

How Women on Probation and Parole Incorporate Trauma into their Identities

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PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

- Women in the justice system have a high prevalence of trauma compared to justice-involved men, and women in the general population.
- Trauma is linked to substance misuse and mental health problems.
- There is a need to understand how justice-involved women realize positive and negative outcomes of trauma.
- The aim of this study is to understand how women who have repeatedly broken the law incorporate traumatic experiences into their identities in a way that leads to positive (e.g., redemption) outcomes such as seeing silver-linings or growth from trauma, or negative outcomes (e.g., contamination) such as descriptions of being permanently damaged or caught in a downward spiral.

In this study, we explored life story narratives of women on probation and parole to answer the following questions:

1. How do women who have broken the law incorporate traumatic experiences into their identities?
 - a. What types of traumatic experiences do women identify in their life stories?
 - b. How do they grow in agency, communion, and/or spirituality in their life stories (e.g., types of redemption outcomes/gains)?
 - c. How do some women's narratives of trauma support contamination and stagnation?
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THE STUDY

The Sample

- The sample included 118 women on probation or parole who had at least five felony convictions and a history of substance involvement/misuse at the start of the research.
- Ages of the women ranged from 22 to 59 years, with an average of 39.98 years; 44.9 percent were White, 36.4 percent were Black, and 17.8 percent were multiracial or another race.

Method

- The women completed the Life Story Interview (Dan P. McAdams, 2008), in which they narrated the chapters of their lives, and responded to questions about meaningful and significant events or parts of their life story, such as high points and negative memories.
 - Women's narratives were analyzed for passages that included trauma, and trauma-related identity changes. Trauma-related narratives with positive and negative outcomes were compared to search for differences in the narratives that might account for the different outcomes.
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RESULTS

- 110 of the 118 women described at least one traumatic experience in the interview.
- Types of trauma included physical/sexual/psychological abuse or assault in childhood or adulthood, neglect in childhood, severe illness or injury, unexpected loss, and exposure to violence.
- Over half of these women described at least one memory in which they experienced redemption after trauma.
 - Communion, or increased connectedness with or care for others, was the most common redemptive gain, followed by gains in agency (e.g., power, control, achievement), and gains in spirituality.
 - Gains in communion through redemption generally involved protecting children from trauma and, sometimes, helping other survivors.
 - Gains in agency through redemption generally involved seeing oneself as a survivor rather than a victim, gaining insight into how trauma had impacted one's life, and feeling empowered as someone strong who overcame the trauma.
 - Gains in spirituality through redemption generally involved increasing faith and connection with God.
- About a third of the women described trauma preceding contamination.
 - Contamination narratives often involved death or separation from loved ones (especially children), or abuse from family members and lack of support from other family members who did not intervene.
- Additionally, about a quarter of the women described generativity following trauma, meaning that they developed goals and/or took action to help others as a result of the traumatic experience. This often involved protecting children from similar harm and helping other survivors to heal.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- A salient theme of women's narratives was the importance of communion with children and family as a mode of redemption. Women's identities as mothers were a common thread of these positive identity shifts after trauma. Conversely, separation from and loss of children served as a contaminate to women's identity.
- Women gained agency and growth after trauma through receiving treatment and disclosing their traumatic experiences. Disclosure and treatment helped women recognize their own strength and develop self-perceptions of being survivors, rather than victims.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Narrative therapies are a useful method for therapists to understand how trauma has shaped a client's behavior and identity, and for reconstructing an empowered identity. Narrative exposure therapy is one such method.
- Probation and parole agents can play a key role in connecting women to needed therapeutic services in response to positive trauma history screenings.
- Probation and parole agents should receive training so they can make appropriate referrals for clients with trauma histories.
- Substance abuse treatment programs often help women address traumatic experiences and should adopt trauma-informed practices to meet women's entangled trauma- and substance-related needs.
- Schools should take on intervention efforts to prevent childhood maltreatment such as raising awareness about trauma and how to recognize it and offering strength-based parenting programs.