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Incarcerated Women's Identity Development: Becoming a Self at the Margins

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Abstract: This study explores the developmental experience of women at the margins of society. Our findings suggest that the role of connection is problematic for these women and gives rise to a self that has a restricted degree of agency, but one that is paradoxically resilient and sensitive to her social context.

It's Wednesday afternoon and the three of us are once again headed to prison, where we have a standing date with a group of approximately 20 women inmates. We've been working with these women for almost a year, first gathering individual life histories, now developing with them a program that will enable them to enrich their awareness of who they are. We have multiple goals in this study, but a central one is understanding their developmental process. How have they constructed their understanding of who they are? And how can we as adult educators help them reflect on and further develop their understanding of themselves?

While we focus this study on incarcerated women, our interest is primarily in their marginality within the larger culture. All of our women have experienced deprivation at many levels: economic, social, emotional, intellectual. They have lived with severely limited resources of all types, within contexts characterized by violence, abuse, and addiction, and within relationships that from our perspective can only be described as dysfunctional. For us, the fact that they have committed crimes is, at least for now, secondary. We want to know how women at the margins of our society have developed their sense of themselves. And our women are teaching us a lot about that.

Here we discuss some of our early findings in this study. We do that by presenting three voices, each representing a unique perspective. The first is the voice of one of the women; we call her Gail. Her story, while not true of any one of our women, is a composite of many stories and thus illustrates themes shared by the group. The second voice is interpretive; there we try to make sense of Gail's story through the lens of current developmental theory. The third voice attempts to situate Gail's experience within a larger sociocultural context. We conclude by trying to assess how we can think about women's development at the margins.

Gail's Story

I was born at the County Hospital on April 14, 1973. I'm the middle child of three: two girls and one brother. My father? Girl, I haven't seen him in a long time, but his mother sends me cards sometimes. He has other children somewhere; I think there are three, but I'm not sure. My parents divorced when I was four because my mother said my father was beating on her. I guess you could say we were poor. It seemed like every time I asked for something, my mother would say, "Girl, you know we don't have the money for that." She worked in a nursing home, until she got a new boyfriend. Then she was just gone for awhile, leaving me and my sister with my grandmother. My brother was in and out of jail. He got into lots of little troubles.

When I was 9 years old, my momma and some of her male friends was over to the house, and the bathroom door was cracked just a little bit. I stood there and I seen that man shoot that needle in my momma's arm and I just started crying. She heard me at the door, and when I seen it, I just broke out running. I was just hysterical. I didn't know

what she was doing, but I knew it wasn't right. Kids ain't stupid. Later she said, "Baby, what you seen, Momma wasn't doing nothing. I wasn't doing nothing bad." There she was, just trying to fill my head up because I was young. I wasn't having none of it.

My grandmother took care of us mostly, but there was a bunch of us, so I was pretty much left alone. I still went to school; I just did everything for myself. Then when I was 11, my momma's boyfriend molested me. He was laying on the couch and he started fondling me. I tried to get away from him but he was stronger than me. When my mother came home I told her what he did, but she didn't believe me. Later on she caught him at it. I know my mom was hurt. She got out her suitcase from the closet and we went to stay with my grandmother for awhile. But she went right back to him. Right there, that's been a barrier in my life.

I met James, my baby's father, when I was 14 and he was 25. He said he had been noticing me for a while. Nobody ever said I looked good before. He had his own place and I just started staying with him. It was fun, having my own little house and my own little life. I had a little bit of money, too, from selling drugs. Eventually I came up pregnant, but by then he was in jail awaiting trial for aggravated robbery. By the time Derek was born, he was in prison.

At first, I played the good little wife, visiting him regularly. But after a while we drifted apart. I guess I was mad about this trouble he was in, and I wanted to give my baby something better than what I'd had. I moved in with my grandmother, thinking I would go back to school, but too much time had passed. I just didn't get around to it. Every day, I'd leave Derek with my grandmother and go out. I started shooting heroin. If my momma could do it, so could I. It took my mind off all the stress. I was still selling to feed my habit, so I had a little money. I'd bring clothes and toys home for the baby. But the places I usually went I didn't want to bring no baby. I didn't want him around the drug lifestyle.

I got locked up a couple times for possession with intent to distribute. I spent 8 months in County Jail the first time, and a year and a half in TDC [state prison] the second time. Now I'm here because I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. I was with this older guy, Elroy; we were out in the street and we seen this white guy come by in his car looking for dope. I didn't even know Elroy had a gun and next thing you know he's jacking the white guy. The cops come and we started running, and when they caught up with me, I gave up. I got 10 years because it was an aggravated offense.

At first I did my time the hard way, getting into messes. I was just angry at the world for putting me here. Then my grandmother came by with Derek one day and I guess it really hit me that I was a mother. Now I'm doing every day for him, trying to go home and start a new life.

I work on the hoe squad, work in the fields chopping grass like an old time slave. They don't pay you to work here in Texas. It's the best job because you don't have to work too long or think about the place you're in. But it's also the worst because you get filthy and they strip-search you every time you come in from the fields. The first time they told me to bend and cough, I was horrified. I guess you could say I'm used to it now, getting it two, three times a day.

I don't ever want to come back to this place. They tell you what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and usually they don't tell you why you're doing it that way. They mainly don't want us to get too comfortable here. I guess that's pretty effective, since now I'm ready to walk the straight and narrow. Get out of here, get me a job, take care of my son. God willing, that is.

Developmental Perspective

A central theme in women's developmental theory is the importance of connection (Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987; Miller, 1991). Women, it is argued, develop in-relation-with rather than through separation-from significant others. As Caffarella (1992) notes, however, most of the empirical research giving rise to these theories has focused on women who are white, middle class, and relatively well educated. What saliency does connection have for women at the margins? And how does it figure in their development?

We get some insights from Gail's story. Connection for her is either dysfunctional or totally absent. Her mother provides little emotional support because of her drug addiction and her dependence on abusive men. Her grandmother becomes the primary caretaker, but she's overwhelmed with other responsibilities and Gail is pretty much left to her own devices. Gail is without either adult guidance or adult protection as she encounters a threatening and unpredictable world. Those who should nurture her instead abuse, neglect, and betray her. Early on she is forced to assume adult roles without ever having responsible adults, with the possible exception of her grandmother, to model herself after. She faces horrific situations--drug addiction, sexual abuse--alone and unsupported. The connection she forms with her child's father is casual at best; and her connection with her son is as dysfunctional as her own mother's was to her. Only in prison does she start thinking of herself as a parent, but that thinking is idealized and untested by reality.

What then can we say about Gail's experience of connection? It is superficial and tentative, surely, because she has every reason not to trust others. There's an economy of practicality, that of using others and being used, that guides her behavior. And there is an absence of responsibility to anyone outside herself. This is evident on the most intimate level in her relationship with her son, and on a societal level it creates the vacuum which enables her to commit crimes without concern for those hurt by her actions.

What are the developmental consequences of this? One clearly is a striking lack of agency. Gail consistently describes herself as being acted upon rather than acting. She "comes up pregnant," as though she had no responsibility for motherhood, and she is incarcerated for "being at the wrong place at the wrong time." There is no sense that she is an actor in her own play. Another consequence, somewhat paradoxically, is a sense of self that is resilient (she is, after all, a survivor) yet dependent on the structure of the immediate context to get her needs met (she is more aware of and sensitive to the outer world than she is to any world within).

As a black woman Gail experiences "multiple marginality" (Chesney-Lind, 1997b, p. 4). In black feminist theory, the self has long been conceptualized as "embodying collective reality past and present, family and community" (hooks, 1989, p. 31). hooks goes on to argue that the experience of "self-recovery," restoration of a self that existed prior to exploitation and oppression through conscientization and other means, should also be incorporated into a model of identity development for women of color. Stevens (1997), for example, describes how African-American adolescent girls' identity develops in three dimensions: mainstream society, their devalued social status as black and female, and within their own African-American cultural reference group. Identity in these terms is a complex organization of bicultural competence, sustained connection to one's own culture, and development of strategies for resistance to oppression. Our conceptualization of Gail's development must likewise take into account the complex impact of race.

Social Perspective

There is no doubt that women in prison are multiply marginalized; ethnic minorities and people living below the poverty line are over-represented in the prison population. Female inmates in Texas are predominantly women of color: 48% African American, 19% Hispanic, and 31% white. This compares with statewide demographics of 12% African American and 25% Hispanic, according to the 1990 census. Donziger (1996) notes that in the United States overall, African Americans are incarcerated "at a rate more than six times that of whites" (p. 38). Yet while the proportion of overall crime committed by African Americans has not increased for many years, their incarceration rates have increased dramatically.

Forty-five percent of female offenders in Texas report a household income under \$10,000 per year (Farabee, 1994). According to the 1990 census, 18% of Texans have incomes that low. "The criminal justice system functions from start to finish in a way that makes certain that the offender is likely to be a member of the lowest social and economic groups in the country" (Reiman, 1996, p. 92).

Most women are arrested for relatively minor offenses, like theft and drug violations (Chesney-Lind, 1997b). The fivefold increase in women's incarceration rates since 1980 is not necessarily indicative of an increase in criminal behavior among women. For one thing, "the war on drugs has also become an undeclared war on women," and that has played a large part in expanding the female prison population (Chesney-Lind, 1997a).

Gail tells us a story that is common to the group with which we are working, and to incarcerated women in general. Childhood experience with physical and sexual abuse is high among female offenders. In Texas, 36% of female prisoners report having been physically

abused and 30% report sexual abuse before the age of 20. Fifty-three percent report having been physically abused as adults, 37% report having been physically assaulted with a weapon. Additionally, 31% report sexual abuse in adulthood (Farabee, 1994).

Gail's drug addiction is also a common experience among the group with which we are working, and among incarcerated women generally. Ninety-two percent of female inmates report some illicit drug use, compared with 28% of adult women in Texas. In fact, female inmates report significantly more illicit drug use than male inmates, particularly higher use of heroin, crack, and cocaine. Fifty-one percent of female inmates in Texas are either alcohol or illicit drug dependent (Farabee, 1994).

We see, then, a social context which supports increased rates of incarceration for women like Gail. Understanding how these social factors impact their development is essential.

Discussion

Our findings so far suggest that becoming a self at the margins of society is a complex process in which connection is problematic and which gives rise to a self with restricted agency and a resilient but outward-focused self-awareness. We are currently doing a more intensive analysis of the women's experience of connection, looking more closely at how they construct their understanding of those connections and what meanings they give them.

We are now providing the participants in our study an opportunity to work and learn together in a weekly program. Our focus there is on in-depth reflection on their experience and exploration of alternative ways of understanding it. It is our hope that in dialectic relation to a positive group development experience, each woman can experience meaningful connections and will discover and recover her own inner sphere of freedom.

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