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## Stories of Agency in the Lives of Women Offenders

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of incarcerated women. The research questions were: (1) How do incarcerated women demonstrate agency in their life narratives? (2) How does McAdams' agency (2001) framework apply to the life histories of women in jail? Findings have implications for educators of those in the penal system and helping professionals.

**Keywords:** incarcerated women, life history, narrative analysis

Women are incarcerated at a rate double that of men (Sentencing Project, 2014). Prior to incarceration, many women's lives include histories of physical and sexual abuse as well as drug abuse or addiction often used to cope with the pain of abuse (Wright, Van Voorhis, Salisbury & Bauman, 2012). Childhood sexual abuse can lead to eventual drug use in adulthood to block the painful emotions associated with trauma (DeHart, 2008). These multiple abuses throughout their lives relate to women's crimes.

Although many women offenders have histories of abuse and are seen as victims (DeHart, 2008), there are scholars who call for a more complex investigation of women's *agency* (Fili, 2013). McAdams (2001) has explored agency and his examples arise from a more privileged existence. McAdams states that agentic individuals are "driven by recurrent desires for power and achievement" (McAdams, 1993, p. 282). Themes of agency include: self-mastery, status/victory, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment.

Agency can be demonstrated through self-mastery such as overcoming a gambling problem (McAdams, 2001). Status/victory involves winning something whereas achievement is demonstrated by overcoming an obstacle. The responsibility motive is displayed when a person cares for others (McAdams, 2001). Individuals feel empowered by their "association with *someone or something larger and more powerful than the self*" (italics in original) (para 71).

Resistance is an act of agency (Wade, 1997). Acts of resistance in prison can include refusing to take medication (Bosworth & Carrabine, 2001), and work stoppage due to poor prison conditions (Law, 2012). An aspect of the context in which resistance occurs includes women's social identities (Bosworth & Carrabine, 2001). Bosworth and Carrabine note, Resistance is always contingent upon a nexus of local and societal circumstance in which certain scripts that make existence possible, like gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality. . . . agency is practical accomplishment that can challenge or maintain prevailing power relations (p. 513). Despite increased numbers of women in jails and prisons, their life histories, remain in the shadows of prison research and are filtered through lenses of criminalization and victimization without regard for the systems of oppression enmeshed in their lives. Because there is a call to take a more nuanced examination of women offenders' lives through the lens of agency (Fili, 2013), the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of incarcerated women. The research questions were: (1) How do incarcerated women demonstrate agency in their life narratives? (2) How does McAdams' agency (2001) framework apply to the life histories of women in jail?

## Method

The life history methodology was chosen because this method privileges participants' perception of their lives within their unique cultural and historical perspectives (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). This method combines well with feminist research because the goal of feminist research is to "correct both the *invisibility* and *distortion* of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position" (Lather, 1991, p. 71, emphasis in original). The life history interview validates women's experiences and creates a place for women to share their stories in ways they choose.

Women involved in Resolana, a gender-responsive educational program (GRP) offered to women inmates at a jail in the Southwestern United States, were invited to participate in life history interviews. The first author also conducted field observations and volunteered in the program for one week. Thirteen women participated in life history interviews lasting 35 minutes to 3 hours. At the time of the interview eight women were incarcerated, three were completing their sentences at a court-ordered residential drug rehabilitation program and two had been released from jail and were completing probation. Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 46 and self-identified as African American (1), Black (1), Black and Cherokee Indian (1), Caucasian (2), half Native American and half Black (1), Hispanic (2), Mexican (2), White (2), White and Black (1). Their reported criminal charges included: check, credit card, and identification fraud; forgery; felony theft; felony escape; prostitution; and various drug related offenses. One woman served time for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. The women's education level ranged from elementary school drop out to bachelor's degree.

## Results

Themes included: (1) Resourcefulness including finding support and making a living, finding resources, and navigating and subverting the "justice" system. (2) Self-protection in the forms of seeking legal assistance, using instincts and knowledge to escape danger, fighting back, and acting fearless. (3) Getting even, (4) Resisting gender expectations, and (5) Resisting stigma and valuing self.

### Theme 1: Resourcefulness

**Finding support and making a living.** Sarah's home life was traumatic. She lived with a mother who was an alcoholic and physically and verbally abused her. After running away from home at the age of 15, Sarah learned to survive on the streets. While in jail, Sarah demonstrated responsibility (McAdams, 2001) when she successfully managed to have her son placed in a loving home despite an agency's insistence that there were no homes available. Sarah explained, "And so this woman has my child since the day he was born and I chose to leave him there because I haven't done the right things since then."

**Finding resources.** Demonstrating agency by taking control of one's life is also an underlying theme in Taylor's story (McAdams, 2001). Before being incarcerated for fraud, Taylor was a successful salesperson and college graduate with a degree in business and marketing. In the 1980s when Taylor was 13, her parents passed away from complications related to AIDS. After her parents' deaths, she lived with a pastor's family. She was sexually abused by the pastor and later raped by a stranger. She coped with her abuse by shopping, which turned into an addiction that she supported through fraudulent activities.

Upon her release from jail, Taylor enrolled in a program that previously only served men. The program matched investors with ex-offenders interested in starting their own businesses. Taylor's proposal garnered the interest of three potential investors. She also located resources that could help incarcerated women and shared these resources with Resolana staff. In this way, it can be argued that Taylor utilizes her power by helping others (McAdams, 2001).

**Navigating and subverting the “justice” system.** Most women used their experience with the court system to navigate its challenges. Sarah was placed in a halfway house with sex offenders. She coped with this challenging situation by exerting McAdams' (2001) sense of self-mastery. Bridge House has like 200 men to eight women. And the majority of men that are there are either there for raping a female or for having some sort of child offense or some sort of sexual offense. . . I'm trying to tell my counselor, 'Look I don't feel comfortable here. . . And she's like 'I'm trying to talk to your parole officer. Two weeks pass by and nobody said nothing to me so I took it upon myself to leave.

## **Theme 2: Self-protection**

Twelve respondents were victims of physical and/or sexual abuse. Women protected themselves from violence and abuse by seeking legal assistance, using their instincts and knowledge to escape danger, fighting back, and acting fearless.

**Seeking legal assistance.** Women rarely sought legal assistance because of the risk associated with being identified as a criminal. Although she had a history of prostitution charges, Lynn sought legal assistance to get away from an abusive relationship:

So knowing that. . . I'm an ex-felon, I couldn't possibly take matters into my own hands because the odds would be against me. . . I'm out of the relationship, it cost me... I had to go through victim assistance to get relocated. I was hospitalized. But they helped me relocate. They helped me medically. . . He received time because he left me for dead. But, I'm not a victim anymore. I'm a survivor of that.

Lynn left the relationship, pressed charges, and had her abuser convicted. She leveraged the legal system to work on her behalf. Lynn demonstrated agency via self-mastery through taking control and leaving an abusive relationship and she showed agency through status/victory (McAdams, 2001) when her abuser was convicted.

**Using their instincts and knowledge to escape danger.** Jasmine grew up in an environment where danger was ever present. Her mother sold 12-year-old Jasmine to a pimp in exchange for drugs. When Jasmine sensed danger or believed she was going to be forced to have sex with someone, she used her instincts to escape danger. She gave an example where as a teenager surviving on the streets, she ultimately triumphed over her potential abuser demonstrating McAdams' (2001) sense of victory.

He was like, "Should I get one bed or two? [at the hotel]. . . I already knew what he was trying to say so . . . I just looked at him and I was like 'just get one' because I know I'm going to get out

of it but right now I'm thinking, 'How am I going to get out of it?' . . . As soon as he gets in the shower I look in his wallet and I get some money out and I left him \$20. . . because I didn't have no money. . . so I ease out of the room and I run.

**Fighting back.** Fighting back was a way of life for Jasmine. She kept a “beat up stick” in her room as a teenager to prevent her mother’s boyfriend from beating her up. Later, when she was five months pregnant she was jumped by three women who got out of a car and start beating on her and she said, “My first instinct [was] to hit because I [didn't] want to get hit and I [had] a baby to protect.” Later, a boyfriend beat her up and she fought back while trying to protect her infant daughter.

**Acting fearless.** Mari’s competitive, fearless nature earned her respect in the gang she joined. She explained:  
I wasn't scared of nothin'. So that really moved me up quick in my gang. I got respect and stripes for doing everything, like they were gonna go do something, I was right there, front row, ready to do it.

### **Theme 3: Getting Even**

Daily acts of resistance are also revealed through the women getting even with their perpetrators or oppressors and, in a sense, demonstrating victory over their oppressors (McAdams, 2001). To “pay him back for beating me up,” Jasmine stole a boyfriend’s Cadillac after he severely beat her. Karen’s story shows how she got even with a John who degraded her. She said, “He ends up doing things that didn't feel right, I uh, he ended up starting to hurt me . . . and uh degrades me so I end up trying to rob him.”

While the act of stealing is criminalized behavior, for these women, “stealing” is agency—a means of adjusting the balance of power and contesting the brutality and degradation they experience. Unfortunately, these acts of retaliation often reproduce the women as “criminals.”

### **Theme 4: Resisting Gender Expectations**

Participants revealed stories in which they defied gender expectations. Carla’s experience showed the struggle that many of the women faced in their role as a mother. After giving birth to her daughter, Carla became deeply depressed and attempted suicide. She shamefully admitted that she felt hate and anger toward her daughter. Unlike some of the other women who tried to maintain custody of their children, when she was released from jail, Carla allowed herself time and space to work through the feelings she had about her daughter despite the expectations of being a “good mother.”

### **Theme 5: Resisting Stigma and Valuing Self**

A final and important finding in the women’s stories is that despite their experiences of being verbally, physically, and sexually abused, and having their self-worth continually attacked, participants recognized that they were worthy of love after participating in Resolana. Hope triumphed over despair. Carla eschewed the label of “convicted felon” saying, I actually love myself, you know, even though I actually feel like I'm in a worse situation because I'm in a convicted felon, but I actually love myself more. And that like, you know, you show that because it's like I want to do some more stuff for myself when before [it] was just

about other people.

### Discussion

Themes of agency clearly pervaded women's experiences. Findings augment McAdams' (2001) examples of agency as they pertain to mastery and status/victory. Self-mastery was demonstrated through identifying resources, starting businesses, and through leaving abusive relationships. Jasmine demonstrated victory when she stole her abuser's car. Respondents told of small and large acts of resistance (Wade, 1997). Jasmine fought back when attacked. Many women resisted the stigma of being a convicted felon.

This study confirmed literature concerning the strategies used by women in the strip trade (Bruckert, 2002), the need to fight back when subsisting on the streets (Maher, 1997) and being stigmatized (Maruna 2001; Opsal, 2011). Participants in this study, learned how to love themselves despite possessing multiple imposed stigmatized identities.

Labeled as criminal, deviant, addict, whore, thief, crack mother, and victim, the "choices" made by the women were judged without consideration for the imposed oppressive circumstances that determined their options. They have been cast off into our current system of mass imprisonment, which has created additional post-incarceration barriers to securing legal employment, safe living conditions, adequate health care, educational opportunities, and in many cases the basic necessities of food, shelter, and clothing. Many of them have been pathologized as suffering from mental illness or low self-esteem, as a way of explaining their "criminal" behavior (Pollack, 2000).

While we need to find informed, compassionate, and healing alternatives to incarceration for these women whose actions have been labeled "deviant" or "criminal," we also need to critically analyze and change the systemic violence induced by institutionalized racism, classism and sexism. Without working on these issues simultaneously, we will continue to vilify the women survivors of this violence and ensure the recurring cycle of incarceration.

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