"Picture Me Different": Challenging Community Ideas about Women Released from Prison
« Changez votre façon de me percevoir » : remise en question des perceptions sociales à l'égard des femmes libérées de prison

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ABSTRACT

This research into social justice explored how women transitioning from prison into the community can raise awareness and challenge stigmatic attributions that interfere with successful reintegration. Using the guiding principles of photovoice and action research, a group of 5 formerly incarcerated women created banners with the intention of dissemination leading to raised community awareness. Thematic analysis through the lenses of relational cultural theory, social capital, and feminist inquiry rendered overarching themes of *helping my neighbour understand* and *my need for connection*. Effects of the experience on participants, counselling implications, and how this research was put into action are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette recherche sur la justice sociale explore comment les femmes qui passent de la vie carcérale à la vie dans la communauté peuvent faire mieux connaître et défier les attributions de stigmates qui compromettent la réussite de la réinsertion. En recourant aux principes directeurs de photovoice et de recherche-action, un groupe de 5 anciennes détenues a créé des bannières avec l'intention de les diffuser afin de sensibiliser la communauté. Une analyse thématique à travers les optiques de la théorie culturelle relationelle, du capital social, et de la question féministe révèle des themes prédominants suivants : « Aider mon voisin à comprendre » et « Mon besoin de connexion ». Dans cet article examine des effets de l'expérience sur les participants, des implications en matière de counseling, et comment cette recherche a été mise en œuvre.

When a woman enters the criminal justice system, in many ways she is given a life sentence, regardless of her crime. Whether a woman has been apprehended for soliciting, drug involvement, or murder, the stigma that follows her for the rest of her life is rarely, if ever, completely eliminated. The most recent statistics indicate that there are over 1,000 women in federal custody in Canada (Correctional Service Canada, 2010) and 9,000 women in provincial custody (Mahony, 2011). The vast majority of these women will be released at some point and face the difficult challenge of integrating back into the community.

Most female offenders in Canada are not imprisoned for violent crimes but rather for property crimes. Most of the violent crimes committed by women are

common assault against a known person (Kong & AuCoin, 2008). Although not every story of incarceration is the same, most include a history of trauma (Sahota et al., 2010), substance addiction (Denis, 2007), the need for social assistance (Richie, 2001), single motherhood, and mental health concerns (Sahota et al., 2010). It is worth noting that incarcerated women are less likely to return to prison than their male counterparts. Consequently, the "revolving door" phenomenon is less applicable to women than men—in other words, women are less likely to reoffend (Kong & AuCoin, 2008).

STIGMA AND MARGINALIZATION

For most women, the precursors to imprisonment place them in a marginalized capacity to start with, and a prison history usually ensures they will remain on the margins of society (Pollack, 2009). Pollack (2009) points out that "their marginal status is significantly augmented; they have been severed from family, community, and the labour market and, most significantly, carry the stigma of having been criminalized and imprisoned" (p. 31). These factors interfere considerably with the chance to gain employment, find housing, reconnect with social supports, and enter into the community (Mahony, 2011).

A predominant question across the criminological literature is what role stigma or the label of ex-con plays in the transition process for both men and women (Devah, 2007; Harm & Phillips, 2001). A key labelling theorist, Erving Goffman (1963), proposed that when a person or group of people is considered "bad, or dangerous, or weak," they are reduced "from a whole person to a tainted or discounted one" (p. 3). Challenging the labels that are typically hung on these women demands not only advocacy on their part but also a receptive general public. Researchers have determined that raising the profile of a labelled group, thereby educating the general public, can affect the way a stigmatized group is viewed (Braithwaite, 2000; Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994; Martinez, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, & Hinshaw, 2011).

The rationale for this research is grounded in the need for research and action that will raise the awareness of policy makers and community members in order to support women transitioning from prison in the struggle to overcome a broken past, cobble together a functional future, and regain, in the eyes of the community, identities that more accurately reflect the depth of their experience. To that end, the objectives of this action-oriented research were threefold: (a) to work together with female parolees and facilitate the exploration of their lived experiences from a unique and creative perspective, (b) to collaboratively create a visual depiction of the lives or challenges of female parolees, and (c) to explore available opportunities to bring the visual and oral or written results of the project to the greater community through public exhibition and/or publication of the material (subject to group agreement). Thus, the ultimate aim of this qualitative action-oriented study was to increase insight and self-awareness through photography and storytelling for the participants and raise community

awareness through public exhibitions of the photographs and commentaries created by the participants.

FEMINISM, RELATIONAL CULTURAL THEORY, AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

This research was conducted through concepts that embody the intention and outcome of the project: feminism, relational cultural theory (RCT), and social capital. Stanley (as cited in Reason & Bradbury, 2010) asserted that feminism is not merely a perspective or an epistemology; it is an ontological philosophy, or way of seeing the world. Acknowledging that the term *feminism* is a broad concept, the feminist position taken by this research aligns with that of Patricia Maguire, who grounds action research (AR) in feminist principles. Maguire (2001) connects AR and feminism by stating, "Feminism and its scholarship is a political movement for social, structural, and personal transformation. Feminist and action research share an avowed intent to work for social justice and democratization" (p. 61). According to Maguire, without roots in feminism, AR would not have the impetus to aspire to liberation. In the context of AR, feminist ideals go beyond the oppression of women and extend to all marginalized groups that must make their way within the dominant discourse. Working within a feminist framework supported the philosophy of respect, dignity, shared experience between researcher and participants, and ownership of materials. This view regards research participants as respected knowledge holders whose input is valuable in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of the research products (Driscoll & McFarland, 1989). In this study, feminist principles provided the platform from which the research relationship unfolded.

With a focus on relationship, Jean Baker Miller and The Stone Centre writers (Jordon, 2010) suggested that women in particular are relationally driven, and relational and cultural contexts must be considered when psychological growth stagnates. RCT embraces social justice innovation, and adherents believe it is through the mechanisms of mutual understanding and empathy that people (not only women) grow through and toward relationship (Jordon, 2010).

The relationship between previously incarcerated women and members of the community has been far from growth-fostering and more often steeped with stigmatic attributions, fear, and avoidance (Comstock et al., 2008; Opsal, 2011). In order to facilitate a mutually empathetic, engaged relationship between female parolees and the community, it is imperative to create opportunities where community members are exposed to the challenges, barriers, and successes of women who are transitioning from prison.

If the economy of reintegrating women is thought of in terms of relationship, then the currency that enables access to resources can be considered social capital (Putnam, 1995). Therefore, it may be useful to describe the tension between formerly incarcerated women and the general community as a deficit in social capital. Putnam describes social capital as "features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effec-

tively to pursue shared objectives" (pp. 664–665): a set of resources on which people can draw.

Social capital has been described as having two dimensions: *bonding* and *bridging*. Bonding social capital refers to the ways in which connections with family, friends, and affiliated organizations (e.g., church groups) help to support an individual. It has been considered the glue of the social fabric (Putnam, 2000) and characterized by homogeneity. Bridging social capital refers to social connections that go beyond familial bonds or friendships and are characterized by heterogeneity. These connections cut across diverse social contexts and help people access information and resources outside of their usual social circle. Putnam refers to bridging social capital as the lubricant of the social fabric: the grease that oils the wheels of societal functioning.

McNeill and Whyte (2007) argue that, in terms of criminal desistance and reintegration, bridging social capital (or lack thereof) is a key factor in successful transitioning for offenders: a reciprocal interaction between the community and the ex-offender must occur. Indeed, "not only must the ex-offender be willing to contribute, communities must be willing to accept and recognize those contributions and consequently reaccept the ex-offender" (p. 185). McNeill and Maruna (2007) point out that "giving up" and "giving back" will only make sense to offenders in social contexts within which they are offered the realistic prospect of engaging, perhaps for the first time, as fully included citizens. Social networks cannot be assumed and must be constructed through investment strategies that will benefit all parties. By engaging the community in an interaction (i.e., sharing photographs and stories), the women in this study would be potentially making an investment in the enhancement of their social capital.

METHOD

The objectives of this project strongly suggested the use of action research in the form of photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is a research paradigm that encompasses the key elements implicit in this study: dialogue, collaboration, visual representation, and dissemination. Photovoice incorporates the acronym VOICE, *v*oicing *o*ur *i*ndividual and *c*ollective *e*xperience (Wang & Burris, 1997), which is appropriate considering the voices of marginalized women—in particular former convicts—are rarely heard and even more rarely heeded.[1] Additionally, photovoice aligns with feminist theory (Gubrium & Harper, 2013), which embraces the validity of women's experiences as expressed by those involved in the process.

The photovoice paradigm of this study was taken up as an action research approach to qualitative inquiry. AR incorporates the element of participant advocacy and has the potential to "bypass the traditional, constructed separation between research and application" (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. xxv). Greenwood and Levin (2007) proposed that a balance of action, research, and participation links all forms of AR. As such, AR aims to alter the situation of the group, organization,

or community involved in the research and move it in the direction of a more sustainable, liberating, and self-managing state. Thus, this approach provided a powerful way of generating new research knowledge while placing a strong value on participation that supports control over one's own life situations. This value reinforces a strong commitment to "democratizing the knowledge generation process" (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, p. 7) so all participants have a responsibility in the research process. Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) proposed several key features that characterize action research: AR is a social process, participatory, practical, collaborative, emancipatory, critical for change, and recursive. Accordingly, all forms of AR will include these elements in varying degrees.

Like feminism, action research is a varied approach with a divergent history. The form of AR this study took arose from social justice community work and reflects a process closely related to community-based participatory research (CBPR; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2010). Community-based methodology is collaborative in that it equitably includes community members and researchers in the process of the inquiry in a partner-based approach. The partners contribute unique strengths and share responsibilities to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation: in this case, ways to challenge post-carceral stigma. The knowledge gained is put into action in order to improve the health and well-being of the community members (e.g., previously incarcerated women) (Israel, Shultz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). In this study, the principles and practices of CBPR offered a scaffold for the women and me to work together toward the common goal of increasing community awareness.

Participants and Making Contact

When working with what is considered a vulnerable group, addressing ethical concerns is imperative, particularly when using an action research/photovoice methodology. This requires that researchers be particularly attentive to issues of confidentiality, trust, ownership of produced materials, ongoing relationship concerns that may go beyond the research context, and control of dissemination activities (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). A feminist perspective also demands that participants are acknowledged for their expertise, are treated with dignity and respect, and participate in decisions concerning the production of their work as well as scholarly dissemination. Throughout the course of this project the above dimensions were continually and consciously monitored. I agree with Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2000), who state, "Although ethical review boards scrutinize most research proposals, the researchers are ultimately responsible for protecting participants" (p. 94).

Upon receiving approval from the institutional research ethics board at the University of Calgary, I recruited participants from a residential facility that assists women transitioning out of prison. The 5 women who agreed to participate (all were past or present residents of the facility) had been working in a group that was examining gaps in services (see Rutherford, 2012). Following an information session, the members of the group agreed that the project explored an important

aspect of their re-entry process and chose to participate in the study. Participants collectively decided to meet with me for several sessions and explore their experiences of community attitude. Several months before the start of the project, I joined the women's group to build our working relationship and establish mutual trust.

Familiar with photovoice methodology, the group wished to use this same approach in the present study. Each woman had been supplied with a camera and was given instruction in picture taking and particularly the ethics in taking photographs (e.g., acquire consent from those being photographed, avoid photographing children). During the study-focused group sessions, questions were posed as discussion starters, which revolved around why it was important to share experiences with the community and what it was the women wanted to share. Through this process, the women came to the decision that they wanted the photographs to represent who they are today and what would help the public to be more understanding and empathetic. The women committed to taking photographs aimed at helping community members understand their experience on multiple dimensions such as accomplishments, hopes and dreams, and the connections to family and friends. After the photographs had been taken, the group processes focused on further discussion as well as producing the montages.

Data Analysis

Data consisted of the photographs and transcripts of all group sessions that included relevant discussion (personal content that the women felt uncomfortable sharing outside the group was excluded from the data at the request of participants). All verbatim transcripts of the sessions were imported into the computerized software program HyperResearch, a qualitative research tool. The photographic analysis culminated in the photovoice banners that each woman produced. To accomplish this, the photographs were viewed and discussed by the group as a whole. From her own images each individual chose the ones she felt most closely represented her present identity. The women then proceeded to assemble mock-up collages that included not only the photographs, but also explanatory captions that had been written by the creator of the collage. These rough collages were then turned into digital depictions that were reviewed and edited until each woman was satisfied with the product. It was these completed banners that accompanied the women when they were invited to speak at conferences, organizational gatherings, and community venues.

The transcribed data from each meeting were presented to the group and reviewed for accuracy and approval. With the accepted transcripts I undertook an initial data analysis following the protocol of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which unfolded in five phases. Although the initial phases were accomplished on my own, the fourth phase was a collaborative process where I invited the women to review the codes that had been categorized into candidate themes. Through a group discussion, which resulted in some revision, both the participants and I accepted the candidate themes. The following

summary outlines the analysis process in more detail: (a) Phase 1: reviewing the audiotaped group and individual interviews; (b) Phase 2: generating initial codes with criteria for coding; (c) Phase 3: searching for candidate themes in an initial grouping; (d) Phase 4: reviewing candidate themes with participants, which was a bilevel process; and (e) Phase 5: defining and naming overarching themes with the intention of refining the themes.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

As the intent of this research was to amplify the voices of previously incarcerated women, the results reflect a shared interpretation of the group discussions and photographic data. As such, these findings represent the experiences, perceptions, and insight of the women at this time in their lives. Three main themes emerged from the initial analysis of the data: *Helping my neighbour understand*, *My need for connection*, and *I don't need a fix*. However, the collaborative data analysis session with the women resulted in the theme *I don't need a fix* being subsumed into the theme group *Helping my neighbour understand*.

The first overarching theme, prevalent in the discussions, was *Helping my neighbour understand*. Much of the discussion focused on how women in this position are viewed and how important it is to be understood. One participant revealed intimate feelings about how this matters when she commented:

> You can't heal yourself, if you can't be "yes, you can heal yourself," you can accept yourself and say "you know what, I don't give a shit what the neighbour thinks" but deep down inside you, you really do give a shit what the neighbour thinks and [you want people to see that] here is my crime and here is me.

Facing stigma permeated a great deal of the talk that rendered the subthemes and categories under this overarching theme. Every woman who is released from prison is confronted with barriers associated with stigma; consequently, it was a prominent experience for the participants. Every conversation about building connections with community was saturated with talk about stigma. For example, one participant lamented:What's sad is the fact that we know they have this preconceived notion and we tend to hide: We tippy toe. You hide the fact that you have been incarcerated because you don't feel open enough to say that, because you will be treated differently. They don't need to see us as a criminal, as a criminalized activity, or whatever the case may be; they need to see who we are as a person. And it would be nice if society, as a whole, wasn't one of those that stepped on your head and threw that rock at you.

As participants discussed their present identity in the eyes of the general community, an important concept arose in the form of *being normal*. In contrast to the concepts of stigma and the misconceptions of the public where the focus was on "who we are not," being normal was about "who we are." When planning her photographic montage, one woman discussed the focus of her work in this way:

I am going to do normal pictures so I took a picture of my living room and I am going to say "I have a house just like you." Then I am going to take a picture of my truck and I am going to say "I drive a truck maybe like yours." And I took a shot of *** Beach—you can't see any faces or anything but there is lots of kids and I'm going to put "Can you pick out the convict's kids in the crowd?" I took pictures of the boys' park. "My kids might play in the same park with your kids." And then a picture of N's school, "You know my kids go to a regular school" and you know?

Members of the counselling profession were included in the plea to be treated with the same respect as other members of the community. The results from the theme *I don't need a fix* in particular described participants' experiences of engaging with mental health professionals. The women wanted counsellors to be tolerant and open to the complexity of formerly incarcerated women's identities and concerns. The subthemes of *Listen to me*, *See my strength*, *I can change and learn*, and *Healing with and without professional help* revealed that the women had ideas as to how counsellors could be more helpful. For example, when the conversation turned to the concept of change, the participants felt that counsellors tended to give up on them too soon, and they wanted professionals to know that change is possible.

We are just as capable of change as anybody out there in the community. If your dad can drink for 60 years and sober up, well we can commit a crime and fuck up and do the time and get on with our life. And if your mom beat your dad for 30 years and then went and got counselling and you know what I mean—if other people are capable of change, why are we not?

The second major theme, evident in both the discussions and photographic data, was *My need for connection*. The women explored the concept of connection on a number of levels including connection to self, to their close community, and to the greater community. Connections and disconnections were the source of insight, joy, pain, and loss. The theme of connection is conceptually related to both social capital and relational cultural theory. The growth-fostering connections that both supported and protected the women could be characterized as bonding capital, and isolating disconnection could be seen as a lack of bridging capital.

In terms of bonding capital, the power of the group was a source of strength for all of the women at one time or another.

We're a pretty strong group of five—and whether we like or dislike each other we're there to offer support … and um I've learned that there are women who go through the exact same things or similar experiences that I do, that I am not isolated, that I am not the only one, or you know what I mean? Like I'm not doing it on my own.

The women talked about learning important life skills, tolerance, and sharing a passion for helping each other. The photographic montages were a way of reaching out and attempting to connect with the community, thereby enhancing bridging

capital. One participant eloquently expressed the possible mutually beneficial relationship:

> I just took every opportunity to ah, to make myself better. I eventually, I came around. The more I did for myself—a little bit every now and then—society would accept me. Then whenever society accepted a little bit more of me, I wanted to give a little bit more to them.

<div align="center">DISCUSSION</div>

The results from this study support evidence in the literature that previously incarcerated women must contend with the crippling consequences of stigma and labelling as they re-enter community life (Richie, 2001). As one participant put it, "Sometimes I feel like I am walking around with a sign, you know, my FPS [fingerprint system] number, stuck on my forehead, you know. Because people don't see me, they see this [number]."

The driving force behind this social justice research was to create a shared understanding between the public and transitioning women. Goffman (1963) suggested that decreasing the distance between a stigmatized group and the surrounding community can lead to increased sensitivity:

> Although impersonal contacts between strangers are particularly subject to stereotypical responses, as persons come to be on closer terms with each other this categoric approach recedes and gradually sympathy, understanding, and a realistic assessment of personal qualities takes place. (p. 68)

For participants, the idea of helping the community to see differently and thereby "come to be on closer terms" generated the necessary commitment and energy to remain dedicated to the research process. The women beseeched the community to see beyond the label of ex-con and instead see them as individuals who are mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends.

Social Capital and Relational Cultural Theory

Through this research process, participants invited the general public into a conversation by presenting their photographs and stories in a way that is accessible and easily understood, thereby making an investment in their social capital. Consequently, both types of social capital were enhanced. In terms of bonding capital—the type of capital that is characterized by Putnam (2000) as connections between known people in a social context—the women were able to derive great comfort and support from each other as a result of the group process. As mentioned previously, the women often commented that the group itself helped them through the difficult process of moving into the community. The group was unique in that participants did not have to feel secretive or defensive about their incarceration experience: "Sometimes when I'm having a real bad week and I want to just say 'fuck it!' Then I come here and I feel like I can hang on."

Beyond the safety of the group, the women were able to take steps toward developing relationships with community members that would enhance their bridging capital. Through presentations of the banners and media interviews, community members became exposed to the experience of these women and consequently facilitated opportunities for the women that would have otherwise been unavailable. With this sharing, the women were striving toward the first steps of a healthier relationship with the community in which they could grow and thrive. The difficult work that has been accomplished is a testament to the importance the women place on the relationship with their community. It was understood that by rebuilding bridges, using strategies such as photovoice, there is a better chance of being accepted into community life. The stories were told with sincerity, and the shared photographs provided deep insights into the consequences of marginalization and rejection as well as hope for the future.

Counselling Implications

The group discussions indicated there were clear ways in which counsellors could be more effective for these women. For example, as strength and resilience was evident in much of the talk about such topics as surviving the streets, addiction, abuse, and prison, it was suggested that counsellors could better serve their clients by focusing on strength and how the women demonstrated extraordinary depths of instinctive survival. One of the women pointed out, "Sometimes service providers don't see what you can do and they don't give you credit for surviving all the shit you've come through … compared to so many people that didn't make it, I'm the shit!" This sentiment was captured in the subtheme *I don't need a fix*, where the women want to be seen as capable rather than embodying "problems" that need fixing.

Suggestions included the need for clear communication (e.g., cautions against the use of jargon), comprehensible explanations for assessment strategies, and the extremely strong need to establish trust. There was also discussion about trauma and how it was conceptualized differently for each woman. The women were clear that, for them, trauma was something different than what helping professionals assume it to be. It was explained in this way:

> We define trauma differently than service providers define trauma. Because when I told G that they blew my mom's house up she was like, "Oh my God are you ok? Like, that must have been really rough" and I was like "Well, shit happens." There is a big difference between our definition of trauma and service provider's definition of trauma and to us trauma is "shit happens."

The women suggested that service providers need to prioritize issues according to their clients' needs and not what they, as "experts," assume to be important. In other words, something a counsellor would consider traumatic may not be felt as such by her or his client.

The women shared that the process of taking photographs along with sharing among peers was highly empowering and therapeutic. There is evidence in the

literature that photography can access emotions and experiences that go beyond a client's ability to express verbally (see Weisser, 1999). It may be worth considering this approach as a way to help those who have been involved in the justice system to work toward greater self-awareness and connection to others. Sharing the photographs with each other and the community not only contributed to enhancing the two dimensions of social capital (bonding and bridging) but also enhanced growth-fostering relationships both within the group and between the group and the community. Counsellors are invited to consider this as an intervention that breaks down communication barriers and serves as a bridge to a trusting and generative therapeutic relationship.

Photovoice and Action Research in Action

The work, undertaken within a photovoice /action research framework, was intended to culminate in some form of action that would address the social justice issues of stigma and marginalization of formerly incarcerated women. This group has been very active and committed to sharing the products from this study in as many venues as possible. To date the findings of this study have been disseminated at several professional conferences in different fields (e.g., the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, Progress Not Prisons, Social Justice Encounter, InsideOut Women's Day Event, and Prairie Child Wellness Symposium), has been featured in a news program, and has generated interest in the media, both within the university community and in the general community. Although the public response was not the focus of this study, the women reported they felt well received with support and encouragement at all dissemination events.

A central tenet of AR is that the process is in some way transformative, and this project resulted in transformation on many levels. For example, the women are becoming more known in the community, and for some this resulted in new employment opportunities and investments in bridging social capital. Additionally the women acquired new skills in public speaking and writing, and report they are learning to function more comfortably in mainstream culture. For members of the community who have been exposed to the banners, the women's external identities have been transformed and now encompass more than that of ex-con.

Looking back, I can see the transformation that took place in me as a practitioner and researcher. What I have gained from this experience goes far beyond an academic exercise. I learned that the very characteristics of the women that were initially startling to me are those that I now appreciate most. An early research journal entry stated, "These women don't make nice." I value their openness and willingness to share, and I accept and understand that my reaction is my responsibility. Ultimately, this research has fuelled in me an even greater desire to work in a social justice context, to bring awareness to injustices that go unnoticed, and to help those of us in the counselling profession to work toward alleviating the roots of mental and emotional distress.

As a practitioner and researcher, I am deeply grateful to the women in this study, as they helped me to face some of my own fears about a world that seemed danger-

ous and insurmountably complicated. I have learned that fully engaged listening is an absolute imperative and that I do not have the right to "fix" a client. These women demonstrated great power, strength, and insight and I now understand more deeply my role and responsibility as a counsellor and researcher.

Figure 1.
Looking toward the future.

You know, there's like the road and the sun in the background and the hills or whatever. But that just gives me a reminder that I'm on the road right now. There's the sun coming through the clouds and that's how it's gonna be if I stay on that road. (Participant describing her photograph)

Note

1. See Palibroda, Krieg, Murdock, and Havelock (2009) for a guide to the photovoice process.

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