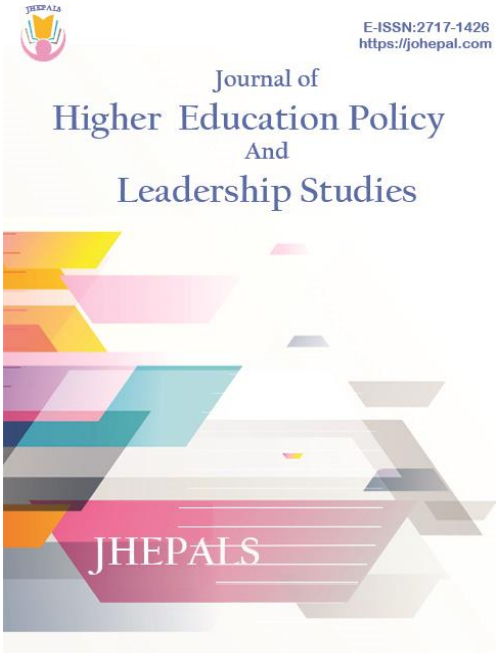
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College Behind Bars *Vis a Vis* the School-To-Prison Pipeline: Cause and Effect

Frederick V. Engram Jr.
Department of Criminology/Criminal Justice and the Center for African American Studies, University of Texas-Arlington, USA
Email: frederick.engram@uta.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3407-0739

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Frederick V. Engram Jr. *

Abstract

Criminality and criminal mindedness are automatic qualifiers affixed to incarcerated or formerly incarcerated persons. Very rarely are individuals seen as human and as individuals who lived life as free persons prior to their convictions. Many are only seen as their offense and by the number stitched to their clothing. When I was informed that I would be teaching (CRCJ 4333) Institutional Corrections during the Spring 2021 semester I decided that I wanted to re-imagine how we would explore incarceration and incarcerated persons. Guided by the theories of causation and critical race theory I assert that we must focus on the cause and effect associated with offending as well as the stories associated with those labeled "offenders". Many aspects of carceral research focus on understanding the offense but many lack the empathy to explore the root. This is largely because the root of crime and criminality in many cases concerning marginalized communities is tied to survival. Surviving white supremacy and surviving the communities that white supremacy imprisoned them in. This article will take a qualitative approach to understanding the lived experiences of the formerly incarcerated and how the 19 students enrolled in the course engaged with them.

Keywords: Anti-Blackness; School-to-Prison; Critical Race Theory; Causation; Copaganda; White Manning, Higher Education

* **Corresponding author's email:** frederick.engram@uta.edu

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The Initiative

At the end of the Fall 2020 semester, I began prepping for my spring courses and started considering ways to make my course prep exciting and innovative. At this point all faculty as well as students had been isolated in our own virtual learning environments for closing in on a year. The realization that our return to normal would escape us for yet another semester was becoming all too real. I had considered all of the feedback provided from students and was determined to make my introduction to teaching Institutional Corrections one to remember. As I sat alone in my home in mid to late December, I began contemplating on what new ideas or approaches I could take to reimagine the corrections course. I knew for certain that I did not want to take the copaganda approach to teaching this course much less any of the others. Copaganda, which is described as propaganda aimed at creating favorable perceptions of law enforcement in the media while simultaneously criminalizing marginalized persons, namely Black and Latinx persons (Neal, 2020).

I wanted to teach my students how to focus on the cause of their circumstances which led to incarceration and not the incarceration itself. In my preparation, I recall watching the PBS series College Behind Bars a year prior and thinking about how I could nix some of the previous mundane work in the syllabus and include some once in a lifetime learning experiences. I knew that it would be a longshot, but I figured what is the purpose of having an engaging social media presence if I could not use my network to liven up a learning experience. College Behind Bars is a documentary film created by Lynn Novick that tells the story of a partnership between Bard College and Eastern and Taconic Correctional facilities. The film does a deep dive into the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) and provides a bird's eye perspective into an innovative way of reducing recidivism of currently incarcerated persons once they are released. BPI works at redefining the affordability, availability, and expectations that are typically associated with earning a higher education (BPI, 2021). Created in 2001, BPI enrolls over 300 incarcerated students with the intention of transforming negative impacts of criminal punishment and creates radical inroads of access and opportunity to higher education (BPI, 2021). BPI offers extensive support to alum of the program as well as developed an extensive summer residency aimed at providing hands on workshops for preparing to enter or re-enter college (BPI, 2021). The workshops are taught by both BPI alum and staff (BPI, 2021). I thought this would be a perfect opportunity to teach about causation and the existence of white supremacy as a regular factor in sentencing, crime, and criminality.

I thought what better way for my students, many who will likely professionally enter the criminal justice system; to unlearn and relearn how to look at people who are labeled criminal-- as humans. As I pondered upon my approach I also considered who within my proximity would also be a great fit for this initiative. As a New Yorker, an 80s baby, and a child of the 90s I am intimately familiar with how the school-to-prison pipeline directly attacked many of my peers. Most who have served their time and are now dedicated members of society, business owners, family men, and positive influences in the community. It allowed me to sit for a minute and be in awe of what they had accomplished even after all that had been taken away from them. The introspection also allowed me to think through some possibilities and approaches. After a careful consideration, I posted to my Twitter as well as my Facebook accounts soliciting names of interested people who fit the criteria. The

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criteria were simple but the request included the following, "I am seeking a formerly incarcerated person willing to share their story and also provide an update on what you are up to now". The focus was on highlighting how anti-Blackness, anti-poverty, and lack of opportunities created the need for participating in illegal activities aimed simply at surviving. From that moment my inboxes began to flood with people offering up their own stories or stories of someone near and dear to them.

I selected three participants for the learning initiative. Dr. Jack S. Monell who currently serves as an Associate Professor of Justice Studies and current Chair of the Faculty Senate at Winston Salem State University. I also contacted two members of the PBS series College Behind Bars (Dyjuan Tatro & Giovannie "Gio" Hernandez) both who I am connected with via social media. All graciously agreeing to attend my virtual class sessions to share their stories and provide updates for my students. The students would then be tasked with writing reflection papers based upon the lectures as well as each of the series episodes. The question that I ultimately decided to answer was, how does engaging with formerly incarcerated persons change the perceptions of them for undergraduate criminology majors.

The Implementation

As with all decisions that could come with publicity or backlash I did what any junior faculty member would do and that is alert my Department Chair and Director. I also notified university media relations about what I planned to offer in my course in the event that the initiative made its way to social media so that they could have first dibs. The university media relations team agreed that it would be an amazing story to tell and we scheduled a date for a representative to sit in on one of the virtual meetings. Dr. Monell joined us on February 9th, Gio joined us on March 2nd, and Dyjuan wrapped up the guest lectures with his visit on March 30th. Although Dr. Monell is not affiliated with College Behind Bars or BPI in any way I believed that his story of being incarcerated in his youth and working his way through the academy and into the role of Faculty Chair cannot be understated and is a story worth sharing. Not to mention his nation-wide Walden ad that certified him as a celebrity to my students.

College Behind Bars is a four-part series with each episode being close to an hour in length. Students were tasked with watching each episode and then responding to a list of questions regarding the episode and how they interpreted it. The questions that students were asked to consider in their reflections were 1.) What role did race and racism play in sentencing? 2. What disparities existed in each of the stories that led to offending? 3.) In considering the concept of "reform" as a public good is free college for incarcerated persons a good idea? Considering that we are located in Texas, in a conservative city, and in a discipline that pushes copaganda it is safe to say that "some" of the first episode reflections were "colorful". As the weeks progressed and the emphasis of focusing on cause and not solely on the effect the students who were the outliers began shifting in their positions. Once students were able to engage face to face with Dr. Monell, Gio, and Dyjuan they became inquisitive about each of them as people and ultimately were invested in what they were up to. This was not just a class but it became an immersive learning experience rooted in intentionality, disruption, and ultimately unlearning and relearning. Or as I liked to call it—Tuesday.

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Cause and Effect

Gijsbers (2020) states that philosophical theories of causation are commonly judged by their ability to correctly determine whether there is a causal relation that is present in certain scenarios. I assert in all of my courses that in order for us to better understand the human condition and more specifically the Black lived experience within the context of America coupled with racism and white supremacy; we must look at both cause and effect. Looking at the cause and effect of criminality and the automatic attachment to Blackness each aspect must be considered in any true measurement of offending. Ignoring the very real issue of racism in crime and punishment is race neutral-color blindness and that is a form of white supremacy. Black and Latinx youth during the post-Civil Rights era have constantly been under attack by both the right and left wings of political leadership for close to forty years. The ushering in of the bullshit theory of super-predators as a threat to both democracy and humanity while protecting the actual threat which is white mediocrity and white supremacy is on brand. The bait and switch tactics of false information created and often shopped from media outlet to media outlet helped to further the narrative of Black youth as dangerous and needing to be socially controlled. This tactic alone cost us a generation of Black and Latinx youth who had the potential to be so much more but their flames were stifled simply because of the color of their skin.

In looking at further exploring this concept of cause and effect one must understand that a theory is meant to express an identity and that identity can simply be suggested when the theory is present (Gijsbers, 2020). In relation to this article, I posit that if not for white supremacy then there would be no insistence on Blackness as criminal. This may be hard to fathom for most people because white supremacy and racism have been the norm and through the lens that the world has accepted its view of Blackness. Anti-Blackness has always been the measurement used to assert whether or not a Black person or group of Black people are socially acceptable. It is also the lens used to determine which students are able to be taught and which students are unteachable (Emdin, 2016). The insistence on who can be taught and who are labeled as lost causes is what begins the trajectory for school push-out via suspensions, expulsions, and other punitive measures aimed at forcing Black children to quit. The immeasurable damage that spirit murdering (Love, 2016) has had on early-age Black learners is incalculable. We only know how traumatized by school Black children are when it is often too late to change their perceptions on school being for them. This is intentional and is a direct result of the decision and flaw of Brown v. Board. The concept of pushing Black children into schools that were not all Black and primed with hands-on learning by Black educators from within their community which would allow for cultural responsiveness was not well thought out. In fact, the decision was rooted in anti-Blackness. The idea that Black students were somehow at a deficit because they were only being trained and educated by Black educators is problematic. Being separate was never the issue but not having access to equitable resources that would give Black children the same opportunities as their white peers--was.

The early decisions like Brown v. Board that were well-intentioned had causal effects on the thousands of Black boys and girls who would later be pushed out of school and into the streets without options. The school-to-prison pipeline reaps the benefits of those decisions by placing Black youth in carceral learning environments led by people who do not

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care whether they live or die. What makes this reality so astounding is that not all of the anti-Black educators who engage in the tactics of push-out are white. In fact, some of the anti-Black educators are Black themselves which is also a long term effect caused by white supremacy. White supremacy, anti-Blackness, and ultimately push-out are cyclical. In order to step out of the cycle you must be made aware that the cycle itself exists. Understanding your role in disruption first requires for you to understand your role in others' oppression. It is also important that we tell our own stories of our experiences with push-out and ultimately how that experience might lead to increased possibilities of future incarceration.

In order to do this, we must consider counter-storytelling. As explained by Solórzano and Yozzo (2002), the ideology of racism, creates, justifies, and maintains the use of a "master narrative" in story-telling. The authors also assert that within the context of racism that "monovocal" stories about the low educational attainment and achievement of students of color are told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). However, none of the traditional narratives ever paint white supremacy as the villain or as the cause of criminality, push-out, and the never-ending need to survive in a world that rather punch down than to uplift you. It has always been easiest to blame the victim. Much like acknowledging white privilege, once people are aware of the true culprit they would then be responsible for doing whatever it takes to dismantle it. Rather than disrupt the system most white educators have settled in to being obtuse and color-blind, because to them it is a more manageable existence than being labeled racist. The gag is that they are virtually the same thing and the only thing that changes is the delivery. Allowing those who have served time to tell their stories to my students allowed for my students to see them as whole persons and not just the sum of their pasts.

Hearing their stories of what led to each of the three guest lecturers' incarcerations although different had two re-occurring themes and those themes were poverty and survival. Both themes are sub-categories created because of the existence of white supremacy at large. We as a society spend entirely too much time, money, and energy on punishing people for the effect and not enough time, money, or energy focusing on eliminating the cause.

Institutional Response

As a result of the class, the invite, and the potential good publicity for the department the university media relations team ran with the story. There was a photoshoot set up for me that would allow a greater variety of photos to be used as the institution ran the story across their media outlets both internally and externally. I was both excited and anxious of what this story could mean in regard to the consideration of the humanity of incarcerated persons as a value greater than their offense. Weeks went by and those weeks turned into months followed by a devastating February storm that delayed the execution of backlogged media stories. As the months dragged on I became concerned that the team killed the story because it did not meet the institution or departments narrative. When the story went live in April, it helped to highlight the innovative approach to my course and other courses like it at the institution (Case, 2021). A student in the course stated, often college students take for granted their education and are often unaware of how life-changing receiving a higher education can be (Case,2021). That student would later inform me that he no longer planned on pursuing an aspect of law enforcement as a career that he considered dehumanizing. He

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aimed to focus his energy on working to assist marginalized persons within the criminal justice system. Mission accomplished!

The Impact

The impact of BPI and the work that the collaboration between Bard College and the partnered correctional facilities accomplished cannot be understated. The work of Lynn Novick, PBS, and now Netflix with sharing College Behind Bars should never be discounted. Bard College did the work but Lynn and company made us all aware of the initiative and how important it is in substantially decreasing recidivism among formerly incarcerated persons. As mentioned earlier on in this article, I discussed the amazing strides that Dr. Monell has had in his professional life. I would like to take this time to highlight what Gio and Dyjuan have been up to. Obviously they have both traveled the world bringing attention to College Behind Bars and the necessary nature of BPI but they each have had personal wins as well. For example, Gio earned an associates degree in liberal studies and worked for the Bail Fund in Brooklyn, New York before transitioning to a Development Manager role at another organization. Dyjuan who alongside Gio were easily the most awe inspiring and attention-grabbing cast members in the Emmy nominated series, has transitioned into politics. Dyjuan earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics and graduated with a 3.78 GPA. He has since consulted for Warner Brothers, worked as a Senior Government Affairs Officer for BPI, and is now the Senior Advisor for Strategic Outreach. Dyjuan recently had a win alongside New York State Senator Zellnor Myrie and Assemblyman Harvey Epstein with the passage of their S261 bill. This bill now allows for incarcerated persons to earn Merit Time eligibility based upon their completion of a college degree (Tatro, 2021). Prior to the passing of this bill, incarcerated persons were only allowed to become eligible for doing hard labor (400 hours via a work crew), earning a GED, or earning a voc-certificate [vocational certificate] (Tatro, 2021). BPI and programs like it provide a direct opportunity for the American criminal justice system to reconsider what "reform" looks like. We can argue about the unnecessary nature of correctional facilities and how they are an extension of slavery granted by a loophole in the 13th amendment in a later article.

Conclusion

This article helps us to consider how we not only view the humanity of our incarcerated brothers and sisters but also how we should focus more on cause and effect. Black and Latinx youth have had a target on their backs for the better part of the last forty years and ignoring that makes you complicit. The carceral state is antithetical to extending recognition for the humanity of people or offering an extension of grace (Watson & Baxley, 2021). It disallows for us to also see the humanity in Black girlhood and boyhood which is an extension of a nation still deeply rooted in Black subjugation. We focus so much of our time being distracted by white manning (Engram, 2020) and how it presents itself in elected officials completely obtuse to how their policies disallow for Black uplift and widespread achievement. White privilege and its supremacy therein disallows for there to be any real systemic change in the Black living condition. The only way to move over and through this roadblock is through our counter-narratives and raising the awareness of causal factors and their relation to survival which can ultimately lead to offending. I shared the story of my

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intentional approach to abolitionist thinking by highlighting the stories of Dr. Monell, Gio, and Dyjuan. Although I am disheartened by how this nation continues to treat marginalized persons I am motivated by how we can all work towards being the change that we should all be seeking.

Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to all of the incarcerated people who are not provided the opportunity to tell their own stories.

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Dr. Frederick V. Engram Jr. is an Assistant Professor of Instruction at the University of Texas at Arlington in the Department of Criminology/Criminal Justice and the Center for African American Studies. His current research and teaching focuses on the role that race, and racism play in the systems of higher education and criminal justice. He focuses more broadly on the way that racism, white supremacy, white manning, and white privilege display themselves in power structures and how they oppress African Americans. A native of Utica, New York, Dr. Engram's research examines how African Americans make sense of their experiences with racism in higher education and society at large which includes the criminal justice system.

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