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An Examination of Narratives From Women Offenders: Are Gender-Specific Reentry Efforts Needed?

Abstract   In this article, data was gathered from interviews and observations using content and historical analysis of several women from a reentry program in Hartford, CT (n=32). Interviews illustrate that examining a gendered approach of female offenders provides an efficient foundation on which to answer the question of whether reentry programs are truly gender-specific. The needs of women are different than men and therefore there should be a difference in treatment upon reentry. Two main purposes are served: to investigate women's narratives about the reason for criminal activity and to examine their specific needs for gender-specific reentry programming. The value of qualitative research in life trajectories is emphasized as a tool to understand gender-specific needs with a particular focus on the life course dimensions of entrance, success, and timing (Thornberry 1997).

Keywords   Gender; Reentry; Case Studies; Life Course; Social Bond

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Many scholars have maintained that subjugation to forms of cultural and economic discrimination play a unique part in the female offenders' life course (Rivera 1997; Goodstein 2006; Claus et al. 2007). Poletta (2009) argues both criminologists and policy makers often ignore this fact. This is problematic with regard to females in institutional or non-institutional correctional settings who have had previous experiences with victimization and its undesirable effects. It is *especially* true in cases where involvement of women in criminal lifestyles is intertwined with relationships to males. In such relationships, women take the form either as victims (Belknap 2007) or accomplices (DeLisi 2002). In this article, data is taken from interviews with several women from a reentry program in Hartford, Connecticut. The article seeks to investigate narratives about women offenders and examine their reactions to gender-specific reentry programming.

Scholars who focus on female offending point out that many female offenders often experience a life history of victimization (Daly 1992; Merlo and Pollock 1995; Owen 1998; Covington 2003; Belknap 2007). Introduction to drugs, running away from home, and forced sexual encounters at a young age is a pattern found in the lives of female offenders (Kilburn and Lee 2010). Female offenders have a unique set of experiences and difficulties that may lead to career criminality (i.e., victimization, trauma, multiple marginalization, mental health, addiction). That said, it is implicit that female offenders have different needs in terms of correctional programming and aftercare.

Many researchers contend that such experiences prompt a need for gender-specific interventions (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996; Bloom, Owen, and Covington 2003). Such interventions are often designed in deference to a life course perspective that highlights critical events in any persons' life (Sampson and Laub 1992; 1993). For those working with female offenders, the importance of focusing on histories of previous domestic victimization or cohabitation with male offenders, for example, becomes crucial to formulating effective strategic principles towards reentry and rehabilitation.

Best practices for female offender rehabilitation are aligned with the increasing number of nonviolent female offenders who are becoming processed at greater rates through the criminal justice system (Belknap 2007). According to Merlo and Pollock (1995:119), "[t]he typical female offender is not a corporate or computer criminal, a terrorist, a burglar, or a murderer. Instead, she is likely to engage in theft, fraud, drug offenses, forgery, embezzlement, and prostitution." Female offenders are typically nonviolent offenders involved in crimes such as larceny and drug abuse (Merlo and Pollock 1995). However, they often became the collateral consequence of crime control policies and uniform criminal justice processing. Unfortunately, attempts at interventions aimed at female populations have typically been gender-neutral rather than gender-specific (Bloom and Covington 2000).

During the last decade, the number of female offenders entering prisons increased by almost 40 percent (Frost, Greene, and Pranis 2006). Frost, Greene, and Pranis (2006) conducted a state-by-state

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analysis of female incarceration. Between 1977 and 2004 there was a 750 percent increase in female incarceration. In 2009, females represented about 7 percent of the state and federal prison population. In addition, there was approximately 24 percent of that population under community supervision (Glaze and Bonczar 2009; Pollock 2009). As the female correctional population increases, female-offending patterns must be more extensively explored to forge more successful attempts towards reentry, prevention, and rehabilitation.

This article seeks to address a gap in current research addressing the need for gender-specific programming (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996; Bloom et al. 2003). While there has been a marked increase of the number of females in need of correctional services (Bloom et al. 2003), there continues to be a limited emphasis on the need for changes in intervention strategies. As a result, the growing needs of female offender populations remain somewhat unarticulated in current criminal justice research.

Life course theory reveals a myriad of factors that potentially contribute to women's criminal behavior (Sampson and Laub 1992; Bloom and Covington 2000; Zaplin 2008). Among issues that emerge from several interviews with female ex-offenders are: pregnancy, family history, victimization (specifically physical, sexual, and emotional abuse), employment, education, and marital status. The call for revisions in gender-responsive programming, policy, and intervention for female offenders represents an attempt to address these factors and in what ways they may be unique to women (Heilbrun et al. 2008).

Life course research on female offending produced during the last decade provides a framework for the study of reentry and other policy initiatives. This article contributes to the understanding of female rehabilitation by highlighting the importance of gender-specific pathways to rehabilitation for women. We explore the ways that interviewees processed personal experiences and events during their life that ostensibly impacted their decisions to enlist in criminal activity or desist from it. In addition, we highlight excerpts from interviews that indicate the importance of gender-specific post-correctional programming.

Relevant Literature

Social bonding theory (Hirschi 1969), developmental theories (Moffitt 1993) and life course theory (Elder 1985; Sampson and Laub 1993) all provide frameworks from which to explore female reentry and rehabilitation. Life course literature is of paramount importance as it emphasizes the changing nature of criminal behavior over the life cycle (Glueck and Glueck 1950; Moffitt 1993; Sampson and Laub 1993; Thornberry 1997). This perspective is ultimately concerned with *transitions* during the life course and *trajectories*, a concept relating to patterns of behavior. Transitions are characterized as events that account for trajectory, such as: gaining employment, committing a delinquent act, or having a child. It is useful to draw from the body of literature on life course theory to understand female criminality. In addition, life course theory applies equally well in understanding why some women desist from criminal activity (Elder 1985).

Social Bonding

Social bonding theory (Hirschi 1969) purports that a person's decision to conform to normative behaviors revolves around four dimensions of contact with mainstream social forces: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. These four artifacts are known as the four dimensions of social bonding. Attachment relates to development of emotional bonds to mainstream role models. If a person is emotionally attached to someone (i.e., family, friends) engaged in criminal activity, they too should begin to develop an affinity towards criminal behavior. Commitment and involvement respectively refer to time and level of commitment and involvement to mainstream (non-criminal) lifestyles. Belief refers to a personal affinity towards normative social values. It is implied that these dimensions of social bonds, for their part, are strongly related to a person's lifestyle development.

Early literature on cognitive development and social bonding relates most strongly to a gender-neutral perspective of criminality, however, social bonding theory is also considered a solid foundation for explaining criminality throughout the female life course. Some research explores the differences in male and female career criminality as they relate to social bonding, however, unfortunately, the vast body of literature in these fields neglects gender (DeLisi 2002). Social bonding literature points out the crucial aspect of bonding towards criminal desistance (Shover and Thompson 1992), and provides insightful comments on the analyses to come. Shover and Thompson (1992) highlight the idea that contingencies related to so-

cial bonds are often highly effective in predicting whether people will desist from criminal activity during the life course. They introduce the idea that people with an attachment to mainstream society (i.e., an attachment to a significant other who is not involved in crime, an attachment to a job or profession, a commitment to school, etc.) will eventually desist from tendencies towards criminal activity.

Developmental Perspectives

Developmental theories emphasize the importance of learning in criminal activity, but research sometimes ignores how patterns of socialization and bonding for males and females inherently differ. Early work in developmental learning primarily focused on juvenile delinquency. Glueck and Glueck (1930:142) observed that many delinquents appeared to have "had experience in serious antisocial conduct." In a follow-up study, they found similar results (Glueck and Glueck 1950). The Glueck's seminal research provided evidence that adult antisocial behavior virtually requires childhood antisocial behavior.

Career criminality does not happen immediately, but develops over time. According to Sutherland (1947), criminal behavior is learned; it involves a dialectic between "teachers" and "students." Burgess and Akers (1966:140) state that "criminal behavior is a function of norms which are discriminative for criminal behavior, the learning of which takes place when such behavior is more highly reinforced than non-criminal behavior."

Developmental perspectives are often fused with social bonding perspectives and focus on how

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social bonds directly and indirectly influence social roles (Erickson, Crosnoe, and Dornbusch 2000). Such perspectives offer great insight into potential risk factors for female criminal involvement. Erickson and colleagues (2000) suggest that males are more strongly affected by the influence of bonding with friends than females. This idea relates primarily to the affinity-based, or attachment, dimension of social bonding. That said, other dimensions of social bonds often prove significant to explain male and female differences. Kilburn and Lee (2010) suggest the burden of raising children, or heading single income households, or even acting as caretakers for ailing parents may have influences on female development.

Some developmental studies indicate that female and male offenders may have similar motivations for committing crime, however, the manners in which they execute crimes differ according to their social roles and perceived identities (Adler 1975; Simon 1975; Smart 1989; Shover and Thompson 1992; Chesney-Lind 1997). For example, it is often expressed in the literature that males are socialized to be aggressive and therefore their crimes will be more aggressive (Reifler 1997). It is probable that women also differ emotionally and psychologically from males in dealing with traumatic events in their lives possibly leading to criminal activity (Gaardner and Belknap 2002; Kilpatrick, Saunders, and Smith 2003).

Social bonding theory (Hirschi 1969) and social control theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) have also proved useful tools for explaining gender-neutral patterns of conformity. Attachment, commit-ment, involvement, and belief in mainstream social norms and mores explain why people do not become involved in crime. Inversely, failed attachments to family, neighborhood, and relatives result in deviance and criminality. Since a person's stake in society increases with age, social control theorists argue that desistance is a natural function of age. There is considerable empirical evidence of the proposed relationship between age and crime (Elder 1985; Farrington 1986; Britt 1992; Nagin and Land 1990; Wilson and Daly 1993). Curvilinear patterns indicate that individuals become involved in property crime and person crime at younger ages and continue criminal involvement until they are older, upon which it is thought they desist as a function of age (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983; Nagin and Land 1993).

Life Course

The life course theory has two main themes: trajectories and transitions. Trajectories have three dimensions: entrance, success, and timing (Thornberry 1997). Transitions, often referred to more generally as life events, are embedded within the trajectories. According to Sampson and Laub (1993:8), life course perspectives "focus on the duration, timing, and ordering of major life events and their consequences for later life development." Basic life course research seeks to shed light on the concept of career criminality as people age and become exposed to varied levels of risk. Results from interviews are consistent with the work by Moffitt (1993). As Moffitt indicated, women who began criminal activity at a young age proved to be life-course-persistent (antisocial behavior persistent over the course of one's life).

Criminologists have focused attention comparatively towards both female and male life course predictors in order to better understand gender disparities in criminal trajectory (van Wormer and Bartollas 2007). As Piquero and Mazerolle (2001) predicted, the majority of the women interviewed (all but one) became pregnant at an early age, dictating the trajectory early on in the life course. We note that this event is a gender-specific occurrence illustrating how non-gendered theories ignore major life transitions.

Life course perspective (Hutchinson 2005) has examined how variant factors, such as age, relationships, common life transitions, and social change, influence people's lives from birth to death. As Hutchinson (2007:9) states, "[i]f you want to understand a person's life, you might begin with an event history, or the sequence of significant events, experiences, and transitions in a person's life from birth to death."

According to life course scholars (Sampson and Laub 1992; 1993), there are some distinct characteristics of the life course perspective that distance it from developmental and social bonding theories. The primary weakness of developmental theories is that they are gender-neutral and perhaps insensitive to events that arise during the female life course. Developmental theories are often used to explain the onset of delinquency, the escalation of crimes, persistence, desistance, and offending patterns. Each one of these theories can then be separated to delve deeper (Farrington 1986).

Steffensmeier and Allan (1996) broached the controversial topic of whether gender-neutral theories

(theories primarily derived from male offender samples) or gender-specific theories (those derived from male and female samples with a focus on differential needs) are better suited in understanding criminality. Despite Steffensmeier and Allan's call for gender-specific programming, the male paradigm is currently used widely to assess female criminality and therefore to evaluate and plan women-specific intervention programming (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996; Bloom and Covington 2000).

Life course theorists point out the importance of the socialization process in career criminality, yet acknowledge the differential life events across gender that also affect career trajectory. Although it is more common for males to engage in criminal careers (DeLisi 2005), females who enter into a career of crime often exhibit similar exposure patterns. Likewise differential life events vary across gender to affect desistance.

In a series of interviews conducted by Giordano and colleagues (2006), female offenders tell stories which provide evidence that exposure to violence is not exclusive to males:

> I was raped by just about every man my mother ever had…I told the judge, he say, "Why you keep runnin' away from home, Danielle?" I said, "Well, hell, if I gotta stay home and get fucked by all her men, I might as well be out on the street and get fucked and get paid for it." [p. 31]

Akers (1998) similarly discusses a young girl who witnessed her mother's promiscuous behavior to

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the extent that she became numb to violence and submission. Other scholars agree that female criminality is often shaped by victimization (Cobbina 2009). A report by Greenfeld and Snell (1999) stated that 44 percent of women incarcerated reported experiencing either physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives; 69 percent of those inmates reported that the abuse occurred before the age of 18. Child victimization often leads to adult criminal activity and subsequent victimization. Intimate partner abuse is one example of the cycle of violence as a young girl becomes involved in more serious relationships throughout her life. Typically, those who have suffered through sexual or physical abuse at some point in their lives are at a higher risk of becoming victimized later in life (van Wormer and Bartollas 2007; Zaplin 2008).

Bridging the Gap

This article presents a challenge to hypotheses implicit in all of three theories discussed above, not seeking to disprove them as much as to see if they apply to independent study of female offenders. That said, we feel that much of the research that has been done in studies of social bonding, developmental theory, and life course perspectives has taken an overly quantitative lean. In doing so, much of the research done in life course perspective over the last decade, has not captured the qualitative dimensions of reentry experiences for females. Towards overcoming this gap, the forthcoming examination investigates female offenders' narratives about reentry and examines their responses to gender-specific reentry programming, bearing in mind the outstanding principles of so-

cial bonding, developmental experience, and life course experience.

Data and Methods

Poletta (2009) suggests that foundation of feminist research lies in compelling case histories and narratives. Examination of such narratives can highly enhance a valid and qualitative understanding of the intersections between gender and the criminal justice system. Interviews conducted on 32 women from Hartford, CT, participating in a reentry program, were analyzed for qualitative content. The women were selected randomly for the study. Six months prior to release from a local women's facility, program participants are chosen for entry and begin working collaboratively with a case manager to establish basic life needs. All but one of the women interviewed had children and were living below the poverty rate at some point in their lives. The women's ages ranged from 31-59.

Patterns and key themes from the interviews were expected to conform to a perspective on criminality. Women interviewed were dually diagnosed with substance abuse and mental illness. An initial interview along with a three-month follow-up was conducted on all 32 women. Then a five-year revisit was conducted. Seven of the women were on probation or parole at the time of the interview. At the time of the three-month follow-up, some of the women had relapsed on drugs, but none had been rearrested.

The qualitative methodology of content analysis proved extremely useful because it allowed for an

in-depth understanding of life course pathways and what events have led females to either continue or desist from criminal activity. The women interviewed were able to offer awareness about issues that are unamenable to quantitative research. A mixed-method approach was used to understand the life course perspective and how it related uniquely to the female reentry experience. The results provided an avenue for identifying patterns of behavior and more importantly, for this study, the pathways one takes to that desistance.

The interview process was an iterative one that demanded flexibility and a comfortable environment for the participants. Most interviewees expressed gratitude for the chance to share their journey with others, but most importantly for the opportunity to talk about painful events. The original study interviews were all collected at a reentry program in Hartford, CT. The three-month follow up interviews were also held in the same place. The five-year follow-up interviews were conducted via telephone as many of the women had moved on to farther locales and it was more convenient for them based on their work schedules.

All of the women were available to be interviewed and committed to a three-month follow-up interview. The study focused on the same group of women five years later to determine their current status. The target was to begin establishing possible points of intervention that may have helped these women desist at an earlier age.

Interviews for the five-year follow-up were conducted via telephone as some women were difficult

to meet with in person. The women were all contacted first to set up an interview time where they would have little distraction and be able to spend 45-60 minutes speaking. All participants provided verbal consent towards participation in the study. They were also mailed a hard copy of the interview and/or provided with a copy of the document through the reentry program staff.

As an incentive, participants were given $20.00 gift cards to a local grocery store or clothing store for their participation. Once the interview was completed, the names were coded and then the actual names were destroyed. In order to preserve the identities of the original cohort of women, a locked file was maintained with the women's first names, pseudonyms given, and contact information for further follow-up studies with this group.

Findings

Interviews with the participants provided insight into the lives of women who engage in criminal activity. The women discussed points in their lives where they were introduced to substances, had their first child, learned of a mental illness, experienced abuse, and struggled with relationships, among other things. The findings suggest a reform of reentry programming based on the specific needs of women offenders.

Although there are similarities to male offenders, a woman's experience of parenthood, for example, can alter the direction of their life course simply by virtue of being the primary caregiver. This life-altering event at a young age often leads to other

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antisocial behaviors. This is the case with the remaining eight factors, as well. Women experience these factors differently than men and therefore their treatment should match their experience in terms of gender/person-specific needs (Thornberry 1997; Heilbrun et al. 2008).

To begin, the interviews first addressed each of the women's experience of supervision once released (probation or parole). To describe their feelings about the moment of release from prison, eleven of the women use the word "bittersweet." They explained post-release is a period filled with "uncertainty." One woman describes her struggle with drug abuse as being a factor in her reentry challenges:

> I tried to get off drugs, both drugs and alcohol. I tried probably about 20 times, but it was just more powerful than me. I lacked education, I guess, and just couldn't do it. I never really understood how to get clean or stay clean. No one around me knew either because we all used together all the time. And I knew as long as I was hanging around the same people, I wasn't gettin' clean.

Another woman discusses the difficulty in making the numerous appointments set by her supervising officer:

> I know they got to have us at all these appointments and meetings, but I can't get to 'em. I can't be waiting for the bus and then asking people to give me rides—it ain't their problem, but I have to be [there]. They should come get me if they want me there…it not like I don't want to comply, but they act like I can just get in my car and go, it ain't like that.

These statements confirm some of the basic principles of life course theory as the "bad associations" proclaimed by one interviewee, echoes of the involvement dimensions of social bonding, the addiction taking control, and the lack of transportation rather than a lack of caring, are all factors in unsuccessful reentry. The statement that one interviewee made that everyone around her was also using substances speaks to the interviewee's affinitive ties to people who use illegal drugs. This statement seems to confirm one of the basic principles of life course theory as the interviewee's claim of "lacking education" (and resources) merges with the concept of trajectories (Elder 1994; Thornberry 1997).

Bearing in mind the importance of trajectories, the women were asked about a point where they may have been persuaded to take a different life path. This question provided important insight as all of the women were able to provide an exact point at which they could have used help to get through a rough patch. One interviewee stated:

> mostly everyone around me disowned me when I was using drugs…the teachers at school never knew I used drugs so they left me alone...but it was when they left that really sent me back…I couldn't get over it when I walked into the school one day and [she] was gone. She was my counselor, my teacher, she meant everything to me and she was gone…it was no surprise though, they all left and came back and left again.

Another woman stated, "yup, my fifth grade teacher, she knew, she was actually the only one who knew I had potential…I didn't even know [laughs]."

One woman discusses that the birth of her daughter could have changed her path, but her addiction made that difficult:

> well, when I found out I was pregnant, I should have gotten off all the shit I was on and I didn't. I had no one telling me that what I was doing was gonna mess with her. I didn't know she was gonna be born with alcohol whatever…what is it alcohol syndrome? She was addicted too and they had to take her, I guess, so I didn't even get her anyway. It was a big mess and I'm still tryin' to get her…I guess that it was then that I had the chance to stop it all, but I was stressin' so I didn't and I still stressin'.

These excerpts are important because they suggest that there are life-altering events, as well as turning points in one's life where those life-altering events can be turned into normative behavior. However, it becomes clear from the interviews that although there were moments when all could have changed, unless the right intervention/support/relationships were established, the women did not choose the pro-social behavior.

Life course trajectories, specifically the eight factors discussed below, appear to be the pattern for women offenders. These factors plus some others are heavily discussed in the literature and our research supports the emergence of the trajectory common to women offenders.

Life Course Trajectories

During interviews, eight factors emerged and appeared to be impacting the pathways of women offenders: *education*, *marital status*, *employment*, *parenthood*, *victimization*, *substance use*, *mental health*, and *family background*. These eight factors, all of which have been identified in prior literature, appeared to prominently impact female criminality (Chesney-Lind 1998; Pollock 2002; Bloom, Owen, and Covington 2003; Belknap 2007).

This section of the findings reveals both quantitative analysis, discussion of the interview content, and interview excerpts in an attempt to triangulate the data and support the existing literature on the common trajectories for this population (Baily 2007; Schutt 2012).

Education

Lack of education, which has been known to play an important role on criminal life course trajectories for men, may also play an important role in predicting female criminal life courses. Of the women interviewed, 93% had one year of college/special training beyond high school or less. One of the women was enrolled in graduate level studies at the time of the follow-up. When the interviewees were asked about the impact that education had on their current pathway, many stated that they floundered in school and "barely got by," leading to consequences of failing grades, suspension, and reported low self-esteem at this time in their life. In addition to the difficulties in the classroom, 10 of the women reported that there was no one at the school that "believed" they would do well beyond high school. Some of the women reported that this was not how the boys at school were treated, that they were pressured into sports and vocational activities, while the girls were

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often ignored unless they were labeled as being one of the "smart" kids. During the interview with many of the women who reported this, it was mentioned that this lack of support both at home and at school caused them to place little emphasis on the importance of doing well beyond high school. The majority of the women also reported very little to no support at home making it difficult to complete homework assignments, projects, and even attend school functions. One woman expressed frustration in her difficulty obtaining employment based on her lack of education as she recalls her upbringing:

I mean, no one really told me about the important stuff, like if I had known that I needed an education, I mean, you know…my step-father never had no schooling, my mom definitely had no schooling, and I think it was like expected that I would just be fine since, you know, I was a girl…like I could just find my man and have his kids and he could go work or whatever. I mean, my brother had a job since he was like, um, 14…but I never had no jobs or skills until I went away.

Marital status

Of the women interviewed 89% had not been married, but all had been in lengthy relationships. According to Hirschi (1969), pro-social bonding is key to positive relationships leading to pro-social behavior. On the contrary, these women described their relationships as "unhealthy," "dysfunctional," "negative," and "toxic," contributing to their antisocial behaviors. One woman recalled an incident of domestic violence where her children witnessed the abuse:

He never cared really if they was there. He was always mad, but only when he was drunk, well, I guess sometimes when he wasn't, too…he would start yelling and cussing at me like I was cheatin'. He said I was cheatin' with his friends on him, his brother, too. He was like crazy, what do you call it…anyway, a couple of times he even hit me in front of my kids and they was screaming and acting like I was dyin' because I was knocked out. They called my sister and it was like all night we was trying to get him to leave cuz I didn't want him near my kids and one isn't his kid so sometimes he takes shit out on him and I wanted him out…my sister ended up taking my kids.

Both physical and emotional abuse present, many of the women reported the majority of their crimes were done alongside their spouse or partner or they became involved with that person after using substances together. One woman stated, "I never did nothing like this stuff [referring to using and selling drugs], I had never even tried it before I met my boyfriend, well, he was…now we don't speak cuz I had to leave all that."

Only one of the women was not in a relationship at the time of the interviews, but reported having been in abusive relationships most of her life. A number of women interviewed were asked about their criminal history. 29 of the women had prior criminal convictions directly related to their spouse or partner. These charges ranged from murder to robbery to drug trafficking. Only one admitted to gang involvement with her partner. Further research on this idea that for women on these particular pathways having a spouse or partner may in fact be detrimental to their success in law-conforming behavior is needed.

Employment

Employment relates directly to education as discussed in the interviews. The women reported having difficulty getting jobs even at a young age, mainly because they either lacked the skills or had already turned to drugs, which also meant, in many cases, selling drugs. However, prostitution was employment where education did not matter. All of the women reported having been involved in prostitution on some level. The range was from regularly prostituting to only having tried it a few times. The majority of the women reported "drifting" in and out of prostitution depending on how bad the bills or the addiction became. One woman reported doing four to five "tricks" a day to fuel her heroin habit, she "got clean," obtained a "normal" job, but when her boyfriend returned from prison and the heroin addiction worsened for both of them, he would pimp her out to his friends. She recalls this segment of her life as an "unfortunate cycle," she states:

it was like the worst of the worst of the worst for me, you know…I hated it, but I had no way out, I loved my dope more. I let him do it, I let him essentially sell me to his friends, coz I knew, I knew I was getting high that night…and it's all I cared about—I didn't care about no job, my kids, my mother, nothing…just dope.

Finding steady, satisfying, and mentally stimulating employment proved to be a challenge for the women interviewed. They reported feeling marginalized as their lack of higher education, poor skills, and substance use, often introduced by a male figure in their lives, may have contributed to their challenges as a woman.

Parenthood

All but one of the women reported having children. Children proved to be a major impact for the women in many ways. First, 84% of the women had their first child under 18. This transitory event of having a child, according to Sampson and Laub (1992), can lead to varying pathways depending on when this event takes place in one's life course. Many of the women interviewed had the event at hand early and admitted that this changed their pathway at a young age. One woman stated, "well, it was his baby and so I stayed, I stayed because you don't want no one else with your man and so I stayed." She goes on to describe the many years of physical abuse she endured by this person, as well as their co-dependence as they often used crack and abused prescription pills. In this particular case, having the child, as she reported, kept her in an unhealthy situation that became increasingly harder to leave as the bills piled up and she had nowhere else to turn. Others reported that their children were taken away from them at some point during their criminal activity and this led to more stress causing them to become depressed and traumatized, placing them on a path of destruction with drugs and alcohol among other high risk behaviors. Two of the women reported that having their children was what changed their pathway for the better, helping them to "wake-up" and also gaining support from family members that had otherwise disappeared. For the women who had a child or children, they all reported that the event

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impacted them positively now, many are either re-unified with their children or in the process, and that reunification was a large part of their sobriety or desistance from criminal activity today. This included one woman who provided a story of her child (whom she typically used with) being killed and the way that the death changed her pathway today.

Another woman discussed the impact of having a child at a young age:

> it ain't no fun to have one when you young, you don't know what life even is about or who's good and who's bad. I ran around and of course I got [pregnant]. Don't know one tell you that it gonna happen—it just do. If I didn't have that baby and then two more, I would be like a CEO somewhere now cuz I did good in school and I used to always keep a job and stuff. I messed it up and then, since it was messed up already, it didn't matter anymore.

This quote provides support of the transitions in one's life that may alter the course of their life based on how influential the turning point was to them. Having a child for this woman, and most, can be a life-altering turning point (Thornberry 1997).

Victimization

All of the women interviewed discussed abuse in some form as a child, youth, and today. The unfortunate cycle of violence became evident as the women spoke of the trauma in their childhoods, which then led to the trauma in their adolescence,

which then led to the trauma many continue to suffer from today. Some reported that today they continue to suffer from abuse by their spouse or partner, their mother, or a sibling. Some reported that they are finally free of the actual abuse, but never will be free from the trauma they have endured. One woman recalls her current situation with domestic violence:

> it's just part of me, I guess, I mean, how could it not be? I been abused like hit and stuff as long as I was little. It was always just the way it was. I can't get away from it cuz after I left my house where I grew up in [sic], it just followed me. I still get beat. Even if it not even in a relationship. I get beat over drugs, or I still on the street [prostituting] so I get beat there, too. It don't matter, it follow me. It always will.

All of the women interviewed were asked about the role their trauma played in criminal activity. All reported that their prior abuse played a role. Some of the women did not make the connection immediately, but when prompted, identified a relationship between their criminal activity and prior abuse. All of the women also reported that they had been victimized while in the commission of a crime such as prostituting or selling drugs.

Substance Use

The women interviewed all had severe drug habits, although the program where the women were interviewed was labeled as a dual diagnosis (mental illness and drug abuse combined) treatment program, the range varied for both mental illness and drug abuse. The women in this study were all

heavily addicted at one point in their lives. About half of the women reported that their addiction started at a young age primarily due to early drug exposure. One woman stated:

> my cousin and my sister used to smoke and so I started, my mom was always working or out so we used to just smoke in the house…I always wondered why no one ever said nothing, then I realized that they just didn't care that we was smoking in the house.

The other half reported that their introduction to drugs began later in life and was accompanied by either a spouse or a partner who was also abusing substances. 8 of the women who reported beginning later in life reported no early drug exposure, but that they experimented with substances in middle or high school.

Mental Health

The women in the study were all diagnosed with mental illness. In addition to other diagnoses, all of the women suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In most of the cases, the PTSD was a result of abuse as children or by a male figure, or witnessing domestic abuse in the home. In interviews with the women, it was not obvious whether mental illness was independent of their relationship with males or a result of it. Women offenders, perhaps more so than their male counterparts, are often concerned about how their diagnoses effect their legal relationships with their children. Mental illness may go untreated if they are fearful that a diagnosis will strip them of their rights as a parent. One woman stated:

> yeah, it was then [referring to date of diagnosis] that they took my kids…no one told me they was gonna take my kids. I went to the hospital and when I came out, my sister who also was abused by [him] had my kids. Why? I don't know…the whole situation was shit.

Other women alluded to the idea that there are more treatment programs for men than there are for women, but another noted that the treatment programs often do not provide adequate or any child care, again forcing many women to abandon the idea of treatment.

Family Background

Of the women interviewed, the theme of intergenerational criminal activity reoccurred. In early interviews, this prompted additional probing about each woman's background. 10 of the women interviewed reported that someone in their immediate family had been either incarcerated or arrested at some point. The remaining women knew of a family member who had been incarcerated or arrested, but it was not a close family member. One woman attributes her criminality to her mother's involvement in illicit activity:

> it was like every night, she was always using, I mean, I could never even see how she like went to work and stuff cuz she always be asking men for stuff, you know, like prostituting for her fix…how could I not grow up dopin'? I mean, she was supposed to be a mother, not out doin' her thing and ignoring her babies.

This theme of intergenerational criminal activity may exist for male offenders, as well. Intergenerational

criminality has many dimensions. The most obvious interpretation of intergenerational criminality is that behavioral patterns are inherited or shared by family members (Fishbein 1967). However, it seemed that for the women offenders interviewed intergenerational criminality was more closely linked to criminality through its association with losses of family members to imprisonment. For women, it proved the absence of that family member often contributed to their own role in criminal activity. One woman stated: "Well, when [she] wasn't around, my sister and me, we paid all the bills, I mean, as best we could, but all that, all that stuff—it fell on US! We was left to do it all ourselves." Another female offender recalled the frustration she felt when her step-father was incarcerated for his third time in her life: "I felt abandoned, lonely, like why are you doing this to us again, scared, and I felt bad for my mother…and us, too—we were always being left by him." In addition to the common feelings of abandonment expressed by many of the women, another recurrent theme in the interviews was that many of the women reported feelings of embarrassment about family members involved in criminal activity. For the interviewees, feelings of and guilt and shame about past family failure seem to linger. Also, many of the interviewees reported the preexisting fear that they would end up on a similar path. It is possible that the concept of self-labeling (Goffman 1959; Richards and Tittle 1981) is a powerful catalyst for involvement in criminal activity, as many of the women recalled shame of where they ended up in grim contrast to some of their closest family members. One woman stated:

it's funny, you know, I ended up like [her]. I never told no one what she did for work because, you know, it

wasn't like the kind of work you proud of [referring to selling drugs], but now I ended up following in [her] footsteps anyway.

It should also be noted that while many women expressed feelings of embarrassment for their family members, they simultaneously expressed feelings of pride for themselves as they accomplished distinct goals and objectives of their rehabilitation program.

Life Course Dimensions

A key theme derived from the interviews was that they were indicative that women have special needs that vary from male offenders and that these women have gendered responses to at least eight factors (mentioned above). There is a decided need for gendered rehabilitation and aftercare. With regard to the life course, women experience life events in varied ways. While our interviews showed support for classic social bonding principles, they also confirm the nature of bonding is strongly linked to gender patterns of behavior (Benda 2005). Although social bonding influences a child's development, life course theory augments our gendered understanding of the journey of growing up in such a way that suggests that neutral approaches may not be ideal. Interviewees' responses also proved consistent with Thornberry's (1997) three dimensions of criminal trajectory: entrance, success, and timing.

The entrance dimension as demonstrated by one woman interviewed was during her middle school years,

it mostly started when I was in grade eight, but earlier I was like really a good student, I did what I was told

and nothin' got me, but it was started when I hang out with these three girls and we did, you know, drugs and shit, like just little stuff, and then one wanted to…she wanted to start selling herself so we was stupid and we did it so we didn' look bad or nothin'… and look at me now—I ain't got my kids, I got nothin', I told you [she was] the only one who helped me with gettin' my food stamps, oh, and my spot in the shelter.

Second is the success dimension, another woman discussed her triumph with criminal activity, she stated:

Well, really, I didn't do nothin', it found me. I always tried to stay away from it cuz, you know, that's what people say, but both my brothers and my uncle where [incarcerated], and while they were there, I sold drugs for them.

The timing dimension played a significant role for the women. The timing of the events in their life seemed to dictate all other events. One woman describes her involvement in a domestic violence situation:

it was always bad, he hit me, my sister used to be with him and she told me, but I figured he wouldn't [hit] me…it wasn't even like he was like doped up, just like mean, and he was like jealous, so I couldn't like even go to the store or to the school to get my son, and he get like all crazy…he didn't work neither so he just told me what to do…it kinda like ruined my feeling of me and what I wanted.

She then went on to discuss how the timing of this event led to other events that impact her today:

it was after he got locked up, where he at now, that I kinda like started with another man, and then he hit me too! I was like so tired, I was using heroin, but started meth[odone], so I was tryin', I was tryin', but got arrested for this time and just tired so I don't want nothing to do with all that no more…that ain't the life for me and my baby, he's ten, but still my baby, haha.

This three-dimensional model is supported by earlier work by Sampson and Laub (1993:8) who proposed that life course dynamics focus on "duration, timing, and ordering of life events and their consequences for later life development."

As Elder (1994:5) predicted, patterns that emerge from the interviews indicate that "the interweaving of age-graded trajectories" is extremely helpful in understanding female criminal behavior. We expect that interviews with males would have proved similar support for the perspective, however, the outcomes of the interviews point out the need for gender-specificity in theory and practice. For females, events that are expected to alter trajectory outcomes are parenthood, drug use, childhood abuse (physical and sexual), access to education/opportunity, mental health, death of a loved one, and family background. For each of the interviewees, these events were processed differently and there were multiple gender-specific factors that lead to criminal behavior.

Conclusion

Our interviews cast in sharp relief the necessity for gender-specific theory to explain crime. In much of the interview content, we observed that much

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of their criminal behavior emerges from their own understanding of gender-specific roles. Many of the women interviewed appeared subservient to males in their personal lives. Connected to this may be low self-esteem issues that emerged during key transitions in their lives.

We had hoped our research would contribute more or less to reentry and rehabilitation findings, however, it is a subject that should be approached with guarded optimism based on the sample size.

Our research has provided insight into the lives of women who have been involved in the criminal justice system for some time, and their needs have proved to be different than those of male offenders. Women who reoffend often do so to cope with daily struggles that are unique to females, a fact that is often ignored by many reentry programs. Women who have been victimized either before or after incarceration are at a higher risk of abusing drugs. With abuse comes heightened probability of dealing or prostitution in exchange for drugs. The child abuse/substance abuse relationship is particularly strong.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In addition to a small sample size, which is often the case in qualitative research, the limitations of these case studies lie in the validity of the interviews as opposed to generalizability. While there is no way of telling whether or not women offenders are globally effected by these life factors, it is a reasonable expectation that the commonalities reflected among these women would also be reflected in larger studies of women offenders. While the list of risk factors is by no means exhaustive, it suggests several avenues of strategic intervention for policymakers. Commonalities among women who desisted from criminal activity emerged during interviews, and successful interventions throughout the life course were identified. What is important is that these commonalities in so far as they prove generalizable can be incorporated into useful models of reentry, rehabilitation, and aftercare. One key factor that future research should consider is that women offenders' identity may vary across regions.

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