

WOMEN, SEX WORK AND AGENCY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores women's agency through the analysis of qualitative works on women who have engaged in sex work or offending. I draw from feminist pathways theory, symbolic interactionism, and post-structuralism to interrogate the question of women's agency in a patriarchal culture. Supplementing these theoretical perspectives are qualitative life history works, which let women explain from their perspective the circumstances leading up to their criminal offending or engagement in sex work. I analyze how cumulative victimization and multiple marginality influence choice, and subsequently how these factors lead women to negotiate choice and agency through sex work and offending. Women who engage in sex work and offending still have agency, no matter how limited. Yet explanations of offending behavior and sex work tend to rely solely on victimization narratives. Exposing this agency reveals both the power of structural oppression in shaping choices, but also the unique and subversive ways women assert power within these constraints.

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Introduction

Historically, criminology has ignored the issue of gender (specifically women's crime). This has made it extremely difficult to understand a women's experience within the criminal justice system and on a larger level within society. It was not until the 1970s that women began to be recognized in criminological theory, when feminist theory made its way into criminologists' area of study (Renzetti, Goodstein, & Miller, 2006). As such, feminist criminology is a new and evolving field. As Susan Wendell (1995) recognizes, "One consequence of increasing our knowledge of the power and pervasiveness of the social forces acting upon women is that we tend to focus upon women's victimization" (p. 41). When the primary focus is put on women as victims, women's agency and empowerment remains unexplored terrain. It is imperative that criminologists and sociologists come to understand women not as powerless or passive victims of their oppressors, but as women capable of empowering themselves despite their marginalized status. My paper delineates ways in which we can acknowledge victimization while accounting for choice and agency.

While it is important to understand the pioneering theories of criminology, most of these do not address women, and are therefore outdated and not applicable. The following analysis comes from a feminist theory perspective, while integrating the pathways perspective, symbolic interactionism, and post-structuralism. Using qualitative lived experiences, I analyze how cumulative victimization and multiple marginality influence agency and subsequently how these factors can lead women to negotiate choice and achieve agency through sex work and offending.

My paper attempts to answer this question: How does one address women's accountability for sex work and offending when women are a population that is consistently undergoing oppression, which limits choices and agency? I came to this research topic after overhearing or being a party to conversations that devalued women. I also conducted a participant observation assignment at Club Saratoga (a local strip bar), which further peaked my interest. I was intrigued by the conversation I heard from the patrons. I kept hearing the word "choice" thrown around. One patron even said, "I don't feel bad for them (dancers); they chose to do it." I knew that these "choices" were complicated by women's marginalized status and probably further by these women's personal life circumstances. It was then I decided to look deeper at women's choices and agency around sex work and offending.

In order to transform and understand deviant and criminal behavior we must recognize women as humans with individual choice and lived experiences of all kinds, without discounting women's oppression as a group. All women are on the margins as we still live in a male dominated patriarchal society. The male hierarchy of our country, its institutions, and social norms keep women as a group and individually from rising to equal positions of power. Women are by and large still paid less than men who hold the same occupations. Historical socially created ideas of "good" or "proper" women keep women in submissive roles. This paper recognizes women as a marginalized group and as victimized individuals, while still holding women accountable for their choices, therefore allowing room for individual agency and ownership. It should also be noted that notions of gender are complicated by several other intersections such as race, class and sexual

orientation. Women are not simply individual women or a group of women. Each woman identifies according to different intersections of race, class, sexual orientation, etc. These different intersections oppress women on many different fronts aside from just their status as women.

For the purposes of this paper I will be referring to the population of women I am addressing as either offenders or sex workers or both. The term offenders is used in a broad sense, not just to explain women that have broken the law but also women who have violated social norms by operating outside our society's patriarchal hegemony. The use of the term sex worker is also broad, not referring to just prostitutes, but also to exotic dancers, women who have been trafficked, or engaged in any type of survival sex behavior.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S OPPRESSION & AGENCY

My paper draws from several theoretical perspectives, all grounded in feminist thought. There are several different veins of feminist theory, however by and large they all have one thing in common. Feminist theorists acknowledge gender oppression, recognize the lack of gender equity in society, and lobby for expansion of opportunity and freedom. Danner (1989) explains that feminist theory "is a woman-centered description and explanation of human experience and the social world. It asserts that gender governs every aspect of personal and social life" (p. 51). Therefore if gender governs virtually all aspects of life on some level, then gender too governs female criminality. Intersectionist feminist thought broadens this view of gender oppression, arguing that the intersection of structural oppressions (e.g., race, class, gender) are a more

accurate framework for understanding the experience of oppression for diverse groups of women.

Pathways Perspective

Feminist criminologists recognized that criminological theory has always disregarded women, by defining criminals as men (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 2004). In order to understand women's criminality, feminist criminologists examine women's criminality and deviance in terms of their position in a hegemonic patriarchal society. What feminist criminology has come to emphasize is the victimization of offending girls and women. This approach is often termed the "Pathways Theory." Belknap (2007) explains the goal of feminist pathways perspective:

...what is included as "feminist pathways research"...attempts to examine girls' and women's (rarely, men's and boys) histories, allowing them, when possible, "voice" in order to understand the link between childhood and adult events and traumas and the likelihood of subsequent offending (p.71).

This approach emphasizes that girls and women do commit crime and are deviant but attribute it to their prior victimization. This is not surprising considering the highly patriarchal nature of American society, which creates an increased vulnerability to victimization for women at the hands of men. What many feminist criminologists focus on is the idea that much of female offending is a result or at least partially resulting from women's victimization experiences under male power. Both the structural oppression that feeds racist, sexist, and classist institutions and individual experiences of violent

victimization such as rape and intimate partner abuse affect the choices that girls and women make. Thus it makes sense that feminist criminologists and scholars look at women's and girls' offending in terms of their victimization.

Understanding women's offending and deviance in terms of their oppressed position in society is extremely important; it is also necessary to make sure we do not deny women agency in doing so. If we explain away women's deviance and criminality by simply attributing it to male patriarchy, then we are failing to acknowledge women as competent, empowered beings, capable of making their own choices. In short we are denying women autonomy by taking away their responsibility for deviant and harmful behaviors. Nedelsky (1989) offers an appropriate understanding of autonomy, "Autonomy is a capacity that exists only in the context of social relations that support it..." (p.25). This suggests that autonomy is fluid to an individual's life experiences. Therefore, while women may be marginalized and victimized, they still have some degree of agency wherein women exercise their autonomy. Thus, recognizing both autonomy and victimization are of importance when considering women's offending and deviance.

The pathways perspective recognizes that girls' and women offending can often be linked to their victimization experiences and social position in our patriarchal society (Gaarder & Belknap, 2002). The pathways perspective is perhaps the most cogent, comprehensive perspective in terms of girls' and women's offending. The pathways perspective acknowledges the existence of multiple marginality and blurred boundaries. Women are not simply one group. Every woman has a different background and a diverse

existence, and each woman brings a different life experience and story of marginalized existence to light. Thus the layered experiences of victimization and offending leads to “blurred boundaries.” While it is imperative to recognize individual experience and cumulative victimization; recognition of agency on any continuum has the ability to empower women. When the boundaries between victimization and offending become blurred the chance for women to exercise their agency by taking responsibility for their choice to offend is taken away. This is evident when analyzing lived experiences of offending women.

Symbolic Interactionism

George Herbert Mead (1934) is considered the father of symbolic interactionism; however, it is Herbert Blumer’s (1969) framework of symbolic interactionism that is used in this paper. Allan Canfield (2004) writes on Blumer’s work explaining that Blumer theorized, “...that humans act toward things and toward others, based on the meaning that they have for them..” (p.19). Blumer believed that humans choose to act, not that they are forced to act. Humans always have choice.

Symbolic interactionism asserts that people make sense of certain behavior based on ability and relationships with other social entities. These social entities take the form of cultural, religious, familial, educational, political and various other institutions. Symbolic interactionism posits that people operate in society and relate their lives to various practices; these practices are defined by dominant institutions and beliefs. The self is identified through relationships with social institutions, practices, and dominant assumptions. People make sense of who they are at least to some degree based on their

relationships to larger social entities. Humans act toward things and others, based on what they mean to each individual. Therefore one makes a choice based largely on these life experiences because one's life experiences are the basis of meaning making.

People have a certain degree of agency, they have choices in relation to larger, dominant, social and cultural practices, and therefore depending on one's specific life situation these choices may be limited. These choices that people make help to define their existence among the rest of the world. Thus women still have agency, but it is relative to their oppressed position under patriarchy. More specifically the latitude of each woman's agency will depend specifically on her individual marginalized position, and her lived experiences under male patriarchy. The choices available to one woman may be limited in comparison to another woman, but there is always choice no matter how limited. Acknowledging agency changes our view of women. When we acknowledge agency we no longer see women as passive oppressed people with no hope. We start to see women as people who choose and act within their limitations to resist oppression claim power where they can.

Post-Structuralism and Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci (1971) is credited for developing the concept of hegemony. Bladwin et. al. (1999) explain that hegemony is based on power controls. Those that are in power in society create the shared values, and beliefs, that act in accordance with the interests of those in power. Gramsci would argue that the power hierarchies and creation of values and norms are largely based on class. In addition to class I would argue that

power controls are also based on gender and race. After all, the most powerful influences in the world are namely rich, white, men.

Hegemony describes the way that people do not question common practices that have been socially defined as accurate or normal. Society makes decisions and follows through with actions based on hegemonic values. In “our culture” the dominant ideology is the middle class white values; these are defined as standard and normative. “Our culture” because “our” implies that most adhere to and believe in the values of the white middle class male dominated society. Not everyone adheres to these values; however it could be argued that while not everyone adheres to these values, everyone is held to these values as the standard. Our society makes these values seem natural, so natural that even those that suffer a disadvantage under these values accept their situation and function within the constraints of these hegemonic masculine values. Even people whose life experiences do not mesh with the hegemonic ways in which our society operates are held to this sort of normal guise that has been constructed. When people divert from these “normal” and “natural” social practices, attention is drawn and these people are defined as non-normative, deviant, and different-specifically, women who are making deviant choices under the constraints of their lived experiences.

Feminist criminology extends the argument of hegemony further to the idea that women are oppressed by “multiple marginality” (Chesney-Lind 1997, p.4). What is meant here is that not only are women oppressed by men, they often have multiple experiences of oppression through avenues such as race and class. We must acknowledge that we are not only fighting to uncover women’s hegemonic oppression within our

patriarchal society on a macro level; it must be recognized that women's individual lived experiences entail multiple marginality. Therefore the choices available or seen clearly to a woman exist within this multiple marginality, and are specific to each woman's life context.

These three theoretical perspectives can help provide criminologists with a clearer understanding of the reach of women's agency and the complicated nature under which women negotiate their role in society. Feminist criminology acknowledges the social, and cultural barriers women face. Feminist criminology understands that we still live in a society where women's mobility is limited in comparison to men's. However, in acknowledging that women have less autonomy than men and that their experiences are much different than men's, feminist criminology can also ignore women's agency. While women might engage in criminal activity under the patriarchal pressures or nature of our society, women still make choices. Denying women agency is also an injustice. If we deny women agency we are rendering them powerless victims of patriarchal society.

Consequences of the hegemonic patriarchal way that American society operates, act as a vehicle for social practices such as domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, sex work, and pornography. All of these impinge on female autonomy.

People (women) have agency: the ability to act on their behalf, and adapt to social circumstances. These adaptations to social circumstances can take a number of different forms of female criminality or deviance as women respond to their social circumstances. Young girls and women are characterized as sexually desirable; it is a defining characteristic of women that patriarchy has made to seem natural (Gaarder & Belknap,

2002). Women might turn to prostitution, stripping, or other sex work for income or survival as a result of their life circumstances. This reinforces the idea that women are sexually appealing, and that women's sexuality offers women economic agency. Depending on one's life circumstances, the message that women are sex objects may be more detrimental to some women than others. While the value of sex in our society has not led me to prostitution or stripping as a means of economic income it has undoubtedly affected my choices. My choice to wear makeup, or to follow fashion trends, or the need to stay thin are all choices that I have made in my life because they are the sexy choices that are condoned by our patriarchal society. However, many women have few options other than sex work for economic survival. For instance, Lisa Maher conducted an in-depth ethnography where she lived with women who were or had at some point engaged in sex work. These women also were or at some point had been addicted to crack. The women in this study lived on the outer margins of society, most were minority women, and all of them had been sexually and/or physically assaulted at some point during their lives. These women's life experiences held little latitude in terms of agency and sex work seemed to be the best option. The sexualization of women, coupled with economic and racial marginality led these women to sex work as a means of survival. Obviously this is not the case for all women. As Lisa Maher delineates in her book Sexed Work, women make choices, but they are not always made under the conditions of their own choosing (p.193). The choices that middle class white women make, and the choices that the women in Lisa Maher's book make, exist under completely different contexts, but all can be attributed to patriarchy and the sexualization of women to a certain degree.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses qualitative studies of female offenders (criminalized women and girls) and female sex workers to explore the contours of women's agency in the context of multiple marginality, oppression and cumulative victimization. I used six different life history works to analyze women offenders and sex workers and the role of agency in their lives. From these works, major themes emerged related to the topic of oppression and agency.

Three of the articles were by Jennifer Wesely. I used her 2002 published in *Violence Against Women*, "Growing up sexualized: issues of power and violence in the lives of female exotic dancers. I also used, "Where am I going to stop?" exotic dancing, fluid body boundaries and effects on identity" published in *Deviant Behavior*. Finally I used her 2006 article "Considering the context of women's violence: Gender, lived experiences, and cumulative victimization," published in *Feminist Criminology*. The earlier articles rely on data from 20 in-depth interviews with exotic dancers working in a southwestern metropolitan city. These articles include life history stories and lived experiences from the perspective of the exotic dancers themselves. Her later article used stories from the 20 in-depth interviews in addition to 20 in-depth interviews with homeless women who had at some point experienced violence. This article uses these interviews to examine the way that marginalized women are often subjected to cumulative victimization.

Also included is Lisa Maher's ethnography, *Sexed work: gender, race and resistance in a Brooklyn drug market*. In this book Maher uses qualitative data she

compiled while studying prostitutes that were or had at some point engaged in sex work for crack. I also read Mary Gilfus' article "From victims to survivors to offenders: Women's routes of entry and immersion into crime" published in *Women and Criminal Justice*. This article uses 20 in-depth interviews done with incarcerated women to analyze how these women chose to engage in street crime. Finally, I used excerpts from Laurie Schaffner's book *Girls in Trouble with the Law*. In this book Schaffner explores the lived experiences of incarcerated girls, uncovering their experiences of multiple marginality and cumulative victimization.

I chose these articles using grounded theory. After reading many articles on the subject of sex work I limited my search to only articles that also took a look at agency. Within those articles I chose articles that had interviews with lived experiences of the sex workers from their perspectives. I narrowed it to six works that seemed to best address the issues of agency and sex work, and analyzed the data from these articles.

Some may argue that qualitative in-depth interviews and anecdotal lived experiences are not generalizable. This is exactly the point; life experiences are not generalizable to the greater population. Each life experience is unique and leads each person toward different choices. It is with the examination of individual life experiences that feminist scholars can begin to theorize on a larger level about societal and institutional factors that propel marginalized populations toward harmful action. James Messerschmidt writes, "...the life history method is particularly relevant because it richly documents personal experiences and transformations over time" (2000). Quantitative data, while useful in many ways, does not and can not account for personal experiences.

Much can be learned from listening and documenting the personal experiences of others. As Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2004) explain, qualitative methods are favored when accounting for personal experiences because it allows the women to speak for themselves. With the examination of life stories captures an individual's perception of agency and action. I use these lived experiences to explore the agency of women offenders and sex workers.

FINDINGS

After reading the life history works I found three major themes that I explain in two different subsections. These themes reoccurred over and over affecting the way these sex workers and offending women exercised their agency and made choices to engage in sex work or offend. First, issues of multiple marginality and a history of cumulative victimization were on the forefront of these women's life histories. All of the women had been subject to some type of abuse, and most of the women were also marginalized by their class, race, sexual orientation or a combination. Second, in most cases the women saw their choices to offend or engage in sex work as a means of achieving agency. Merton's Strain Theory speaks to this phenomenon. When legitimate access to means to achieve goals are blocked, innovation is one adaptation marginalized groups make. Marginalized populations (women) will find illegitimate means to attain the goals which most often revolve around income production (Merton, 1938). Thus these women are engaging in sex-work and offending to conform to society's goals; they are just using illegitimate means because legitimate means are blocked. With limited options it seemed that these women were negotiating between the lesser of the evils.

Multiple Marginality and Cumulative Victimization

On a macro level, women have historically been and still are the proletariat under men. This has been made to seem natural. Jennifer Wesley underscores this in her article “Growing Up Sexualized.” Women are sexually objectified in a number of different ways, and this sexual objectification becomes a tool to assist in the oppression of women (2002, p. 1182-1183). When men and society reinforce the value of women’s sexuality in everyday social relations it becomes the norm. There is a joint production of meaning being created. Humans cooperate and participate in actions creating social relations. Things such as male dominance are made to seem natural; therefore many women cooperate and actively participate in constructions in society that are male dominated. Such practices are accepted because of hegemony. This macro level distortion of choice is based on the seemingly normal patriarchal nature of society on a general level. Gender roles and expectations are constructed as “natural” rather than a deliberate ordering of hierarchy (Kimmel, 2008). Therefore there is a joint production of meaning created and agreed upon centering around inequity of women under men.

Complicating this accepted joint production of meaning is what has been referred to earlier as “multiple marginality.” On the macro level, women as groups are oppressed by patriarchal, masculine, set of hegemonic rules and values. Minorities as groups are oppressed by white-patriarchal hegemony. The GLBT community is oppressed under white-patriarchal and straight hegemony. Huge groups in society are oppressed based upon a set of values that have come to seem normal. These values of the white middle class are not applicable to marginalized populations as values for these populations differ

based on a differential distribution of economic and political privilege as well as access to culture (Wilson, 1991). For many groups such as women, or African Americans, or gay men, etc. these values are not normal, and their entire population comes to be defined as abnormal.

Throughout history marginalized groups have banded together in activism and fought for increased rights. These groups have made huge strides in the direction of equity. However now that there are laws protecting marginalized groups such as equal opportunity employment laws, women's rights to choose, the right for all citizens ages 18 or older to vote and others. I contend that the institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism that exists is hidden better than ever in the hegemonic way our society operates. It is easier to ignore racism, sexism, and classism because it seems as though a) there are laws enacted to protect against these isms and; b) those in power (wealthy, white, males) are not affected by racism, classism, and sexism and therefore do not see a need for change. Though the hard work of feminists and marginalized activists throughout history should be commended and their work is extremely important, we still have a long way to go. The work that has been done in the past makes it easier for society to blindly accept the hegemonic values as they are now as equitable. This is not the case.

Thus whole groups of people are subjected to living in a society that adheres to a set of values and norms that do not fit for everyone. Merton's strain theory argues that the American dream is comprised of material and monetary success and achievement, and these are reinforced by media, public authorities and other institutions. To be truly successful one must achieve these monetary and material successes by working hard in a

legitimate career. However, access to legitimate opportunities is disproportionate (Merton, 1938). Marginalized groups end up either adhering to an entirely different set of norms and values or are forced to find illegitimate means to reach monetary and material success. Because of the way that hegemonic masculinity functions in our society groups that stray outside of these normative values are ostracized, criminalized and seen as deviant.

While groups as a whole are marginalized, it is also important to recognize that the individuals in these groups have their own lived experiences of marginalization. Meda-Chesney Lind (1997) explains that women suffer not only from gender oppression, but from class and race oppression as well. Depending on the context of each woman's life she may be marginalized in all three of these categories. She explains that these factors work in conjunction with gender oppression to multiply marginalize women. Therefore it is not enough to recognize gender inequity when discussing women's offending or sex work and the choices available to them. It is imperative that all the different ways women experience oppression are taken into consideration when discussing agency. Angela P. Harris (1990) provides a clear explanation of this:

The notion that there is a monolithic "women's experience that can be described independent of other facets of experience like race, class, and sexual orientation is one I refer to in this essay as "gender essentialism"...The source of gender and racial essentialism (and all other essentialisms, for the list of categories could be infinitely multiplied) is the second voice, the voice that claims to speak for all. The result of essentialism is to reduce the lives of people who experience multiple forms of oppression to addition problems: "racism + sexism = straight black women's experience, or "racism + sexism + homophobia = black lesbian experience. Thus, in an essentialist world women's experience will always be forcibly fragmented..." (pp. 588-589).

When recognizing women's multiple marginality it is extremely important to not essentialize experiences, but to recognize that each woman regardless of race, sexual orientation or class, has a unique and different lived experience of oppression.

In addition to this or perhaps in response, these same women are often subject to cumulative victimization. As Jennifer Wesely (2006) describes, many times women who offend and participate in deviant activity have life histories, "...characterized by abuse, degradation, and social exclusion," (p. 303). Often deviant women have been victimized over and over again throughout their lives. Wesely (2006) explains the experiences of the homeless women and exotic dancers she interviewed. These were women who had been or continued to be engaging in violence. For example, Angel was an 18-year old exotic dancer who ran away from her abusive home at the age 15 with an older friend named Ricki, and became romantically involved with an older man named Chris, who was the owner of an exotic dance club. She was repeatedly victimized by Chris after he became her legal guardian. Wesely (2006) explains the cumulative victimization:

When Angel turned 16, Chris asked her if she wanted to begin dancing at his club, which she did, while becoming increasingly dependent on him. Along with this dependence, Chris started introducing more and more terror into the girls' lives. Angel's first sexual experience was being raped by Chris while his friends watched. She and Ricki both became pregnant by Chris. After Ricki gave birth to a baby boy and Angel was still pregnant, there was a vicious gang rape attempt by Chris and his friends that resulted in Ricki's death. Angel, a minor, stayed with Chris to raise Ricki's baby for 3 years and was raped and beaten consistently during this time frame by Chris and others (p. 315).

Recognition of women's cumulative victimization is needed to understand the circumstances in which women make choices. Angel made the choice to run away after being raised in an abusive home. Angel then made the choice to become an exotic dancer after having become romantically involved with an older abusive man. She had choices, however the options available to Angel were limited. At Angel's young age of 15, it may have seemed that running away was a better choice than to be continually abused. After running away perhaps Angel saw working as an exotic dancer and becoming romantically involved with an older man as a better option than living on the street. Angel made the choice to run away and to engage in exotic dancing, but her visible options were limited. In an earlier study, Wesely addresses the issues of power and violence in the lives of exotic dancers through in depth interviews. Again Wesely (2002) provides an example of the types of cumulative victimization that many women who choose to engage in violent behavior have lived through. In Skye's own words:

If I didn't mow the lawn, [my father would] smack me over the head with an aluminum baseball bat. He pushed me out of a second-story window when I was 10 years old. I came home from Girl Scouts, my mom had been beaten the hell out of, she left to my aunt's house with my sister, not thinking I was coming home. I came home early, he was there, my grandmother was in the next room, and she claims she didn't hear a damn thing. And he raped me in my own room three times. I was 12....(p.1192).

Skye was beaten and sexualized at a young age by her father. Skye grew up feeling powerless, but as Wesely (2002) explains, even in the most horrific circumstances, people have some agency. For women like Skye who choose to become exotic dancers; there is a power or perceived power around their body and sexuality. When Skye was growing up her father took control over her body and her sexuality. But when Skye was

able to get away from her father she was able to take control of her body and sexuality to feel empowered. Skye made a choice that helped her feel like she had some control over her life through her body and her sexuality. Other avenues to control and economic success were likely invisible to Skye considering her past lived experiences.

Evident in the life histories of all of the offending women is cumulative victimization. The women who tell their stories in these interviews have often been sexually, physically, verbally, and emotionally victimized over and over again throughout their lives. It seems appropriate, even humane to excuse women's offending after hearing some of these lived experiences of victimization. Feminists recognize that these victimizations occur under the hegemonic patriarchal constructions of our society. After hearing stories of sexual degradation, abuse, physical and emotional trauma that some of these girls and women offenders have been through, it seems natural to excuse the behavior based on their cumulative victimization. Even women with haunting lived experiences, can own their actions, otherwise we render them powerless.

When someone takes responsibility for their choices they are exercising their agency. When someone exercises their agency they are given the opportunity to use their agency (however little it may be) to invoke positive change and make choices that do not harm themselves or others.

Negotiating Choice and Achieving Agency Through Sex

This pattern of multiple marginality and cumulative victimization is not limited to Wesley's studies. Mary Gilfus (1992) explains women's entry into street crime through in-depth interviews of incarcerated women ages 20 to 41 years old. It is evident through

these interviews that these women's agency was limited by multiple marginality and cumulative victimization. Here she explains the experience of Janet, a 28 year old woman incarcerated for breaking and entering:

Her first memory of sexual abuse was by a female babysitter around the age of three or four, then by a group of male and female cousins from age five to seven, then by her grandfather at age twelve, and finally by her step-father from the age of twelve to fourteen. She never told anyone of these experiences. Janet left home at age 14 to escape her stepfather's sexual abuse and became involved in prostitution as a teenage runaway. The resulting drug addiction and abusive domination by her male partner kept Janet immersed in a variety of street crime activities (p. 71).

In this story we see a woman who has been multiply marginalized by her sex and race, who suffered several years of sexual abuse at the hands of several different abusers. Janet chose to run away and to engage in sex work. However she did not choose sex work in the same way that a white middle class woman chooses to finish high school and to pursue a college education. Her life circumstances did not make easy or perhaps even visible those options. In this way Janet was exercising the only power she perceived she had. Janet was able to run away from the abuse, but after years of sexual abuse she turned to sex work as a means of survival, knowing that she could put a value on her body. To Janet her body gave her agency. She was able to use it to get away from her abusive home. To her survival sex was a better alternative than living at home. As Gilfus points out, even after running away her choices were constrained by subsequent drug addiction and male domination. While Janet still chose to engage in sex work and criminal activity, her lived experience brings to light the constraints on the availability and visibility of alternative choices.

A woman's choice or her agency is fluid on a micro level, based on her specific life experiences. A woman's choices within her social circumstances will depend greatly on her life experiences. A woman who has been sexually assaulted repeatedly might then connect her body to her place in society and thus participate in prostitution as an adaptation to her social circumstances that have been created by patriarchal hegemony.

Laurie Schaffner (2006) describes this in an in-depth interview she conducted with Portia, a young woman in juvenile detention:

For Portia, her boyfriend wasn't her pimp, she wasn't really a prostitute anyway, and at least she wasn't participating in the violent drug trade sector of the street economy. According to her, love powered Portia Barlow into the arms of her boyfriend/pimp. Sex provided her/them with a way to generate cash. Portia struggled to minimize and even deny her sex work, neutralizing her guilt. The social logic to her decision making was largely apparent. Given the choices that Portia believed were available to her, for her to move toward the boyfriend and seemingly financial security made sense. Her grim bravado during the interview hardly reflected what sociology has referred to as girls' "impulse to get amusement or adventure." Her sexual choices have served instrumental purposes. Portia coolly claimed she turned tricks for a chic modern reason--money--and she did (p.84).

In this passage, Shaffner astutely analyzes the context of Portia's choices. Portia engaged in sex work to avoid becoming a part of a more violent and dangerous drug economy. In her eyes she was making the most fiscally responsible choice available to her. She needed a way to survive and avoid living on the street, and she also did not want to be a part of the violent drug economy. Therefore her prostitution, which she didn't even necessarily see as sex work, was the most viable option. Girls like Portia exercise their autonomy within a limited range of good options.

Gilfus (1992) describes Yvonne's story. Yvonne made the choice to run away with her boyfriend after he sexually molested her, physically abused her, and emotionally traumatized her by her mother. She ran away with her boyfriend:

The third night came, we had no more money. He said "get some money." I didn't understand what he was talking about. But he was talking about being a prostitute...We didn't have a place to stay, we slept on trains... I had to steal food. Time I went two, three days without eating, I'd have to steal something (p. 76).

Gilfus goes on to explain that Yvonne then engaged in sex work to ensure her and her boyfriend's survival. Yvonne made the choice to run away, believing that it would be better than being molested and abused at home. After leaving home she engaged in sex work knowing that her and her boyfriend needed food and shelter and she saw no other way to achieve this.

Gilfus explains the complicated circumstances that led another woman, Ann, to engage in sex work:

Ann, a 37 year old black woman, was serving six months for a disorderly conduct (a prostitution-related offense). Ann was violently abused by her step-father from the ages of ten to 16. Whenever she had to be taken to the hospital for treatment of her injuries her mother would lie about the source of the injuries, and Ann would collaborate in the lies, explaining, "I loved my mother, and I knew they would take me away from her if I told the truth." At age 16 she moved into her own apartment and worked for a year in a low paying clerical job. That year she was raped by her first boyfriend she had ever dated. Feeling alone and betrayed, struggling economically, Ann was convinced by a girlfriend to go "downtown" to get a job as a go-go dancer. Ann enjoyed the money she began making and was enthralled by the glitter of "downtown" life. She soon met and fell in love with Joe, a flashy pimp who made no effort to conceal his plans for Ann. She readily agreed to work as a prostitute for him, explaining in retrospect, "I was a fool for love" (p. 83).

Here Ann explains all the choices she made that eventually led her to prostitution. She explains why she lied about her step-father beating her. She explains that the economy and her loneliness led her to go-go dancing, and her need to feel loved led her to her pimp, who led her to prostitution. Ann was victimized over and over again, but does not cite her victimization as the ultimate reason she engaged in prostitution. Her victimization did of course impact her life choices leading up to her decision to engage in sex work, but as Ann looks back on this decision she explains she did it for love. Ann owns her choice to engage in prostitution but also explains the history that led her to view sex work as an option.

The degree to which women are free is often limited by their personal life circumstances and setting. With every “atypical” or non-white, non-middle class normative characteristic, a woman’s agency within society becomes more limited.

BLURRED BOUNDARIES

Mary E. Gilfus’ (1992) concept of “blurred boundaries” explains that women’s subordinate status, cumulative victimization and multiple marginality can blur the lines between victim and offender with regard to women’s offending. This issue of blurred boundaries uncovers a key question Kathleen Daly (1992) asks, “But where does victimization end and responsibility for acts that harm others begin?” (p. 48). This question is extremely important to consider when addressing women’s offending. We know that women offenders and sex workers often suffer from multiple marginality and cumulative victimization. We also know that someone (preferably those responsible) must be held accountable for crime and harm to others.

As feminist criminology has emerged it perhaps has made an over-correction for the lack of recognition of women's victimization. Feminist scholars have worked to uncover the hegemonic subordination and victimization that many women offenders have suffered. This is important to gain ground in women's rights and working toward gender equity in American society. Yet feminist scholars need to be careful of denying women agency. When women's offending and deviance is explained through their victimization and marginality at the hands of men, agency is overlooked. As feminist scholars start to make strides toward gender equity, women must also be held accountable and empowered to own their choices, even those constrained by male dominance and victimization. Stuart van Wormer and Bartollas (2007) maintain that, "Oppressed individuals are not devoid of personal or moral strengths or resources" (p. 17). As feminists we are trying to empower women toward gender equity, but if we deny women the ability to be held accountable for their choices no matter what the circumstance we are rendering women passive victims of hegemonic patriarchy. By giving women the opportunity to own their choices women can use that power to exercise agency in a positive manner. As Stuart van Wormer and Bartollas (2007) argue, taking responsibility and personal empowerment go hand in hand; it can thwart oppressed individuals away from hopelessness and toward more positive choices.

If women's offending is explained solely by their victimization then we fail to acknowledge women as dynamic human beings. Women's lives are affected by many experiences, relationships, and other factors, and the choices women make cannot be explained simply by recognizing their victimization.

Wesely (2006) gives several more examples of how homeless women and exotic dancers negotiated choice:

For instance, Rita's mother began to steal from Rita's bank account, and it was at this point that Rita began dancing. Tasha lived with her divorced mother and felt responsible when her electricity was turned off and her mother was unable to help them. The "choice" of becoming a sex worker or hitting the streets evolved into a viable option under these circumstances. Eliza described, "The reason that I actually went to the streets is because there was no food at home... We either had lights or we didn't. We either had food or we went and found it" (p. 313).

Here Wesely describes how becoming a sex worker or living on the streets became a better option for these women than staying at home. In lieu of difficult life circumstances these women chose the option that seemed to offer them the most agency, and economic security. There are a multitude of factors that influenced these women's choices to offend or engage in sex work. Blaming these choices on victimization alone does not allow these women to own their choices and explain for themselves what influenced their decisions.

BALANCED DISCUSSION

This is not to say that women's victimization should not be taken into consideration when holding women offenders accountable for their choices. Women's choice should be recognized within their personal lived experiences and constraints. Scholars and policy makers must take a look into the life histories of women offenders and deviants, and get their personal accounts of victimization and the choices they've made in response. We must recognize that when women are subjected to multiple marginality and cumulative victimization, that an outsider may see several different options or healthy outlets. But a woman who is living these experiences, may see

criminality and deviant behavior such as stripping or sex work, as the best, if not only option within their internal sense of autonomy. Again in her 2003 interviews with current and former exotic dancers it is apparent that many of these women suffered from cumulative victimization and multiple marginality, and saw stripping as the best financial decision. Wesely (2003) briefly described the victimization some of these women experienced:

As children or teenagers, nine were raped or molested, three by their fathers, and six by someone outside the family. Six stated that they were neglected or emotionally abused by one or both of their parents. As adults, either had been, or were in, violent intimate relationships (pp. 489-490).

Here it is clear that most of the women interviewed had been subject to at least one form of abuse, if not several, throughout their lifetime. Wesely's (2003) article goes on to articulate that several of the women described exotic dancing as the alternative to being homeless at a young age, one woman, Irene, explains:

My father left my mother when we were very young. I remember I was about 9 years old and he left her for another woman. She basically after that was left to raise us, and work. She got married when we were in junior high school, and her husband said she had to make a choice between him and her kids. So me and my sister were placed in state homes. I remember having my 16th birthday in a state home, so I was maybe 15 when I was put there, and my sister was 14 (p. 490).

Pollack (2000) explains how we might be able to understand women as victims and as agents in their offending. "Furthermore, understanding victimization as a dimension of experience provides space for the possibility of women's agency" (p. 83). When contemplating women's victimization, we must think of their victimization as a facet, but not the only one. Women are multi-faceted, and while women offenders and

deviants may have life experiences that include victimization, they also have a multitude of other life experiences and character defining attributes. When we recognize women only in terms of their victimization we are taking away their power to make choices. As Pollack (2000) writes, “Relational autonomy acknowledges that even under conditions of oppression individuals function as agents; they make choices,” (p. 85). This analysis recognizes and takes into consideration women’s victimization, while allowing room for choice. This is a balanced and equitable way of considering women’s choice to offend or take part in deviant activities without denying the effects that multiple marginality and cumulative victimization may have on their choice.

The reason we need to consider women’s victimization is so that we can understand their choices to engage in deviant activity and offending; not to excuse women’s offending but to combat the problem by understanding how one might come to the decision to engage in such behavior. If it is understood what circumstances lead up to a woman using what agency (no matter how limited) she might have to engage in deviant and criminal behavior, policy can be improved to help combat the factors that lead to these decisions. Understanding women in terms of gender constraints, but also as having choice. By looking at lived experiences in conjunction with gender equity and feminist literature, scholars can begin to acknowledge gender inequity, while recognizing that women as individuals have choices that fall into differing places on the continuum of agency. It is with a closer look at specific life circumstances that larger social change in terms of gender equity and policy around women’s crime and deviance can take place.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In light of this over-correction, there are three different areas I see an opening for policy change, education, programming, and law. While I do not have any hard and fast answers as to how these policy changes should be made, I think it is important to recognize the complicated nature of women's agency.

Perhaps as educators there is a place to use qualitative works to help students grapple with the idea of agency. Agency is a complicated subject to explore and qualitative works may be able to help students understand that agency happens on a continuum. This may help combat stereotypes of sex workers and offending women. The idea that people (women) are homeless because they are lazy, and that rape is an occupational hazard of women choosing to engage in sex work may be challenged if we can start to help students realize that these women's choices were made under extremely different context than their own.

Next, programming needs to address the intersections of victimization and offending, and agency and power. Gender responsive programming would do well to recognize that not only do women have different needs than men, but that their prior experiences, victimizations, lack of power, and how women perceive agency is different than men. Because we live in a patriarchal society, women's agency is seen within and in comparison to men's agency. Throughout history women have been fighting to get rights that are equal to the rights given to men. While achieving these goals and rights is wonderful, these rights have been granted on the basis of what rights are afforded to men. Yes, men and women should be afforded all of the same rights, such as voting, without regard to gender. However when it comes to programming women and men have

different needs because women and men are different. Women have a whole set of experiences that cannot be compared to the male experience, such as motherhood, pregnancy, childbirth and larger rates of sexual trauma. A woman's agency is largely based around experiences that differ from the male experience. Programming for women should be based around validating those experiences as real, as important, and as a factor in agency. When recognizing this programming might try to lean toward the empowerment of these women by helping them own their choices and recognize their agency.

The laws that dictate women and girls lives, should take into account that women have a different continuum of agency than men. I would address specifically status offenses. Several times in these women's stories we heard of women and girls running away to get away from their abusive homes. Criminalizing women's and girls' choices to escape from abusive homes should be re-evaluated. These status offense laws while they may be good intentioned disproportionately negatively affect young women. These laws in affect women and girls differently than men and boys. The oppressed status of women as a whole should be taken into account with law-making. Right now it seems as though the laws in place just serve to oppress women more, rather than help women break free of oppression.

CONCLUSION

Women as a whole are oppressed, and within this group each woman has a different life circumstance, and a different history leading her to the choices she has made. When it comes to women who engage in sex work and offending women it is

necessary to recognize the individual experiences of women. These experiences will help explain the choices women make to engage in sex work and offending. Instead of taking away women and girls' ability to own their choices and explain the ways in which they came to these choices by blaming sex work and women's offending on victimization we need to empower women by acknowledging each woman's agency no matter how limited. When women are empowered their agency is broadened, and more choices are visible. Options become less limited and stereotypes are broken creating a path for progress in terms of gender equity.

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