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Recommended Citation

Clark, M. Carolyn (2000). "Women's Development at the Margins: Incarcerated Women's Search for Self," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2000/papers/16>

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Women's Development at the Margins: Incarcerated Women's Search for Self

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Abstract: *This study examines how one group of marginalized women, the incarcerated, construct their sense of self. Using the notion of nonunitary subjectivity to analyze life history narratives, I demonstrate how multiple positionings within available discourses serve to disadvantage these women.*

The notion of development usually implies fundamental change (e.g., cognitive, moral, epistemic) that occurs in human beings over time and that is theorized in linear ways and according to unquestioned social norms. Alternative approaches have been offered more recently by feminists working from postmodern and poststructural perspectives who focus on the notion of subjectivity and seek to understand how it is constructed within the complexities of social interaction and discourse. This approach is particularly salient for the study of identity. Weedon (1997, p. 32) defines subjectivity as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world.” Also implicit in this concept is the belief that the self is non-unitary, that it is “dynamic and multiple, always positioned in relation to particular discourses and practices and produced by these” (Henriques, et al., p. 3). While distinctions can, and usually should, be drawn between the terms *subjectivity* and *self*, for the purposes of this discussion I follow Griffiths (1995) and use them interchangeably and connect them to the concept of identity.

Riessman (1993), among many others, argues that subjectivity is best understood through the analysis of narrative, and Bloom (1998) has been particularly successful in using the concept of non-unitary subjectivity as an analytic tool, demonstrating how narrative makes visible the complexities and contradictions of the self. In this study I follow a similar approach. My purpose is to understand how women at the margins of society, in this case incarcerated women, construct their subjectivity or sense

of self. I conducted extensive and unstructured life history interviews with 24 women inmates, then analyzed their narratives using a modification of the holistic-content approach outlined by Lieblich et al. (1998). For each woman I identified the overarching themes in her life narrative, then examined closely one or more portions of the narrative in which she appeared to be in dialogue with herself, usually within the context of one of the major themes. I then used that segment as a lens through which to view the theme more closely, paying particular attention to how her multiple subjectivities were made visible in this process and how she positioned herself within the various social discourses available to her. In this paper I demonstrate this approach in some detail with the story of one of the women, and then suggest how the complex subjectivity of these particular marginalized women can be conceptualized.

Sabine

When I first met Sabine she told me that her life was about “hurt and pain.” She wasn’t wrong. A black woman in her early forties, she had served four years of her 20-year sentence for the death of a child in her care. She was adamant in her claim that she was not responsible for the child’s death, and I believed her. She and her siblings grew up in a dysfunctional family, with an alcoholic father and an emotionally distant mother, in conditions of poverty that presented a significant burden for her. Her unhappy childhood moved quickly into a hurtful adulthood, with the horror of a gang rape at a friend’s house when she was 16, a serious suicide attempt after that, a series of disappointing and sometimes

abusive relationships with men, and a continuous struggle with poverty. While she earned the distrust of those around her by a few minor acts of thievery, she had only spent a brief time in jail on a theft charge before her current conviction and imprisonment. Unlike all the other women I interviewed, she always seemed out of place in prison, and she clearly struggled to make sense of this experience. Her family had retained a lawyer who continued to plead her case, and several months after we met, her conviction was overturned and she was released.

Several overarching themes mark Sabine's life narrative, the largest of which is her identity as victim. She has been actively hurt by others (being molested by her uncle, the rape, the abuse and infidelity by men with whom she's been in relationship), and she been hurt by circumstances (ongoing poverty, the absence of adequate emotional support and approval by her mother, her current conviction). And as we will see shortly, she is also hurt in significant ways by her own actions. The second major theme is the breaking of trust. She has been consistently disappointed by those she trusted and in her narrative she often gives voice to her own mistrust of herself. Perhaps even more hurtful to her is being distrusted by others, a dimension of this theme that appears again and again. Finally there is the theme of isolation. This gets expressed in terms of critical secrecy—she hides the story of the rape, and she tells no one in prison the nature of her charge (for their own protection, women who responsible for the death of a child are counseled to make up another crime). Her unfulfilled longing for love and acceptance from significant others isolates her emotionally, and she actively blocks painful memories and feelings, thus creating isolation within. When I asked her to give me an image of herself, she spoke of being wrapped in a hard shell, alone but protected from harm. I thought it was a particularly apt image.

It was in my initial attempts to analyze Sabine's narrative that I saw the possibilities inherent in examining moments when the self seemed to be in dialogue with itself. About two-thirds of the way into the first interview, Sabine tells me three stories on top of one another, essentially unprompted by me. It was unusual for her to volunteer stories; ini-

tially she asked me to ask her questions about her life because she couldn't freely talk about it, and I often had to ask for specific instances of certain things, like the impact of poverty on her as a child. But here she narrates freely. What I believe she is doing in these stories is trying to make sense of her identity as a criminal. Just before this section she was telling me about when she moved in with her older sister after she recovered from her suicide attempt. When she said they started not getting along anymore, I asked what led to that, and she told me the story of meeting her first husband and being jealous of her sister because she was flirting with him. She goes on to tell me that after she married this man, she discovered that he was a drug addict and that he was conducting a longstanding affair with another woman. She tries to hurt him by taking up with another man, only to be hurt herself when her husband finds out because from then on he was bitter towards her. On the heels of that, she tells the following three stories:

And then me and my ex-husband, we had started staying with his mom, and his mom, I don't think she cared for me too much. I don't think so. But I tried so hard for her to understand me. It's because I've got real moody ways, and I try to get her to understand me, and try to like me, and stuff like that. And then, too, it probably just was me, I don't know. I don't know if she really started liking me or what. I don't know. I never just came out and asked her so I really don't know.

And then I did something to her that was really hurtful. One time we was behind on our bills, and she had some money and I took some money from her. Today, I don't know if she knows I'm the one that took the money from her but after that, oh, it hurted me more than it probably hurted her, because it stayed on my mind, it really bugged me for a long time.

And I had went to my sister and I told my sister, and she said, "Well, why don't you talk to her about it?" I said, "I can't" because I was really embarrassed and that really got next to me. I knew it wasn't mine, but I took it and I don't know if I took it to hurt her...I

could have called the people that we owed this bill for, I could have called them and asked for an extension, but I didn't, I took her money, and I went and I paid this bill, and I felt real bad about it. If you could ask me to do it now, I wouldn't do it for nobody. That's just how I feel about it. That's probably the reason she didn't too much care for me. I don't know but that's probably the reason.

I really sit back, and I've thought about it, maybe she did know, and maybe that's the reason she don't too much care for me. Because if somebody come and takes something that belongs to me, and I know it was them, because me and you is the only one there, so it had to be you, I'd probably dislike you too. I'd probably have some vibes about you, too. That's the kind of way that was.

And I did everything I could to sit up here, to try to make it up, and stuff like that, you know? I just didn't feel it no more. Then I felt like when I'd go around her family, I felt like everybody in the family knew about it. That bothered me, that was really an experience right there.

I: Was that the first time you stole anything?

Uh huh. I started when I was a kid, when I went in Neiman-Marcus (laugh). Me and my cousin (laugh) went in there, me and my cousin and a friend went into Neiman-Marcus and we was gonna go to this concert and we wanted an outfit, and like I told you, my mom and my dad didn't have the money to pay for it, and so we went in there and we was gonna go take an outfit, and we walking through the store, we went and put on the clothes, we turned around and put the same clothes we had on over the clothes we was gonna take. We walking out through the store, trying to find stuff to go with the outfit (laugh). And my tag is sticking out (laugh), my tag is sticking out the back. So when we get ready to leave out the store, there was two men that at the front, and they told us we wasn't going anywhere, we was going upstairs with them. And we kept on asking them what was the prob-

lem, and he said, "next time you try to take something, at least put the tags on the inside." (laugh)

Ooh, we laughed about it. My mom and my aunt wasn't thinking it was too funny when they came to pick us up, because we was, at the time, I think we were 12 or 13, something in there. And they didn't think it was too funny, so we got a whupping behind that. That was the only time that I took something from somebody, and then when it came to something being taken, it made my mom not trust us anymore. When something come up missing, the first person they look at was us. They didn't trust us anymore.

And so then I was in an incident, I was at somebody's house and their dad had took the money. I had went to somebody's house, my husband, the husband I have now, it was his cousin, I went to her house and she was telling me about some money she had. And she turned around and she asked me would I hold it for her. And I told her "no" because I didn't want to be responsible for it, and she had left it in her purse or something. I don't know how it went down. Okay, next thing you know, I was at the motel because my husband, he's a truck driver, and I was at the motel. Next thing you know there was banging at the door. And so they turned around and they asked me was I that person. And they said, "you under arrest for (how did they put that?) some kind of theft" because it was \$500 or something. And I was asking them, "Officer, what are you talking about?" I went to jail. And I stayed in jail for like almost 2 weeks. I got out on probation, they let me out on probation, six-month probation. So I had to pay that \$500 and something dollars back. So after I paid it back, and she got her money back, I told her, I said, "That was very unfair for you to sit up here and tell the people that I took your money, and I did not take your money." I said, "I could understand if I had took your money." She turned around and said, "Well, you was the only person there." And I let it go on because I paid the money back. And it hurted me because I knew I did-

n't do it, and yet I got accused of it. Like I said, it started from the time I actually took the money from my mother-in-law, and when we got caught in Neiman-Marcus, it got started from there. And from there on, it was like, whatever I did, I hope nothing come up missing because I didn't want to be accused of it.

I: So you were beginning to be identified by others and by yourself as a thief.

Yeah. I didn't like that feeling, I didn't like that feeling at all. Then after that, it was like, I don't know, I started being angry with myself.

I: After you got out of jail?

Yeah, I started being angry with myself, because I felt like I went to jail for nothing, and I started being angry with myself. I said "Well, I wouldn't have never been there if I wouldn't have never been accused."

Making Sense of the Story

This passage is made up of three stories, the first of which centers around her mother-in-law. Wanting this woman's approval – and not getting it – parallels her experience with her own mother, so this is a shadow story of that relationship. While she can't explain to herself why her mother doesn't give her the approval she craves, she can locate the rejection by her mother-in-law in her own behavior. Interestingly, though, the reasons why she stole the money from her are somewhat unclear to her—to pay the bills or perhaps to hurt her mother-in-law – which suggests that she remains somewhat of a mystery to herself here. Of even greater significance is the way she takes on the perspective of the disapproving mother-in-law and passes that harsh judgment on an objectified self: "If somebody comes and takes something that belongs to *me*...I probably would dislike you, too." In effect she's saying that the woman is right to dislike her and that she dislikes herself. This is one of several places where she defines herself as unlovable. This is an underlying thread in the victim story she constructs—it's as if

she's saying "I *deserve* to be a victim!" We don't get a sense of the impact this act had on the mother-in-law, but we do hear Sabine's pain very clearly. Things backfire on her—she is both the criminal and the victim.

The second story, shoplifting from Neiman-Marcus as a child, is in marked contrast to the first story; this is a lighthearted account of a childish prank, and we're both enjoying it. It's a comedic plot: three poor Black girls in an upscale store doing an inept job of shoplifting that must have amused the store detective ("Next time...at least put the tags on the inside."), enough so that no charges were filed. But then the story goes dark when her mother and aunt appear and the girls have to deal with their anger. The consequences were greater than a whipping; from then on they were marked as untrustworthy, and this hurt Sabine more than anything else could. Once again her actions backfired and she is the one who is hurt. A childish prank results in a permanent scar on her character.

The third story, the theft of the \$500 from her husband's cousin, has more detail but less coherence, which suggests that she doesn't yet have a meaningful explanation for this experience in her life. This also foreshadows the story of her current conviction—and I think that's its primary significance. Both stories are filled with ambiguity and present an unclear plot line. Here there's uncertainty about her guilt. She says she didn't steal the money, but she says three times "I had to pay it back," suggesting that she took it in the first place. Also, she confronts the cousin after she gets out of jail, then backs down quickly – "I just left it alone because...I paid the 500-some dollars" – so she's split on this. There is a similar set of contradictions and uncertainties in the story about the death of the child, and in fact it is the absence of a coherent story from her that contributed to her conviction. More important from Sabine's perspective is the fact that in both instances she pays dearly for something she didn't do. Once again *she* is the victim.

The final part of this excerpt is an evaluation of the three stories. Here she concludes that the distrust others have for her stems from the two thefts she actually did do—from her mother-in-law and from Neiman-Marcus (it's interesting here that she

keeps the order of the narrative version rather than the chronological version). It's as if these actions marked her as untrustworthy more generally and made her vulnerable to charges for things others did. The focus is on understanding her own victimization in life. Characteristically, she blames herself for this, a kind of self-flagellation: "Well...I wouldn't have never been there...I wouldn't have never been accused of it..." I believe she's saying that her earlier misdeeds have now made her a target, and that by placing herself in certain situations she's vulnerable to victimization. But she blames herself for this, and not those who take advantage of her (they are largely invisible). It's a significant inversion.

In the thematic analysis of the entire narrative, Sabine's identity as a victim is clear. The closer analysis of this segment of the interview gives us new insight into the nature of her victimization. We see several splits in her subjectivity, in how she understands herself and her relation to the world. She inverts the usual victim structure—blame of others is reduced (and often is totally absent), and self-blame predominates. Her victimization has two dimensions. First, she actively positions herself within the dominant discourse of judgment, thereby aligning herself with hegemonic power, but does so in order to condemn her objectified self. She does this with her mother-in-law ("If somebody comes and takes something that belongs to *me*...I probably would dislike you, too.") and later with those who prosecuted her for the child's death ("I don't blame them because if somebody would have come to me and was telling me something and then turn around it was two or three stories about it, I would've had doubts, too."). This involves a split subjectivity between judge and accused. It's especially interesting that this positioning of herself within the dominant discourse of judgment gives her a perceived advantage, as Hollway (1984) claims, by uniting her with those who have power, but that very act serves to disadvantage her because through it she shares in the condemnation of herself. It's a powerful double bind.

The second dimension of her victimization is what I call the backfire effect. Her actions against others end up hurting her more than hurting them, so she becomes her own enemy. We see this in the

mother-in-law story, in her infidelity to her first husband, even in the Nieman-Marcus story. Here subjectivity is split between enemy and victim. She is doubly victimized, both from without and from within. This is quite different from the victim stories told by other women in the group who follow the more common pattern of outward blaming.

Subjectivity and Marginalization

The contours of Sabine's story are uniquely her own, as is true for each of the women in this study. However, one element that is identifiable in all the life narratives is a subjectivity that is split in multiple ways, but those always include splits in subjectivity that ultimately serve to disadvantage them. It may in fact be this seemingly inevitable negative positioning within dominant discourses that binds them to their marginal status.

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