslim man, his perceptions of that identity, and the principles of Islam acted as a resource for challenging the structural forces that could potentially drive him back towards crime as he became able to understand himself as more than just a Black man and ex-felon, but as a good Muslim and citizen. For Jelani, his identity as Muslim which would typically be understood as a stigmatized identity actually operated as a positive identity force in his life because he felt that it overpowered his stigmatized label as an ex-offender.

Jelani’s narrative challenges Goffman’s concept of tribal stigma because through his perspective, the typically stigmatized identity as Muslim actually benefitted him throughout his process of reentry. For Jelani, his identification as a Muslim man, made

him feel more aligned with the societal norms as opposed to making him feel as if he was deviating against those norms. His identity as Muslim helped him navigate away from the stigma of being an ex-offender. It is also important to note that this may be a result of the social networks and relationships Jelani was grounded in. For example, if a Black, Muslim man who is an ex-felon spends majority of his time with other Black, Muslim men, some of who are also ex-offenders, they would not be stigmatized based on those attributes because it is common within that specific social group. Also, religious identification may be harder to detect from people outside of one's immediate relationship and network. Whereas, one's race is more visible and can be easily be stigmatized by others.

Islam acts as a resource that the men would otherwise not have had access to in order to combat the stigmas of them being ex-offenders. Although they may still face stigmatization because of their identity as Muslim, what's important are the men's perceptions of their own identity as Muslim and the way that serves to normalize them as citizens and counter the stigmatization of them as criminals. The stigmatization of them as Black was not directly brought up in any of the personal narratives of reentry but unlike their religious identification or status as an ex-offender, their race cannot be concealed and so they may still be stigmatized based on other's perceptions of them as Black and the stereotypes that stigma is generally associated with.

Tramel's narrative of his changed perceptions towards himself and reentry, also spoke about the ways in which his identity as Muslim helped to combat the stigma of being an ex-offender when he stated:

“Before I went to prison or became Muslim I only saw myself as being and doing one thing and that was hustling. Coming out of prison it was a different story. I only saw myself as Muslim and

the last thing I imagined myself doing again was hustling. It's actually funny because I thought I was so tough. I was always trying to prove something, but when I got out the only thing I wanted to prove was that I was a good Muslim and that I followed the word of Allah and that I could be a real member of society and do right. I wasn't no hustler anymore, I was a legitimate worker and member of society."

Tramel's narrative reveals the ways in which his identity as Muslim served to eliminate his previous identity as a hustler or criminal. He provides us with a story of personal transformation and his ability to develop a new sense of self through his commitment to Islam. He began to see himself as having the opportunity to be more than a hustler and saw reentry as his means of re-establishing himself as a worthy citizen because of his ability to obtain legitimate employment and refrain from engaging in criminal activity. For Tramel, his identity as Muslim was the only way he could begin to align himself with societal norms and abandon his previous status as a criminal because of the values it instilled in him. Within the micro-context of his life and his immediate social roles and relationships, his identity as Muslim did not act as a stigmatized identity, but instead served to combat the stigma of him as a criminal. His desires to find legitimate employment and become a respected member of society were a direct result of his relationship with Islam. Without his identity as Muslim, Tramel only saw himself as a hustler and that change in perception of self, positively contributed to his process of reentry and transition back into society.

The narratives of Jelani and Tramel help challenge Goffman's (1963) theory of social stigma because of their ability to turn a stigmatized identity, one that is typically viewed as deviating from the social norm, to an identity that actually served to align them with societal norms. However, it is important to consider the contentions to this argument because on a macro scale, their identity as Muslim may be stigmatized by people outside

of their immediate networks as well as by society as a whole. Given the current political and social climate of America, identifying as Muslim and being perceived as such, as well as being a Black man who has a criminal record, could serve as a major detriment to their processes of reentry and lives outside of prison. It is important to note that people become stigmatized based on the stigmatizer's perceptions of them; regardless of if those assumptions are accurate or not. While the men cannot conceal their Blackness, they may be able to conceal their religious identification or even their status as ex-offenders.

However, particular physical attributes, such as a beard or traditional Islamic clothing can act as signifiers to others which may lead to the stigmatization of them as Muslim. The research conducted is not enough to conclude that their identity as Muslim fully served as a means of combatting structural barriers and other forms of stigmatization. However, these narratives serve a significant function in the process of reentry and the overall lives of these men because it allows them to envision themselves in a way that challenges other people's perceptions or stigmatizations of them. What is significant, is the ability their identity as Muslim gives them in order to reimagine themselves in society as existing other than criminal or ex-offender and to construct a post-prison citizenship.

### **Religious Commitment and Outcomes of Reentry**

The above narratives each tell the story of how conversion to Islam and one's identity as Muslim benefitted them throughout their processes of reentry and contributed to a more successful transition. Trimbur (2009) found that for men reentering, who decided not to engage in criminal activity, are able to actualize their goals through disciplinary practices or techniques. She also found that men who have religious loyalties tend to take long – term approaches to achieving their goals and remain

committed to not returning to crime. Based on the narratives of the men I interviewed, they each expressed a great desire to leave prison and never return to engaging in criminal activity or prison. Of the ten men I spoke with, only one man admitted to returning to criminal activity after converting and being incarcerated. None of the men I interviewed disclosed that they anticipated returning to criminal activity upon their release from prison. As Trimbur (2009) concluded, the research I conducted supports the assertion that there is a correlation between the level of commitment one has to their religion and their views and outcomes of reentry.

An overwhelming majority of the sample of men I interviewed, remained faithful to Islam and continued to practice their religion and as a result, had felt more prepared leaving prison and confident that they would be able to transition and reintegrate themselves back into society successfully. Their perceptions of themselves significantly contributed to their processes of reentry because they viewed themselves as being able to take on social roles that were important to them, including becoming a legitimate worker, acting as a father and a husband, and being a Muslim who followed the word of God. However, what are the outcomes for the men who converted to Islam in prison but did not remain fully committed to the religion upon release from prison?

During our interview, one young man spoke of his struggle to remain faithful to Islam and live outside of prison while refraining from criminal activity. Malik age 22, stated, "I didn't feel like Islam was going to help me out of prison. I didn't have full faith in it and that was my downfall. I didn't prepare myself or fully believe Islam can help me so when I got out I went back to the block, to what I knew. I needed to be fully focused but I just went back to crime."



For Malik, converting to Islam and identifying as Muslim was not enough to keep him from refraining from criminal activity. Malik is significantly younger than the other men interviewed and his two and a half year prison sentence was significantly shorter than the other men discussed in this chapter. Malik described his struggle with finding interest in school and his lack of motivation for finding a job because he felt his search would be useless considering his status as an ex-felon, his age, and his lack of experience. After being released, Malik continued to attend Mosques and Mass Jihad's in order to complete his daily prayers and remain connected to the Islamic faith. Malik expressed that he separated his religious and spiritual life from his everyday life. For Malik, Islam helped him develop a better perception of the world and develop a relationship with God through prayer, but his faith and commitment to Islam did not guarantee employment or break the structural barriers that made it hard for him to obtain employment. The decision to return to crime had already been made for him because of his race, his socio-economic status, his status as an ex-offender, and his limited social network. He felt and knew that it would be easier and faster to obtain money through illegal activities as opposed to searching for and obtaining legitimate employment.

As a young Black male from a low-income minority community, Malik felt as though Islam could offer him something personally but knew it could not change things structurally. He struggled to reconcile between the benefits Islam offered him as a person in terms of his changed behaviors, and the structural obstacles he was inevitably set up against. Malik did not have a hopeful perception of his reentry nor did he have a strong belief in Islam and its ability to solve all of his issues, especially those concerning his financial status. Unlike the other nine men I interviewed, who viewed Islam as a way of

combatting structural barriers and challenging their stigmas as ex-offenders, Malik saw these structural barriers and stigmas as being unescapable regardless of his religion or his commitment to Islam. However, while reflecting on his experience, Malik did note that if he had been more faithful to Islam and practiced its core principles in his everyday life, he would have been more likely to have refrained from returning back to his previous activities, but felt that at that point in his life his major concern was supporting himself financially.

### **Building Resources and the Importance of Social Networks**

As previously mentioned and discussed, men of color transitioning from life within prison to life within their communities face institutional obstacles and structural barriers which make it difficult for them to obtain legitimate employment, find stable housing, maintain relationships with family, and become productive members of their communities (Fader, 2013). Many men of color are leaving prison and returning to the low-income, minority neighborhoods (Martin 2013, Wacquant, 2004) from which they are originally from, only to be met with the same structural barriers they faced prior to incarceration. These structural barriers include poverty, racism, and discrimination. The obstacles and barriers men of color face have already been established. Each narrative, spoke about the necessity of utilizing Islam as a framework and system of support needed to navigate society and reintegrate themselves effectively. This speaks to the lack of resources that are available to men who are leaving prison. The men I spoke with had to find and utilize their own mechanisms for transitioning into and surviving the outside world. Islam acted as a connecting and driving force for majority of the men I spoke with

because of its ability to guide them, their behaviors, attitudes, and help them set goals for themselves in the absence of any other options.

Islam should be considered as a disciplinary practice and technique that men use to get through and manage reentry processes. Conversion to Islam also places and embeds men within a new social network, one dominated by other Muslim men who may have also been incarcerated. The social group of Muslim men that is formed within the prison extends beyond their lives in prison and allows men to leave prison and establish a new social network of other Muslim men. This section will look at the ways conversion to Islam places newly released Black men within a new social network, one that they were not exposed or bounded to prior to incarceration. The social networks that are formed and sustained in and outside of the prison are made up of other Muslim men who may have also been incarcerated, as opposed to family members. These networks significantly contributed positively to the men's reentry processes in ways that are beyond just the attainment of employment.

After serving nearly 25 years in prison, four of which were served on death row, Amir, age 50, was anxious about leaving prison and returning to the outside world he left when he was just 25 years old. In our interview, Amir joked about his most difficult transition being the process of getting acquainted with the new and advanced technologies that had developed while he was away, particularly the overwhelming use of smart phones. Throughout his prison sentence Amir remained in close contact with his family so upon release he was able to be paroled to his aunt's house. Like majority of the other men interviewed, Amir's family ties helped particularly with obtaining housing.

While incarcerated, Amir spent majority of his time studying and learning about a variety of topics from law to anthropology.

Upon his release he had been recruited by a nearby reentry program that specifically focused on Muslim men who had been incarcerated. Recruitment into this reentry organization was the moment in which Amir became embedded in a new social network. Becoming connected with a reentry organization significantly contributed to Amir's reentry process and his ability to reintegrate himself back into a society he had been casted out of for so long. He was not only able to attain employment at the organization but he was also able to become connected with other Muslim men who were in similar predicaments as himself and they established a network of support amongst each other. Amir currently helps operate a home for ex-offenders and assists them in other counseling and mentoring services. He was able to use his experiences as a way of helping other men who were going through processes of reentry. The men in his network acted as re-enforcers for one another and ensured that they all remained on the path they perceived to be positive.

Working and being a part of an outside organization that focuses on reentry among men, a majority of who identify as Muslim, is crucial to Amir's identity as a Black, Muslim man, as well as to his transition process. Working with this organization not only provided him with employment and the ability to obtain housing of his own but it also situated him in a network that was made up of predominantly other Black men who were formerly incarcerated and who too, converted to Islam. Outside of his work, Amir was able to maintain and lead a productive and criminally free life because he is constantly surrounded by other men who have similar experiences and aspirations. They

serve as a system of support for one another and engage in positive activities, including those directly connected to Islam, such as praying and attending Jumar on Fridays.

Majority of Amir's network is made up of people who he connected with through work and those he was able to meet and connect with while attending religious services. All the men he surrounded himself by had been through similar experiences and were also undergoing similar processes of reentry.

### **Social Control Theory and the Significance of Social Networks in Processes of Reentry:**

Hirschi's (1969, 1977) social control theory contends that individuals who lack or lose a bond with society turn to crime because of the lack of control one has over their environment and conditions and the lack of connection or investment one has with society. When we feel that we cannot control a situation, we revert to deviant behavior to achieve instant gratification regardless of the risks or consequences. Hirschi identified four 'connectors' or ways in which people become involved in society in a way that allows them to feel in control. These include attachment, belief, commitment, and involvement (Hirschi, 1969, 1977). These four connectors are each significant to understanding processes of reentry among Black men who converted to Islam while incarcerated and the ways in which their narratives demonstrate how through Islam they were able to develop feelings of control over their post-prison lives and form societal bonds.

The first connector, attachment, refers to a person's immediate social network and relationships, including their family, friends, and other like-minded people who help connect them to the world. Each narrative of the men I interviewed discussed the

importance for them to leave prison and reconnect with family as well as establish and embed themselves in a network of other Muslim men. One's social networks outside of prison helped them to continue and maintain a re-narration of self. Connecting with other Muslim men allowed them to surround themselves with like-minded people, those who shared a common faith and understanding of what it is like to be a Black, Muslim man.

Previous sociologists have discussed the significance of social networks, particularly for the attainment of employment (Calvo-Armengol et al. 2004, Granovetter 1983). Individual interactions and circumstances are affected by larger social structures and as a result, individuals are placed in or connected to particular social networks and excluded from others. However, as Granovetter (1983) contends "weak ties", those that are not direct and are often formed through mutual relations or circumstances are just as beneficial as stronger ties, those which are more immediate and direct. One's social position, racial or ethnic background, and economic status are significantly tied to the social networks that an individual is bound to, born into, or exposed to. Previous scholarly research has found that formerly incarcerated men who maintain steady employment and who develop and sustain close ties with members of their family are less likely to return to prison (Berg and Huebner, 2011, Glaser, 1964). Having strong ties with family members mainly contributes to lower rates of recidivism because it is an indirect means by which formerly incarcerated men attain employment. Current research on the importance of social networks focuses primarily on its ability to lead to the attainment of employment.

The narratives of the men I interviewed reveal the ways in which social networks helped them become more connected to society in a way they had never been able to

before, as well as help them concretely in the process of obtaining employment. For Jelani, developing and maintaining social bonds with other men who had similar lived experiences and who were faithful to Islam was crucial to his own transition and progression. Jelani stated, “After leaving prison I wanted to be around other men who knew what it felt like to be incarcerated and who knew the power of Islam. If I didn’t find other brothers who been through what I been through I believe I would be back in prison this very moment.” For Jelani, establishing and becoming embedded within a social network of other formerly incarcerated Muslim men was essential to his reentry process. Among the network of Muslim men, they are able to foster moral codes and internalize them in a way that allowed them to align their selves with societal norms and feel connected to each other and to the world in which they lived. Jelani’s immediate network made up of other Muslim men, allowed him to develop strong and stable attachments with others which helped him maintain a post –prison citizenship because he became less likely to deviate from the principles of Islam, which also meant refraining from violating social norms.

Maintaining strong social bonds with others makes one less likely to deliberately engage in criminal behavior because that would not only affect them but would also sever or weaken their attachments (Hirschi, 1969, 1977). This immediate social network for Jelani was not about finding employment or housing; rather it was based on forming attachments with others who shared similar values and desires to align with societal norms. Jelani surrounded himself with people he could see himself in and who would act as an example and a reminder for how he should conduct himself as a Muslim man.

In another interview, Shai, whose narrative I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, discusses the importance of maintaining a network of other formerly incarcerated Muslim men throughout his process of reentry. For Shai, it was essential that he be surrounded by other men who shared a deep belief and commitment to Islam. Hirschi's theory of social control discusses the importance of the connectors, commitment and belief, in how people become involved in society in a way they feel in control of. The connector, commitment can be understood as when an individual invests time and energy into particular social activities or institutions. Based off of all the personal narratives presented, including Shai's, we can understand one's investment and obligation to the principles of Islam and the guidelines attached to the identity of Muslim as an example of the connector, commitment. Binding ones' self to a network of other Muslim men is crucial because it allows them to maintain their commitment to Islam as well as sustain strong social bonds, which further connects them to Islam and their identities as Muslim. The more invested the men are to Islam, the less likely they are to return to criminal or deviant behaviors and the closer they become to aligning themselves with societal norms.

Hirschi's (1969) element of belief can be directly linked to the institution of religion and its ability to foster a sense of control over one's environment and strengthen one's bond with society. According to the teachings of Islam, the men utilize their beliefs to mitigate between bad and good behavior. Surrounding oneself with other Muslim men can be seen as a way in which these men are able to maintain their commitment to Islam, desist from criminal behavior, and better align themselves with societal norms.

Shai also stated that through his immediate social network, he was able to get in contact with other Muslim men who connected him with an organization dedicated to



services regarding reentry for newly released men. Through his immediate network, Shai was able to form what Granovetter (1983) refers to as “weak ties”, which lead him to obtaining stable employment. Not only did Shai’s social network allow him to maintain a narrative of himself as a good Muslim, it also helped him actualize his desires to align with societal norms because he was able to gain legitimate employment and remain connected to a religious institution.

The last connector of Hirschi’s social control theory is the element of involvement. Involvement can be understood as one’s social role, the more a person is attached to particular social roles the more they feel that they serve a purpose in society and the greater their bond becomes. Embedding oneself in a network of other Muslim men who maintain stable jobs, are consistently committed to Islam, and who refrain from criminal activity is essential to how the men come to view and understand themselves and their social role. All of the men were able to maintain social networks and relationships with other Muslim men because of their involvement in community Mosque’s, Mass Jihads, and reentry programs. Being connected to these institutions provided them with a sense of purpose and gave meaning to their identities as Muslim men. Their identities as Muslim men were also significant to their other social roles as workers, fathers, husbands, and friends. As previously mentioned, Islam and the teachings of the Quran provided them with a guide for how to act as a citizen, a father, a husband, a friend, and as a legitimate worker.

Involvement is essential to processes of reentry because it not only connects a person to society and its institutions, but it also connects them to other people. The more involved the men are in their families or in their communities, the more they also develop

the elements of commitment, attachment, and belief. During our interview, Rahsad stated, “It does not matter what city I am in, where I have traveled to, I always find a Mosque or Mass Jihad to attend. I pray, I listen to sermons, and best of all I meet brothers who I do not know in an atmosphere of brotherly love.” For Rashad, it is essential to his identity and role as a faithful Muslim to attend services related to his faith, which further displays the importance of commitment. Secondly, attending these services or sites of worship allows Rashad to become more embedded within a network of other Muslim men and deepen his attachment to the institution of Islam. These spaces also generate feelings of attachment, purpose, and love, which can help one feel closer to the world in which they live and allow them to feel that they have a level of control over their environment. Lastly, the more an individual becomes involved with an activity the less likely they become to return to engaging in criminal activity. Rashad and all the men that I interviewed spoke about the necessity of attending Mosques, Mass Jihads, and other services related to Islam because it allowed them to spend their time engaging in things that were meaningful to them, with others who shared similar systems of belief. Involving themselves in these activities allowed them to continue to desist from criminal activities or behaviors.

Examining individual processes of reentry, specifically among Black men who converted is significant to the larger discussions surrounding the importance of social networks. The narratives and stories of the men presented in this chapter reveal and expand our notion of why or how social networks are useful. Previous research on the importance of social networks in processes of reentry primarily focuses on family ties and the ability to find employment through these networks because of its impact on lower

recidivism rates (Berg and Huebner, 2011, Glaser, 1964). The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that family networks have been primarily important in the process of obtaining housing but not necessarily in finding employment. Many men explained that through networks of other Muslim men they were able to find employment and were also connected to reentry programs and organizations. Social networks established and built among formerly incarcerated Muslim men provide them with social, emotional, and religious support throughout their processes of reentry.

Their level of attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief in Islam allowed them to gain a positive relationship with society and view themselves as valuable citizens and Muslims. Through Islam, the men gained a sense of control over their lives, their selves, their environment, and their outcomes of reentry. Their identities as Muslim helped them deal with and navigate the structural barriers and stigmas they faced or could potentially face. The men also refrained from engaging in criminal activity because of their investment to the social relationships they formed and their commitment and belief in Islam. It allowed them to narrate their process of reentry in a way that constructed them as citizens who served a social purpose and who maintained valuable social roles. While their identities as Muslim men do not eliminate the structural and institutional obstacles they or other Black men leaving prison may face, it did help them establish a worthy sense of self.

Further research should look more in depth at the benefits and significance of social networks in processes of reentry among formerly incarcerated men of color. Social networks should not only be understood as a means by which one finds employment or housing, it should further be explored as a mechanism by which formerly incarcerated

men construct a post-prison citizenship and challenge their stigmatized labels as ex-offenders. Further research should also consider the use of personal narratives of men who have actually underwent processes of reentry as a means of better understanding the challenges they face and how they come to define successful reentry. Within prison men become attracted to the presentation of self among the group of Muslim men and form a social and religious group within the prison based on those characteristics. Upon release from prison the men seek to maintain these relationships and look to form a cohort of formerly incarcerated Muslim men, in order to maintain their commitment to Islam, and to their new attitudes and behaviors.

Lastly, conversion to Islam should be further investigated as a mechanism by which Black men are able to combat and get through the structural barriers and social stigmas that they will inevitably face. Islam is an outlet Black men use outside of prison to maintain a positive and hopeful view toward their transition. They also maintain the moral framework that Islam initially provided them with in prison, outside of prison as well. Connecting with other Muslim men and outside communities of Muslim people helped to keep newly released men engaged and grounded in a significant network of people who supported them throughout their process of reentry and who did not seek to stigmatize their identities as Black, Muslim men, or their status as ex-offenders. The interviews with the men presented demonstrate the positive effects conversion to Islam has had on their reentry process and supports previous findings (Trimbur, 2009) that commitment to religion has long term, constructive effects on men of colors' life outside of prison.

## Conclusion

Based on ten interviews I conducted with Black men who converted to Islam while incarcerated, their narratives reveal that conversion is an extensive process that leads to the discovery and construction of a new self. The men told their stories of having to struggle to survive the confining, isolating, and oppressive nature of the prison and articulated their journey to finding Islam behind the bars of their prison cells as transformative. They spoke of their selves prior to incarceration and conversion as people they no longer knew and saw Islam as a means of regaining control over their lives and their environment. Prison has typically been discussed as a place in which an individual abandons any previous understanding of self and becomes detached from their social roles (Goffman, 1961, Sykes, 1958), the narratives of the men support this claim as they speak of their time incarcerated as a moment in which they were forced to abandon their previous ways of life and understandings of self. However, their stories reveal that within prison, processes in which men develop and reformulate a sense of self are also taking place. Conversion to Islam should be understood as a journey toward self-discovery and a reclaiming of one's power over one's self.

Conversion to Islam leads to the formation of an individual's identity as a "Muslim man." The presence of Islam among the group of Muslim men in the prison helps to form a collective identity, which challenges the existing social and racial structuring of the prison. The Muslim men in the prison utilize Islam and its principles as a resource toward performing and achieving a new masculinity, one that challenges the hegemonic form of the prison. The men converting to Islam within prison are able to embody a new form of masculinity in order to further distance themselves from who they were prior to

incarceration, as well as from the other inmates. The men utilize the Quran and the principles of Islam as guides for understanding how to become a man, how to regain control over their previous social roles, and how to navigate society outside of prison.

Islam not only acted as a mechanism for managing and surviving their incarceration time, but it also helped them construct a post-prison citizenship. Islam provided them with a new level of confidence and a more hopeful perception toward their reentry process and transition back into society. The men left prison and were able to embed themselves in new social networks, which consisted of other Muslim men. Through these social networks, their commitment to Islam, and their involvement with organizations and institutions, the men were able to redevelop a bond with society. Based on the narratives of the men I interviewed, their level of commitment to their faith contributed to the outcomes of their reentry because Islam provided them with a life-long framework for how to become a productive member of society and provided them with the tools needed to reintegrate themselves back into society.

Although their personal narratives spoke largely about the ways in which Islam helped them throughout their incarceration and throughout their reentry processes, it is important to note that the men I spoke with are men who have had relatively successful outcomes and who are actively connected to a network of other Muslim men. These are also the men who wanted to discuss their commitment to Islam and their experiences converting. It is important to consider that given the socio-political climate of America today, identifying as a Black, Muslim man who also is also labeled as an ex-offender can act as a detriment to their processes of reentry. In one interview, when I asked if he wanted to add anything, Rashad stated:

“In 2015, conversation about Islam in the world today is always associating it with terrorism and I just want to say that the overall majority of Muslims, 99%, do not condone terrorism. We are not about anger or hurt or war, or anything negative. We are all about promoting positivity, and helping one another.”

It is important to consider the everyday struggles and discrimination these men face based on their race, their religious identification, and their status as ex-offenders. More research should consider the personal narratives of individuals who have been affected by systems of mass incarceration and who struggle in their reentry processes because of the structural and social barriers they face. Listening to the narratives of men who have converted to Islam while incarcerated is a great approach toward understanding the effects that larger systems and institutions have on individual lives and experiences.

More research should also be done on conversion to Islam within prisons because it is a phenomenon that has become increasingly more common and visible in American prisons. Listening to and considering the first-hand accounts of individuals who have gone through the American prison system and who have underwent processes of reentry can help us better understand the obstacles and barriers they face. Further research on this matter can also help towards creating policy and legislative changes. For example, based on the narratives of the men I spoke with, they revealed that there was a lack of resources available to them when they left prison. In spite of this, the men had to rely on their own efforts to create resources for themselves and embed themselves in networks that would help them gain access to employment opportunities and reentry organizations. More services and support should be provided to men and women leaving prison in order to assist people as they transition from live inside prison to live outside of it.

## Appendix 1: Interview Questions

- What religion do you identify with?
- What sector of Islam do you identify with?
- Do you consider yourself to be a religious person today?
- Tell me about your experiences with religion.
- At what age were you first incarcerated?
- Tell me about your experience while incarcerated.
- At what age did you convert to Islam?
- How much time did you spend in prison?
- What prison were you in when you converted?
- When and how did you first become introduced to Islam?
- Who first introduced you to Islam?
- Were you encouraged to convert to Islam by anyone in the prison?
- At what point did you decide to convert to Islam?
- Why did you choose to convert to Islam?
- Tell me about your conversion experience.
- Was conversion to Islam popular in the prison you were in?
- Can you identify particular social groups who were converting to Islam in the prison you were incarcerated in?
- Did they disclose to you why they were converting?
- How do you think being incarcerated shaped your decision to convert/your interest in Islam?
- Are there any specific aspects of the Islamic faith's principles that particularly appealed to you? If so, which ones?
- How did your life change after you converted to Islam?
- Tell me about the first six months of your life after being released from prison.
- Did converting to Islam help change your feelings toward re-entering society? If so, how?
- How did converting change your perceptions
  - Of yourself
  - Of incarceration?
- Do you attend any Mosques or are you involved in any other religious or Islamic institutions/programs?
- How did you get introduced to these programs/ religious institutions?
- What do you do when attending these programs/ religious institutions?
- To which social groups or people are you most connected?
- Are there any other ways that Islam is a support system for you?
- Have you ever considered converting to another religion?
- Would you urge other African American men to convert to Islam while incarcerated? If so, why?
- What is your current age?
- What race do you self -identify with?
- Is there something I didn't ask that I should have?



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